



Revisiting the historiography of Manipur

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Abstract

Historiography usually provides thoughtful insights into the past in varied ways. Manipur has a long history of coexistence of diverse ethnic communities across its hills and valley. The Historiography of Manipur has in itself numerous writings by different historians and scholars. Through time, the oral and folklore of historical narratives of the past have been taken over by the writings of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial historiography. Historians construct and deconstruct history by analyzing different sources for writing. In the case of Manipur's past, the historiography-writing in *puyas* and colonial writings remains the archetype of history. History writing in Manipur is mostly state sanctioned which tends to mask the historical objectivity to create national unity, however, by not exposing its citizens to the fissiparous details. In this context, the paper tries to study, investigate and understand the historical facts or reliable sources to renovate the Manipur past. While doing so, the paper will study how, when and where the development of an appreciation of historical sources, historical imagination and historical agency can be achieved most fruitfully through insights into the historiography of Manipur.

Keywords: Manipur History, Hinduisation, Puyas, Atom Babu Sharma, Naoria Phulo

Introduction

The study of Manipur historiography can tell us much about not only our past but also what we collectively hold to be important in our present and future. Usually, it provides an insight into the past in many varied ways. A remarkable feature of Manipur's past is its vast cultural diversification of different races and tribes of hills and valleys. The tribal culture is significant in Manipur *puyas* and the religious traditions of the hills and valley people. For example, on the last day of The Pleasing of God or *Lai Haraoba*, it is mandatory to have a ceremonial component of tribal customs and traditions. On the other hand, Manipur from ancient times has been a land of unity among the different ethnic communities. Though, each ethnic community speaks different languages and practices different customs; everyone follows certain common styles and customs in life. This shows a deep underlying unity despite having great diversity among the Manipuris.

As we know, history writing is an evolving process of the reconstruction of the past. It is a process that recollects, innovates, renews, repacks, revisions, abandons; revisits methods, etc. from diverse historical sources in its courses of construction and reconstruction of the past. This is also evident from the existence of diverse historiographical traditions that produce diverse objects, methods, and histories. The fields of research interest of the historian change over time and shift historical writing away from traditional to objectivist^[1], positivist to the empiricist, and modernist, etc. towards a new historical approach to writing.

In the case of Manipur's past, the historiography-writing in *puyas* and colonial writings remains the archetype of history. However, history writings in Manipur are mostly state-sanctioned, which tends to mask historical objectivity to create national unity by not exposing its citizens to the fissiparous details. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that different sources of the knowledge of historiography of Manipur past are now available for an individual or a scholar to study and understand the overall aspects.

¹ Frank Ankersmith as termed the *new historiography* or *new historicism*. Their school upheld the quasi-positivist belief in *Objectivity*.

Therefore, studying the historiography of Manipur through the understanding of the past and present writings and other reliable sources to keep alive the historical facts for future to study as well has become a major area of study over time. It is also important that the facts of the historical past do not exist unless a historian constructs or deconstructs the history through collections from diverse sources. The traces of the past collected by historians are not constructed haphazardly; rather they create a narrative to tell a meaningful story. The task of historians has been to find out what is the actuality of the past itself. How does thing change over time? How things were in past? What is the present historical knowledge and how are things in the past related to the present? Over time, historians have interpreted and crafted different historical events along with other social phenomena of the time by using different reliable sources.

In this context, the paper tries to study the different aspects of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial writings of the historiography of Manipur. On a socio-cultural discourse, the historiography of Manipur can be sub-categorized as phases of pre-Hinduization, Hinduization and revivalism. The paper will analyze how, when and where the development of an appreciation of historical sources, historical imagination and historical agency can be achieved most fruitfully through insights into the historiography of Manipur.

Pre-colonial Historiography

Unlike the European mode of historical periodization as ancient, medieval and modern; the history of Manipur arises out of a distinct scheme of man and his socio-cultural developments. Having said so, the writings on the historiography of Manipur are usually sub-categorized politically as those of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial.

