

Manipuri Culture during Hinduization and the Politics of the Sanskrit Epics

Pragya Moirangthem

Abstract

This paper interrogates the ramifications of Hindu cultural colonization and the role of the two Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* as catalytic agents of change and social and cultural transformation when cross-cultural transactions took place in Manipur in the eighteenth century.

With the initiation of King Pamheiba (1706-1749) into Ramandi faith Manipur became a Hindu kingdom that got rid of all indigenous religious practices including the annual ritual festivals, notably Laiharaoba. The demolition of the Meitei shrines, the burial of the deities and the burning of a stockpile of Meitei *puyas* (treatises on a number of subjects) rendered in the old Meitei script led to the subordination of the independent kingdom of Kangleipak as Other.

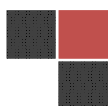
This paper demonstrates how the widespread adoption and popularization of Hinduism in the eighteenth century could be effected by the epic narrative of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. A new tradition of storytelling associated with these migratory epics with their religious fervour reshaped and influenced the minds of many Meiteis towards accepting Hinduism. The story tellers distorted the epic stories to suit the sentiments of the Meiteis. The original myths, legends, genealogy were recreated in cross-cultural context to the extent of colouring the Meiteis as being duped into believing that they were descendants of the Pandava Arjun. Manipur now became part of the *Mahabharata* in the newly formed oral tradition at the cost of Meitei culture and identity. This politics of subordination although an inevitable part of power relations in colonial enterprises is today subverted by a native discourse returning to the old. That way, the paper is a critique of the Hindu cultural domination over the native Meiteis of Manipur, and the retrieval of the past.

Keywords: culture, history, domination, cultural colonisation, hinduization, sanamahism.

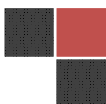
In this paper an attempt is made to demonstrate two important things: (I) how Hindu cultural incursion into Manipur, (then known as the independent kingdom of Kangleipak), took place in the 18th century, and (II) how the two Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were used to consolidate the cultural domination of Manipur by Hinduism. The political and cultural history of Manipur before the advent of Hinduism was quite unique, insular in character. The oldest kingdom of Kangleipak that flourished in Kangla (now Imphal, the capital city of Manipur) was that of the Khaba dynasty, but the last of its king was defeated by the legendary King Pakhangba who ascended the throne at Kangla in 33 CE where he ruled for 120 years according to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (Royal Chronicle). A long line of kings, all Pakhangba's decedents continued to reign Manipur till the 20th century before Manipur was annexed by India. The present tutelary king Sanajaoba is the last in the royal line of Pakhangba. The erstwhile kingdom of Kangleipak/Manipur was an amalgamation of seven principalities, viz., Ningthouja, Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, and Sarang Leishangthem, with a unique cultural history of each of them. In other words, the Ningthouja clan kings who ruled in Kangla became very powerful, and frequent wars were fought among these independent kingdoms, ultimately got merged into one nation during the time of King Charairongba (1697-1709) although Moirang became part of Kanglei king in the 15th century during the reign of King Ningthoukhomba (1432-1456).

The oldest religion of the Meiteis was Sanamahi, a faith in the mythical God Sanamahi, who created the world on the orders of Atingkok Sidaba, the Supreme God. He is also a household God of the Meiteis, and before Christianity was embraced by many of the hill tribes especially the Tangkhuls and the Kabuis worshipped Sanamahi. Non Christian Kabuis still worship Sanamahi. But when the influence of Hinduism came over the land Sanamahi faith got a jolt. During the time of great kings there were military expeditions outside the boundary of Manipur conquering many kingdoms like the Cacharis, Takhels (Tripura), Ahoms (Assam), Awa (Burma) and the western parts of China. Amidst hostility, friendship between Manipur and these kingdoms through trade and commerce, matrimonial alliance was made. The wars and friendship had directly led to the influx of outside non-Meitei people inside Manipur. These people married Meitei women and either took Meitei surnames or made new ones. They made their settlement on the periphery of the Kangleipak, and were not allowed to come close to the centre for a long time.

