

## **“Puya Mei Thaba” (The Burning of Ancient Meetei Scriptures) and its Impact on Manipuri Culture and Literature**

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### **Abstract**

The event of “Puya Mei Thaba” (The Burning of Ancient Meetei Scriptures) is of immense social, cultural and religious significance in the history of Manipur, a northeastern state of India. In 1729, the Meetei king Pamheiba commissioned the burning of the ancient Meetei scriptures, numbering around 120, and converted his subjects to Hinduism. The event is marked by serious implications for the language and religious practices of the Meetei community. While the event exposed the Sino-Tibetan speaking Meeteis to the influence of the Indo-Aryan languages like Sanskrit and Bengali, it also introduced them to a new and foreign literary tradition at the expense of their own literary heritage. Taking its cue from Ngugi wa Thiong’o’, the celebrated Kenyan writer, who famously observed that language is the carrier of one’s culture, the present paper seeks to explore the overall impact of the event of “Puya Mei Thaba” on the Meetei language and culture.

**Key Words:** Language, Culture, Manipur, Literature, Meetei.

### **Introduction**

The Meetei or Manipuri is a Sino-Tibetan language spoken by around 1.5 million people as their first language in and outside the state of Manipur in Northeast India. The Meetei or Manipuri society that we know at present is a composite one which accommodates different groups of people who reached Manipur at different periods of history and became inseparable parts of the Meetei social set up. At present, the Meeteis include Meetei *Sanamahis*, Meetei Vaishnavites, Meetei Christians, Meetei Buddhists, Meetei Atheists, and Meetei Muslims among

others (Sanajaoba 24). The different religious practices that exist in the contemporary Meetei society entered Manipur from outside at different times of history, except *Sanamahism* which is the people's indigenous religion. The present paper mainly seeks to focus on how the historic event of "Puya Mei Thaba" contributed to the decline of *Sanamahism* and changed the course of Meetei literature and culture in the following centuries.

### **Puya Mei Thaba:**

"Puya Mei Thaba" is a Meetei phrase which literally means "burning of ancient scriptures." It pertains to the historic event of 1729 of the burning of Holy Scriptures written in archaic Meetei language. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of Wakching (the tenth month of the Meetei lunar calendar) in 1729 A.D., the Meetei king Pamheiba, following the advice of the Bengali preacher Shantidas Goswami from Sylhet (in the present day Bangladesh), commissioned the burning of around 120 *puyas* or ancient scriptures written in archaic Meetei language. This event is generally considered as a watershed moment in the history of the state as it not only led to the replacement of the older native faith by a new one but also paved the way for the infiltration of foreign literature, language and culture into the Meetei society.

### **Meetei traditional religion:**

It is notable that the burning of the *Puyas* was motivated by a vision of the king to reconstitute the society on new moral and cultural grounds under the guidance of a new religious tradition. This vision necessitated a destruction or erasure of the old religious order, practices and customs which had been preserved through centuries in the native spiritual literary texts locally known as *puyas*. These *puyas*, on the whole, centred around a rich and ancient worldview shaped by devotion for a revered pantheon of gods and goddesses inseparable from the Meetei nation. Thus, burning of the *puyas* meant a complete erasure of any recorded memory associated with this earlier native worldview. Traditionally, these people are the worshippers of "Yumlais" or household deities which are installed in the South-West corner of each and every Meetei house. These deities have a firm basis in Meetei creation myth which encapsulates the Meetei worldview. The Meeteis traditionally consider their Kings to be the direct descendants of Lord Pakhangba who is often represented with a dragon or serpent motif. Apart from the "Yumlais", the Meeteis also worship various "Umanglais" (literally meaning forest-deities). Despite this apparently polytheistic nature of Meetei traditional faith, these people believe that the various gods and goddesses worshipped by them are the manifestations of "Ipuroi Shidaba" or the Supreme Creator. The main implication for the burning of the *Puyas* was that it sought to launch an attack on this very religious tradition and replace the local gods and goddesses with a new set of imported gods and goddesses.