Peoples of Manipur have their local historical understanding and art of writing culture from a long time back. This was known as *Puwari* ^[2]. The term *Puwari* is similar to the Sanskrit word *Itihas*, the Latin word *Historia*, the English word *History* or the French word *histoire*. The *Puwaris* were writings in *Korbak* ^[3]. The *Puwari* consists of old legend stories, folklores, myths, hymns, the creation of cosmology, origin and genealogical tradition, clan narratives, religious accounts, etc. Writings of *Puwaris* were conducted by the then priests, called locally known as *Maichous*. The *Maichous* were intellectuals, priests, astrologers, prophecies and mentors to the royalty or nobility of the time. According to Gangumei Kamei, "Maichou became a generalized and comprehensive one or with some great scholar encyclopedic. Historical particularism or special differentiation of history did not develop in the ancient period". ^[4] Though the *Maichous* lacked the art of writing history, yet findings from their writings and inscriptions could not be ignored in the construction of Manipur past. The question of historical knowledge and a new approach to writing history has not existed in Manipuri society. However, the *Maichous* and peoples of Manipur have their sense of *Puwaris* through the past.

² *Puwari* means 'Stories of for-father'. This was a traditional concept used by Meitei or Meetei. *Puwari* has two parts i.e. Oral and Written.

³ *Korbaks* were made from wood or Bamboo. The woods were then cut into a small thin sheet. G.K Gosh. *Bamboo: The Wonderful Grass*, APH publishing House, New Delhi, 2008

⁴ Gangumei Kamei, *Lectures on History of Manipur*, Akansa Publishing House, New Delhi, 2012, p. 15

G. Amarjit Sharma writes on the differentiation of the ideas of *Puwari* and *Itihas*, elaborating on how it was used in different historical contexts and how it has been perceived by others. He proclaims that,

"*Itihas* is found to be a language used by the early scholars who work particularly between the 1940s and 1950s by people like Atombapu Sharma (for instance, *Manipur Itihas* published in 1942), L. Ibungohal Singh (*Manipur* published in 1956), W. Yumjao Singh (*Manipur Itihas* published in 1947), whereas *Puwari* is a relatively recent language, although it can be traced back in the 1960s and particularly in 1990s. Then it used L. Sanajaoba's writings (*Manipur: Past and Present*, particular volume II; *Manipuri Puwari* published in 1997) particularly to understand this language of history. It is difficult however to say that these terms denote two different schools of history ^[5]."

The questions he asked mostly relied on language perspectives. On the other hand, he does not comment on the implicit ideas behind the writers of *puyas* ^[6] and *puwari*. Those contemporary time *Maichous* (the Kings' scribes) are mostly sanctioned by the state. For instance, 'Loiyumba Silyel' was a manuscript based on the administrative account of the Ningthouja dynasty of Manipur. It was first written during the reign of Loiyumba, then, with the advice of King Chingthangkomba, Angom Gopi reinterpreted the texts. It is worth noting Collingwood here, who observed that the task of the historian is to find out the reality of the past as much as possible. Therefore, such inscriptions and texts of the past must be well incorporated into the writings of contemporary history to objectively relate the past with the present.

Oral History

Throughout history, most people have learnt history through "oral narratives". However, as the generations advance, individual consciousness has started to preserve the first-hand account of the past to record. On top of that, both the silent and popular stories, which have been passed down to the present generation through periods of history are also important cues in apprehending a more nuanced picture of the past. While most historians have started with the work through the information they could gather, they have started to construct the past from such informed knowledge of history. The sources, such as recording devices, audio tapes, engraving arts, archaeological sources, photos, individual notes, printed materials, memoirs, diaries and others are considered, for such historical writings, as the reliable sources for the construction and reconstruction of the past. Thus, it is pertinent here to raise a question about the most generous account of "Oral history".