Before the massive religious turmoil took place in the 18th century some important things happened in Kangleipak. The Meitei king, Meidingu Kiyamba (1467-1508) had a strong military alliance with the king of Shan (Pong) dynasty, and once they made a joint military expedition and defeated the Burmese king. As a mark of friendship and in praise of the bravery of Kiyamba Pong prince presented an idol to the former having some magical power to heal illness, which was kept in a temple at Lamangdong (presently called Bishenpur) under the care of a Brahmin priest, who discovered the magical power of the idol. The Brahmin was able to convince the king that it was the idol of Visnu, the Hindu god, and he further insisted on worshipping the idol. It was eventful that the first seed of Hinduism was sown in Kangleipak. King Khagemba (1597-1652) constructed a temple of Sanamahi at Wangoi. During the time of Meidingu Charairongba temples in honour of Meitei deities, Sanamahi and Panthoibi were constructed, but the king also built temples for Radha and Krishna. He did not do much for the new religion because of his untimely tragic death. But the real havoc came during



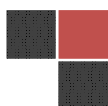
the time of his successor son, Pamheiba (1709-1748). Although he was a powerful king with glorious achievements and administrative reforms what his misdeeds had far reaching consequences for centuries. It was during his reign that one Hindu missionary, Santidas Goswami (known as Gosai) who hailed from Silhet came in 1716 with a band of Brahmins to preach Hinduism, and he could get access to the king's court. No sooner had Santidas arrived than the king embraced Ramandi. Now both the king and his mentor Santidas were hand in glove and marshalled as crusaders against the Meitei religion, culture, myth, history and archaeology of knowledge. Destruction, misinterpretation, rejection, rewriting and invalidation of what was originally indigenous became the order of the day, all of which were able to make an old civilization fall into pieces. The artful and proselytizing Brahmin Santidas, himself a bigot and iconoclast, easily occupied centre stage in the affairs of the royal court. It took no time for him to become the supreme religious guru of the apostate king. A large scale conversion to Hinduism was orchestrated by the king and Santidas amidst protests from the masses and court noblemen. Through coercive measures a large number of unwilling masses were collected and forced into a holy dip at the confluence of two rivers, the Imphal and the Iril at Lillong, and each person holding a leaf of *Nongkhrang* tree enounced an oath of faith in Rama that from that day onwards only the name Rama would be uttered instead of God Sanamahi. The unholy ceremony held on the full moon day of Wakching (Jan./Feb) 1729 (Nilbir 2002: 166) was notoriously called "*NongkhrangIruppa*". Thereafter, Hinduism was declared a state religion much to the shock and anger of the masses and the royal pundits who did not give up their allegiance to Sanamahi despite intimidation, physical torture, death penalty and religious persecution. King Pamheibahad the sacred thread, *Lukun*, worn by Guru Santidas on the full moon day of Hiyangei month (October 1737) (Singh 1969: 38). Thereafter king "Pamheiba also known as Gopal Singh was rechristened as [sic] Garibniwaj by the Goswami and in line with other great Hindu kings took upon himself the title of 'Maharaja'. So also the commander of his army and some of the nobles were re-designed as Senapati, Mantri, Katwan and Dewan" (Singh 1996: 109). Added to it, the Meitei king became a *Kshetriya* by caste, so also the masses who followed him. That was the beginning of casteism in Manipur making a divide among the Meiteis those who showed allegiance to Hinduism and those who did not. Those who resisted and defied the new religion were executed, exiled, put in sacks and thrown into the river. The exiled were excommunicated as untouchable (*mangba*) class. Santidas declared that the king would then be called "Maharaj". Similarly, the original name of the independent country of Kangleipak was also replaced by the name, "Manipur", a mythical land lit by dazzling bright gem of Ananta. With the new faith taking root in the land, Santidas could make Kangleipak a stronghold of Hinduism. Now Santidas wielded his power and unleashed his crusade in complicity with the apostate king against the native faith. The massive onslaught against the Meitei traditions, religion, ethos became so destructive that within a few years of Santidas's coming everything of the old culture was sacrilegiously treated and all native gods and goddesses and their shrines were demolished and desecrated. This avatar of destruction wrecked the century-old Meitei civilization, he acted like the Trojan Horse reducing everything of the old to debris. He took no time to hatch up a plan to hold the culture and religious traditions of the Meiteis to ransom. A massive campaign to convert the people was made - the people were forced to profess Hinduism on pain of death should they defy allegiance to the new faith. In complicity with the king the Brahmin pundit made a religious cleansing, first he blasphemously desecrated the Meitei shrines