### **"Puya Mei Thaba" vis-à-vis Meetei language and culture:**

As per historical records, the first contact of the Meeteis with Hinduism took place in the fifteenth century through the Shans of Burma. In this connection, Ch. Manihar Singh maintains:

In 1470 A.D. Kyāmbā, the Meitei king, had the occasion of launching a joint expedition with Khikhomphā, the Shān king, against the Burmese and this Shān contact coincided with a literary and cultural awakening of Manipur ... But what came of a far-reaching consequence is the Shān king's gift of a metal icon of Vishnu to his Meitei counterpart and this event ... opened up the passage for the inflow of the great current of Hinduism. And perhaps the first Hindu temple now maintained at Lamāngdong, some 20 kms. from Imphal, was constructed during his time. (105)

Although Hinduism made its initial appearance in Manipur in the late fifteenth century, it was only in the early eighteenth century that this new religious faith gained prominence. In 1704, the Meitei king Charairongba “embraced the Nimandi faith based on the worship of Radha and Krishna” (Singh 107), whereas his son Pamheiba was formally converted to Hinduism by the Brahman preacher Shantidas Goswami on the first day of Hianggei (the eight month of the Meitei calendar) in 1737 A.D. (Singha 107).

After burning the ancient scriptures and converting to Hinduism, king Pamheiba was determined to bring about radical changes in the religious set up of the state. He declared *Ramanandi* faith as the state religion, often suppressing resistance from the public with a strong hand. When Pamheiba tried to impose the new religion on his subjects they would usually respond thus:

O Your Majesty! How can we Meeteis adopt a foreign tongue, neglecting our own language, and leaving the customs that we know to be ours? Someday we will forget our own language and it will be replaced by the language of the foreigners, whose powerful waves will destroy our identity. (Paonam 75)

Their apparent plea to the king not to adopt a foreigner's language reminds one of the opinion given by M. Hamel, the French school teacher in Alphonse Daudet's story “The Last Lesson.” In the story, M. Hamel tells his students that “when a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison” (Daudet 7). The contemporary Manipuri public's cultural anxiety also resonates with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's famous view that since language is the carrier of culture and “the collective memory bank of a people” (Ngugi 48), adopting others' language implies adopting others' cultural patterns as well.

That the adoption of Bengali and Sanskrit marked the arrival of a new era in the Meitei history was evident when the Meitei king Pamheiba changed his name to Garibnewaz and issued metal coins on which his name was inscribed in Devanagari as “Shri Garibnewaz Mekhaleshwar” (Paonam 75). Before him, no Meitei king had ever issued any coins with any

foreign language or script inscribed on it. He also adopted the surname ‘Singh’ or ‘Singha’ for Meeteis which is commonly used by many people of the Kshatriya caste in India.

Along with various Hindu rituals and customs related to marriage, funeral and other occasions, some of the evil practices of the medieval Hindu societies entered the Meetei social life following the introduction of Hinduism in the state. One such evil practice was the burning of the “sati.” This practice was non-existent in Manipur in the pre-Hinduism era. Following the Hindunisation of Meeteis many incidences of burning of sati in Manipur were recorded. For instance, on the death of the Meetei prince Murari, his two wives were burnt to death in 1726 (Naorem 45). Likewise, in 1733 the wife of Sapam Khwairakpa was forcibly made to lie down on her husband’s funeral pyre (Naorem 45).