before they were demolished including that of the Sanamahi temple at Wangoi built by King Khagemba (1597- 1652). But later the temple was rebuilt as tragedy befell the king's family. The so collected *komais* (masks) of the *Umanglais* (forest deities) gods and goddesses were brought to the Mongbahanba, a riverside forest, near the present palace for burial. By the month of Inga (June/July) 1726 (Singh 1969: 37) the rampant campaign against the traditional Meitei faith ended. Where the masks were buried a statue of Hanuman "carved out in 1729 ... in relief on a big slab of stone" (Singh 1992: 163) was installed in a temple. Similarly, on the desecrated sites of those shrines now the Hindu gods and goddesses were placed, and many of the names of the original deities got changed. With the burial of the deities the ancient Meitei annual religious festival, *Laiharaoba*, believed to have been celebrated from the 4th century BCE in honour of the union of God Nongpok Ningthou and Goddess Panthoibi during the time of Khba dynasty was no longer held. Professor Manihar Singh, a noted literary historian writes: "worshipping of local ancestral deities, observances of traditional rites, performance of religious festival *Lai Haraoba* were put to a sudden end (Singh 1996: 109).

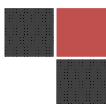
Neither the demolition of all ancient shrines nor the burial of the deities would make the conversion to Hinduism a complete project, Santidas knew. What made the Meiteis very stubborn, unyielding, was the Meitei epistemology represented by the so called sacred texts/ MSS, rendered in the old Meitei script by the pundits. These MSS were treatises on a variety of subjects, religion, philosophy, cosmology, astronomy, origin myths, legends, predictions, sacred places, medicine, rituals, martial arts, warfare, law, justice, administration, topography, place names, history, geography, art, artefacts, culture, literature, and so on, all a monument of Meitei civilization. Santidas managed to convince the king that these texts were too sacrosanct for the humans to touch, hence they be given to forgetfulness. Both the king and his guru contrived a plan to dispose of such invaluable storehouse of knowledge. Soon a decree was issued by the king that all such MSS in personal possession would be confiscated and they be handed over to the royal court and keeping such a text was as unlawful. In no time as many as 120 odd manuscripts were collected. Such collected MSS were then consigned to the flames very unceremoniously at Kangla Utra Mang on the 17th Mera (October) 1732 (*Cheitharol Kumbaba* 93). It was done in such a manner as to serve as a reminder that thereafter disposal of the dead in the state would have to be performed in similar way. That was the most unforgivable and barbaric action during the Hindu cultural colonial period which no one forgets in Manipur still today. Thus a nation's treasure was reduced to ashes. The xenophobic noblemen, the royal pundits and the general people who were opposed to the burning of the MSS were dealt with severe punishment. Many are feared to have been executed, and those who escaped the punishment went into hiding. The great royal pundits such as Khongnang Thaba, the patriarch, who upheld the long Meitei cultural traditions raised a voice of protest against the king's new faith and the burning of the MSS, but the blind king remained unbending. Thereafter there was no mention of the whereabouts of such a great pundit. History is reticent about giving a truthful account of such events for historical documents were to conform to the palace paradigm. Thus Hinduism took root in the soil of Manipur under the full patronage of the monarch and the resentment of the public was quelled by an iron hand under a velvet glove. The effect of colonialism is that it could effeminize the people long after colonialism was over.

The plan of Garibni was and Santidas nexus did not end at that. In order to fill up the vacuum prevailing all over the kingdom following the nation-wide devastation now



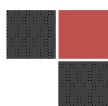
Garibni was commissioned Santidas to write a new distorted creation myth of the Meiteis so as to keep the people in future in complete darkness with a tilt towards Hindu gods and goddesses and confuse the origins of the Meiteis and genealogy contradicting what was written in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. Santidas wrote *Bijay Panchali*, vehemently falsifying all facts of history and the myth of creation claiming that the Meiteis were descendents of the Gandharvas, the Pandava prince Arjuna came to Manipur and married Chitrangada. According to this fictitious myth the original name of the land was “Manipur”, woven round the stories of Hindu gods and goddesses, myths and legends outdating the old creation myth of the Meiteis, their gods and goddesses. Siva was the creator and also first king of Manipur (a land of bright gems), a land brightened by Ananta’s gem when Siva showed his dance performance at Kangla, the capital of Manipur at which many gods and goddesses, and Ananta himself were present. Siva came with his divine consort Parvati and made the Nongmaiching Hill their abode. Subsequently they came to Hiyangthang hill on the top of which Durga’s temple was built. Again, it is written that Ananta, the serpent god was also the first king of Manipur and he was succeeded by his son, Chitraketu. The royal line came down to Chitrabhanu, whose wife having had no issue worshipped Siva who blessed her with a daughter, Chitrangada, who too became a devotee of Siva, and wished to become the wife of the Pandava prince Arjuna. Arjuna while doing penance for his sin was on a pilgrimage and reached Manipur where he met Chitrangada and married her. But he left Manipur before the birth of his son Brabubahana, who became a powerful king. Once again Arjuna came to Manipur as part of Ashmavedajajna, horse sacrifice, and Brabubahana caught the horse and welcomed his father as wished by his mother. But the proud Pandava declined to recognize Brabubahana rather he insulted him and challenged to a fight. Enraged at the insult Brabubahana fought with Arjuna and slew him. But at the intervention of Chitrangada Arjuna came back to life again with the help of Ananta’s gem. There was jubilation when a reconciliation was mediated between father and son. Brabubahana ruled Manipur but was succeeded by his son, Yabistha who was identified with Pakhangba (the first king of the Ningthouja clan at Kangla). This concocted story and the fictitious connection between the *Mahabharata* Arjuna and Manipur, and other references to Ananta, Siva, Gandharva, Chitrangada, Brabubahana, Parvati, and so on had made the identity of Manipur quite unclear for a long time. Some earlier Sanskrit scholars of Manipur supported the theory of the Manipur-Aryan connection and the *Mahabharata* Manipur by rewriting and distorting Manipuri culture and history but for want of any tenable proof their claim could not sustain. The points raised by *Vijay Panchali* do not hold true, and they have no bearing on the relevant social, historical, anthropological and linguistic factors determining the identity of the Meiteis. National debates were held in the past decades ago and the champions of such postulates did not withstand and apologized in public for their misguiding the public. Even the name Manipur was only given to Kangleipak after Santidas came to Kangleipak, hence comparatively of recent origin, but to set it in the remote prehistoric, Vedic times is just a gross anachronism.

Following Sanskritization Kangleipak/Manipur was never like its past. Now in order to malign the identity of the Meiteis they were called Kshetriyas with the suffixes “Singh” and “Devi” to males and females respectively. Non Hindu-Meiteis/Manipuris were socially and religiously discriminated against and they were declared *mangba* class (polluted, profane). There was thus a divide among the Meiteis as well as the hill tribes, who were not Hindus. The effect of the rift was so deeply entrenched that still today it



remains irreparable. Now name change continued. All the hills associated with the ancient gods and goddesses were dubbed into Hindu names: the *Koubru* became Kumar Parbbat, the western side of which was inhabited by the Gandharvas (yet an unknown and unfamiliar name), the *Nongmaiching* (the abode of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi) was called Nilkanthagiri, where Siva and Durga came first, the *Hiyangthang* hill (the original home of Hiyangthang Goddess) Hirachal and the *Thangjing* hill (God Thangjing's place) was rechristened Kshirachal hill where Visnu was the god. Thus all indigenous shrines were desecrated. Similarly, the three rivers of Manipur had now been renamed: the Imphal river was called Bijya or Bejoya Nadi, the Iril river Indira Nadi and the Thoubal river Bala Nadi. The historic pond near the palace compound Ningthem Pukri was called Geibi Ganga. Now temples of Visnu, Durga, Mahadev appeared at Kangla, the sacred place of the Meiteis. Brahmins sang Hindu devotional songs, read the *Gita* and narrated the stories of Hindu gods and goddesses. The king's palace walls were decorated with the paintings of the Hindu deities. Heibok Lairembi (the Goddess of the Heibok hill) was worshipped as Durga (Mangising and Manising 1966: 4). Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji remarks, "Thus ... the god Mai [sic] was identified with Brahma, Ishing [water] with Visnu, Nung-shit [wind] with Siva, and Sorarel or Soraren [sky God] with Indra, Marjing [the eastern God] with Kubera, Khoriphaba with Varuna, Wangbrel [the God of death] with Yama, Irum with Agni, and Taoroinai [Pakhangba] with Ananta, the Naga king" (Chatterji 1974: 144). Thus the original gods of the Meiteis Sanamahi and Pakhangba were given Sanskritized names as Kuptreng and Sentreng respectively. Nongpok Siva, Panthoibi Durga, Sorarel Indra Wangbren Yama. To dismantle "the best that has been known and thought" and identity that "differentiates 'us' from 'them,' almost always with some degree of xenophobia" (Said 1993: xiii) during colonial period was quite normal in order to subjugate the native population and undermine the existing social and cultural order.