Following the conversion of the Meetei king along with his subjects to Hinduism, a great influx of Sanskrit and Bengali terms into the Meetei vocabulary was noticed. The numerous Sanskrit and Bengali words that won acceptance in the Meetei vocabulary following the proselytisation of Meeteis include “bhakti,” “guru,” “pranam,” “kripa,” “charan,” “paap,” “punya,” “sabha,” “atma” etc. The Meetei king who had been traditionally called “Lainingthou,” meaning the Divine King, was now known by the title “Maharaja” (Paonam, 75). The seven clans of the Meeteis viz. (1) Mangang, (2) Luwang, (3) Khuman, (4) Moirang, (5) Angom, (6) Khaba-Nganba and (7) Sarai Leishangthem were now converted into seven Gotras, namely, (1) Shandilya, (2) Kashyapa, (3) Madhugalya, (4) Atreya, (5) Kaushika, (6) Gautama and (7) Bhardwaaj respectively.

Perhaps, one of the most significant events accompanying the proselytisation of Meeteis was the introduction of Bengali script into Manipur and the replacement of the traditional native script by the new script. As a result, the native script remained in obscurity for a large part of the later period till its recovery in the twentieth century by cultural revivalists. At present, attempts are being made to recover ancient *Puyas* which were not included in the event of the burning and kept secretly in the personal custody of individuals. Recently, under the patronage of the state government, transliteration and republication of these texts have started (Indrakanta Singh).

Notwithstanding the negative effects of “Puya Mei Thaba,” it would be too simplistic to assume that it robbed the Meeteis of their literary and artistic sensibility. In fact, the event heralded the dawn of the Middle Period of Manipuri literature. In this period, the Meetei writers took to translating the well-known Sanskrit and Bengali texts into their own language. This included the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These translation works, however, were imitative in nature and were of little literary merit as they were merely the loose renderings of the age-old Hindu epics in a new language. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that in the hindsight, the venture enriched the scope of Manipuri literature which absorbed themes and literary techniques from Indo-Aryan literatures beyond the limits of the native aesthetics.

Furthermore, it is seen that a notable repercussion of “Puya Mei Thaba” and the religious conversion of Meeteis is the emergence of a new myth regarding the origin of Meeteis. Traditionally, Meetei origin myths have stood independent of any Hindu influence. But now, these myths started to be questioned and rejected in the face of a new religious outlook under the royal patronage. Ch. Manihar Singh suggests how king Pamheiba’s rule was marked by a strong desire to replace the traditional worldview with a new one. Pamheiba’s desire to change the course of Meetei culture through his various radical actions is summed up thus:

...worshipping of local ancestral deities, observance of traditional rites, performance of the religious festival *Lai Haraoba* were put to a sudden end ... In order to make his identification with the new culture complete he got his new religious mentor, the Goswami, compose an entirely different chronicle called the *Vijay Panchāli* in Bengali and *payar* tracing the lineage of the first king of Manipur to Chitrabhānu, the great grandson of Ananta whose only child and daughter Chitrāngadā got married to Arjuna the third of the Pandavas and had by him a son, Babrubāhāna and whose son Yavisthā was identified with Nongdā Lāiren Pākhangbā. (109)

The king’s ban on the traditional practice of *Lai Haraoba* is imbued with significance. Far from being a mere religious festival, *Lai Haraoba*, literally meaning, “merry-making of the gods” is also a powerful vehicle through which the native oral literature and values have flourished for centuries. The ban meant that the native chants, hymns and songs used in the festival were no longer accessible to the masses and they had to cut off their link with this rich repository of ancient folk literary tradition. Furthermore, the quoted lines suggest that the king used literature as a means to link two unrelated cultural traditions and forge a sense of acceptability for the new religion in the minds of his subject. This led to cultural intermixing of two diverse traditions and paved the way for reorganisation of the Meetei society in new lines.

### Conclusion:

“Puya Mei Thaba” or the burning of ancient Meetei scriptures was a landmark in the history of Manipur and her people. Owing to this event the people who had remained cloistered for centuries within their self-created cultural cocoon were exposed to a strong cultural wave from outside. In fact, the people of the state got the opportunity to reexamine many of their values, customs and practices through the lens of a new religious and cultural order. But at the same time, the event proved catastrophic for the indigenous literature, resulting in the loss of a centuries-old literary heritage.

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