All this is because under any colonial system native culture was first to be suppressed, marginalized so as to create a void. Inferiorization of the native people and their culture was on the top of any colonial agenda. The old social and cultural life of the Meiteis got assimilated, sycritized. Many Hindu gods and goddesses slowly got their place in the Meitei society, with that a number of Hindu festivals were celebrated all year round. New temples were built where Hindu gods and goddesses were worshipped. The sites of old Meitei deities were newly named after the Hindu deities. Now, all over the kingdom, in all localities Brahmins were sent to take charge of newly constructed temples, which were used for religious congregations, devotional songs and pujas. Brahmins would recite slokas from the holy scriptures, narrate parts of the *Vedas*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* on religious and other occasions repeatedly. Rigorous attempts were made to compose, adapt, and translate the two Sanskrit epics. Garibni was himself as a devout Vaisnava composed a part of the *Mahabharata* in Manipuri called *Parikshit* (Singh 1996: 135). Religious services connected with birth, marriage, death and other rites and functions had been demarcated exclusively for the Brahmins. With the advent of Hinduism there was complete change in the lifestyle of the Meiteis. The Brahmins were the catalytic agents of cultural transformation and harbingers of a new age of Hindu Raj. It was mainly through them that there was an influx of Sanskrit and Bengali loan words that newly occupied a space for themselves in the Meitei society, and Meiteis had then a penchant for these loan words – *jol* for water, *bhat* for rice, *namak* for salt, *chamas* for spoon, *barton* for invitation, *charpai* for cot, *tarkari* for curry, *kursi* for chair, and so on. Countless number of loan words entered and they were retained with

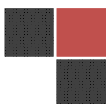


admiration. The use of loan words in such expressions as “*Apnanayaisihaibasthandahektayaisi*” became very fashionable till the first few decades of the twentieth century where we find less use of Meitei language. Still today, the custom of using heavy dose of Bengali/Sanskrit words in ceremonial invitations is witnessed. During colonialism the old myth and social cultural systems were to be invalidated by the construction of a stronger myth of power, and this is what was done by Hinduism and its champions.

II

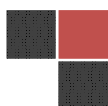
After Pamheiba was initiated into Ramandi radical changes could be seen as a result of which many traditional and indigenous faith and other practices almost came to a halt. Now Garibani was became the absolute power in religious affairs with his henchman Santidas. At his behest a Manipuri *Ramayana* was composed by one Kshema Singh Moiramba (Singh 1996: 112). With that the story of the *Ramayana* was known to the masses and that paved the way for widespread acceptance of the Rama cult. The process however was not a smooth one. Meiteis could not afford to lose their culture and cultural practices that were relegated to the margin. Unable to resist openly the new cult and the repressive measures taken by the king Meiteis suffered from cultural cringe and found their culture of being secondary importance. Books written in Bengali language were increasingly published until such a time when the Bengali script completely replaced the Meitei script in the early part of the 20th century. Sanskrit was also increasingly becoming prominent. Those who could speak and use these two languages were respected in the Meitei society. For two centuries under monarchy the Sanskrit epics were adapted, rewritten, translated to quicken the process of Hinduization and cultural colonization. At places Rama mandirs were built and story tellers narrated not only the story of the *Ramayana* but also of the *Mahabharata* at religious gatherings, ritual functions like birth, marriage, shradha etc., and on various occasions when Hindu festivals were celebrated. This became almost inevitable. They acted as instruments of Hinduism, recitation/narration, listening to them the audience got enthralled, participated emotionally in the stories to the extent that such stories became part of their consciousness with religious devotion to Lord Rama and Bhagavan Krishna. People went on pilgrimage to Brindavan, Haridwara and Nabadwip and during Holy colour festival was celebrated all over the state and sang songs in honour of Krishna and Radha. All this is the influence of the Sanskrit epics. In honour of the Lord Meiteis put chandal on their forehead. On religious and sacred occasions both men and women wear very distinct religious dress, dhoti and kurta by men, and white wrapper and chandal coloured phanek by women. “This was a process, in Edward Said’s terms, of conscious affiliation proceeding under the guise of filiation (...), that is, a mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed. It caused those from the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins...” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1998: 4).

When King Bhagyachandra (1759-1761; 1763-1798), the grandson of King Garibni was ascended the throne of Manipur in 1759, himself a devotee of Krishna, and not Rama he brought one professional Hindu epic narrator called Jiuram Sharma from Tekhao (Assam) who sang the two epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. This ushered in the development of a new art of storytelling known as *Wari Leeba* (Wari means story, Leeba means telling). Slowly that narrative gained momentum. The practice continued for a considerable length of time and still today in some parts of Manipur it is



prevalent. It became increasingly very popular as Hinduism was imposed by the kings on the people of Manipur and with that Hindu festivals, religious ceremonies associated with rite the passage and a number of calenderic festivals all year round were seldom celebrated without reciting episodes from these epics. All these led to the popularization of *Wari Leeba* directly and indirectly on the one hand, but the political angle of this particular art was to inject Hinduism in the minds and blood of the Meiteis, young and old, on the other hand. Entertainment apart these epic stories have tremendous spiritual effect on the minds and consciousness of the listeners. People muttered “Hare Ram”, “Hare Krisna” in joys and sorrows. The method adopted is not through any violent or coercive measures but through peaceful spiritual atmosphere where men and women were given the lessons of bhakti, tolerance, love, self control, and so on. Its social impact was tremendous, people’s adherence to Hinduism ever remained steadfast. More people were brought within the Hindu fold. Outside these two epics one episode that has remarkably moved the audience is “Nimai Sanyasi” but this is narrated in another narrative design called “Lairikhaibathiba”.

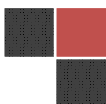
The outstanding feature of the epic narrative is that the stories are indigenized and appropriated by the narrators primarily for entertainment purposes. For instance, Bhima, Arjuna, Hanuman, Sita are treated as local characters with specific geographical places associated with flora and fauna thereby making the story more at home. The attention of the audience is captured by the aesthetic beauty, description of the dramatic personae, heroic deeds, wit, and exemplary achievements, the triumph of truth over falsehood. In order to arouse interest the narrator inserts the very immediate environment to tickle the fancy of audience, thus far removed from the original, but regaining freshness and strength every time such stories are narrated. Many of these stories go outside the frame of the actual/original text, they are generally a product of improvisation in order to suit the local taste and conditions. Thus, the Indian epic traditions not only in Manipur but also the Northeast have evolved through various stages of growth, development and change marked by additions, interpolations, and they have passed through such stages of growth, “Adopt,” “Adapt” and “Adept” (Barry 1995: 195). The tellers use even such interpolations that Hanuman took a hill from Manipur on which was grown the herb called “sidahidak” (a shrub that can bring a dead man to life again), to save Lakshman fatally wounded on battle by Indrajit. The myth of Arjun having visited Manipur and married Chitrangada, the daughter of Gandharva King, Chitrabhanu, the creation of Manipur associated with Ananta, Visnu, Siva, Parbati are all ploys to control the culture of the Meiteis, and destroy, dismantle the original Meitei cosmogony, belief and region. But these stories along with the Sanskrit epics are not as simple as they appear outwardly, they have far reaching power politics erasing the native culture, ethos, history, genealogy and thus changing the blood and the consciousness of the masses thereby exercising hegemony of Hinduism without opposition of the native people who were now duped into believing in the institutionalized religion and the falsely constructed myth of creation. This method under colonialism is called in Gramsci’s term “hegemony” which means “the maintenance of power without the use, or direct threat, of physical force; normally by a minority class whose interests are contrary to those over whom power is exercised” (Hawthorn 1998: 98). Such domination is received by consensus. The process is so powerful that it could wreck the whole fabric of social, cultural, historical system of the pre-colonial world into a limbo which guns could not do. Sanskritization was a means of changing cultural contours and reframing the environment suitable for the alien culture to grow. In this context what the Kenyan



activist Ngugiwa Thiong'o says in his *Decolonizing the Mind* may be recalled: "In my view language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (wa Thiong'o 2007: 9). From the time of Hindu cultural colonization Meiteilon (Meitei language) became highly hybridized with the Sanskrit and Bengali words profusely got infused. It was the fashion of the day to mix Meiteilon with these loan words. One who spoke Meiteilon proficiently with these loan words was appreciated. Thereafter the influence of Bengali language, songs, dress, food habits on the Meiteis was not exaggerated. This internalization of the whole system brought from outside was of paramount importance during colonial period.

The masses reciprocated with joy and revelry amidst songs and dance newly made to popularize the new faith, and unaware they were believers in Hinduism. The art of telling the stories from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* both true and falsified veiled the political objective to keep the native culture in bondage. For a time the Meiteis stole the show. The penchant for the epics increased when Manipur was duped into being the *Mahabharata* Manipur. Episodes from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were narrated to embellish and give a religious fervour on many occasions as mentioned above. The epics acted as though a magic potion, the king, his noblemen and the masses got so enchanted that they spent time enjoying life like the "Lotus eaters" forgetting their roots, past, history and culture. It was indeed a cultural coup-d'état, the indigenous culture being dominated, the existing discourse left to complete disuse, meanwhile the projection and representation of Meitei populace only from the perspective of Hinduism complete. The epics' role was to hasten the sweeping social and religious change converting the independent state of Kangleipak/Manipur into a bastion of Hindustan. That indirectly legitimized the hegemony of the institutionalized religion that held the public to ransom. The access is too much to take it lightly that some of the epic characters and gods and goddesses were given regional/local colour thus assimilating the large tradition into local culture. The native culture was beleaguered, and suffered from cultural cringe, forced amnesia. All this was the symptom of cultural colonization. "Cultural colonialism," says Sarah Amsler, "refers to internal domination by one group and its culture or ideology over others.... Dominant cultures make themselves the official cultures; Schools, the media, and public interaction reflect this.... A common technique in cultural colonialism is to flood ethnic areas with members of the dominant group" (Amsler Web.). The agents of cultural colonialism were not, first of all, an army and military strength but a combination of the dominating power of knowledge – language, culture, literature - and brute force. Culture and language imprison the mind but force violently subdues man physically. This is exactly what could be seen in the colonial phase of the Meiteis of Manipur. Demolition of shrines, burial of gods and goddesses, burning of the MSS and myth making were the means by which an independent people could be made rational, progressive eschewing the insular nativist thinking and cultural paradigm. For every colonizing power it was necessary to devalue "the nation's past, seeing its pre-colonial era as a pre-civilized limbo.... Children will have been taught to see, history, culture and progress as beginning with the arrival" of the colonizer as Fanon argues (Barry 1995: 192).

Meiteis lost their identity to a great extent, a hybrid form of identity emerged as a result of assimilation and syncretism. The state sponsored programming kept aside whatever was the native. In fact, they had nearly two-century Rip Van Winkle slumber

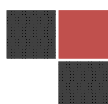


before they got up again with a sense of resilience and revivalism. Many of the ideas and practices alien to the Meiteis earlier became part of the mixed culture, hard to discard or do away with. Normal functions and religious activities were seemingly incomplete without adherence to Hinduism in most cases. It is not easy to return to the past because so much of our daily activities and religious affairs got entwined with Hindu beliefs and religious system. The false myth and other social cultural construction after Manipur became a Hindu state became extremely difficult to get rid of. However, belief in Sanamahism has remained intact in thick and thin. *Laiharaoba* ritual festival that was banned during the time of Garibni was revived on 24 April 1898 during the time of Major W. Maxwell when he was the Political Agent of Manipur (*Cheitharol Kumbaba* 530). Many of the festivals are still observed such as Heigru Hidongba – the royal regatta, Kwak Tanba, Kongba Leithong Phatapa, Meitei Cheiraoba, Lamta Thangja Saroi Khangba, Mera Wayungba, Mera Hou Chiongba, etc.

By way of conclusion, it may be said that since the third decade of the 20th century there has been a move to return to the past all over the state and in some parts of Meitei inhabited areas of Assam. The revivalist movement was called Apokpa Marup under the auspices of a visionary, Naoria Phullo of Cachar District of Assam. He stirred the minds of Meiteis from the 1930s onwards. A new tradition of Meitei myth narration started replacing the Sanskrit epic narrative in religious functions. Sanamahi Kiyong temple has been constructed on the top of hill near the Nongmajing hill. Thus the lost myth, history and culture are reconstructed and restored subversively. But this is done against the grain to resist “epistemic violence” (“the way in which colonial and other historiographical writings forcefully manipulate representations while usually purporting to be disinterested commentaries”) (Childs and Williams 1997: 230). The process is decentering the centre and to revert the power politics. The journey to the past is not an easy path though. The 20th century also witnessed other reformists like Hijam Irabot, who with his communist leaning fought against the orthodox and oppressive caste system, social ills like *mangba-sengba* (the practice of untouchability), chandalsenkhai (forcible collection of tax from the masses for using *chandal*) sponsored by the Brahma Sabha and the king. Last but not least, a recent introduction Meitei script in place of Bengali in schools, colleges and university will remove the linguistic hegemony.

It is to be noted that even the Meitei kings who professed Hinduism were still ardent believers in God Pakhangba. Col. J. Shakespear in his article "The Religion of Manipur" published in the British journal, *Folk-lore* (1913) thus writes: "The greatest of all the gods is Pakhangba. He is the mythical ancestor of the Meitheis kings, and is the first king mentioned in the Chronicle.... He is said to have assumed the form of a god by day, and by night he used to be a man" (Shakespear 1913: 423). Hinduism was not the religion of the Meitei people, and it starts losing its footprint from the soil of Manipur. Even in the 19th century when the king's power was absolute Hinduism was staggering. Major W. McCulloch, in this context observes: “Thus Hindooism with Munniporees is but a fashion” and it is “A religion professed, not from conviction, but because it is a fashion” (McCulloch 1859: 18). The trajectory of Meitei faith in Sanamahism is increasingly gaining momentum day by day. In the decolonization historical phase the wounded civilization would fight back with vigorous force of resilience putting back the dislocated culture and discourse to the original form which would involve a process of rejection and subversion of the dominating discourse.

The Meiteis, a scion of a rich culture and tradition, would not afford to forget



their past, and theirs was now to reconstruct the lost culture by challenging the dominating discourse of homogenization. Reconstruction however was a process of deconstruction. In decolonization “the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim, one’s own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which the past has been devalued” (Barry 1995: 192).

Works Cited:

I: English section

- Amsler, Sarah. Cultural Colonialism. <http://onlinelibrary.wily.com/doi/abs/10...> dated 7.1.2019. Web.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester U. P., 1995. Print.
- Chatterji, Suniti Kumar. *Kirata-Jana-Krti*. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1974. Print.
- Childs, Peter and Patrick Williams. *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*. London: Prentice Hall, 1997. Print.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy. *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Edward Arnold, 1998. Print.
- McCulloch, Major W. *Account of the Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes*. Calcutta: Bengal Printing Co. Ltd., 1859. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print.
- Shakespeare, J. The Religion of Manipur. *Folk-lore*. Vol. xxiv, No. iv, Dec. 1913. Print.
- Singh, Ch. Manihar. *History of Manipuri Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996. Print.
- Singh, R. K. Jalajit. *A Short History of Manipur from 33 AD to the Present*. Imphal: OK Store, 1992. Print.
- waThiong’o, Ngugi. *Decolonizing the Mind*. Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2007. Print.

II: Manipuri section

- Cheitharol Kumbaba*. This royal chronicle, originally written in Meitei script, was first transliterated in 1967, and has gone into five impressions ever since, the latest being the one published in 2015 (Imphal: Manipuri Sahitya Parishad). Print.
- Masngisingh, L. and L. Manisingh. *Manipur Itihas Meitei Puran Bijoy Panchali: Garibniwas Charit*. Imphal: Mahabharat Press 1966. Print.
- Nilbir, Sairem. *Layingthou Sanamahiamasung Sanamahi Laining HingatIhou*. Imphal: Puthiba Press, 2002. Print.
- Singh, N. Khelchandra. *Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas*. Imphal: But Printers, 1969. Print.