The modern concept of oral history started to begin with the work of Allan Navin in the 1940s at Columbia University. He initiated a systematic account to record on tapes, preserved recollections, which are considered, deemed to be of historical significance. Oral history is also a primary source.

⁵ G. Amarjit Sharma, *Itihas and Puwari: Conversation on the History of Manipur and the Historical world*, Paper presented in National Seminar on Thinking history, Writing History; Asian Experiences and Challenges, Organised by Netaji Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, in collaboration with Netaji Research Bureau, 13- 14 April, 2017

⁶ *Puyas* means ancient manuscript of Manipur. The term *puya* is a local language used by the Manipur society.

The research was conducted through the recorded interviews between a narrator and personal experience of historically significant events adding to the historical records. In furtherance to this, historians, folklorists, anthropologists, human geographers, sociologists, journalists, linguists, and many others are increasingly employing this method of historical envisioning in conducting research in their respective studies.

The methods, which are being used in oral history, are different for different countries. In Britain, it has been used as a method of folklorist study in the 1970s, whereas in Italy, Allasandro and Portelli used oral history for analysis of memory, identity and construction of history. However, Czech uses oral history as a method of social movement and political activism with an aim of systematic development of oral history. In Southeast Asia, oral history has been used as an integral part of ancient Southeast Asian history. Blackburn also writes that oral history was used by "Political elites and state-run institutions to contribute to the goal of national integration in the post-colonial South Asian countries" [7]. In India, Gyanendra Pandey conceptualizes memories of marginal communities. He suggests that fragments are important, in challenging the dominant narrative, as the fragments are being traced as a loss of history and fracture within the dominant narratives. To come to this, he has conducted the research by referring to people's diaries, poems, and individual songs about riots in India.

However, those individual songs and local songs have an incomplete quality to themselves to construct a reliable history, for the reason that the personal and more subjective narrative(s) of the narrator(s) may at times distort the very aspects of historical facts. For instance, the account of elites contesting among the elites reduces the meaning of the past and history somewhere goes to a homogenous set of experiences. As a result, Silence of the past is increasingly used as a tool for oral history. For example, "The Other Side of Silence: Voice of the Partition in India" by Urvashi Butalia investigate the discourse of violence in the name of maintaining ethnic harmony and the state's discouragement of the public discourse in India.

In Manipur, the idea of oral history has been in existence since past centuries. This has been employed as a source for the reconstruction of the past. Oral tradition does not explicitly highlight the authorship of historical narratives, but the vexing problem of the past can indeed be understood to some extent from such sources. Besides, oral history also helps in the comparative study of the various sources within the historical framework. In this context, oral narratives such as *Khongjom Parva* [8], *Moirang Parva* [9] and hill people's oral sources are treated as sources of the oral history of Manipur. However, colonial writings constructed on hill peoples developed an ethnohistory that was not developed in oral tradition. It was because the colonial state needed a 'creative adaptation' on the part of hills and valleys to make way for their divide and rule policies. The colonial state used

various strategies to administer, process territorial fixing and demarcation and made divided colonies in the region. For instance, during Colonial Northeast India, the British collected knowledge on the Nagas, and then fixed them to a specific territory thereby creating divided Naga Hills. This construction of groups along racial, religious, and socio-cultural lines later created a rise in racial and ethnic identity conflicts within.

Nevertheless, oral history brings knowledge of the various underlying historical discourses to revive the long fragmented and forgotten past of society. The component of oral history, therefore, serves as an important area of the past to engage with care and without any bias to the facts of the narratives in constructing a reliable and acceptable history of Manipur.

Written Histories on Puyas

The Manipuri learnt how to use *Che* (Paper) after the establishment of close contact with the neighboring states. R.K Jhaljit, in his book "A History of Manipuri Literature" throws light on the probable account of the Manipuris learning the use of paper. He writes that

"The ancient and medieval Manipuris were in close contact with the Shan of Upper Burma called Pong. The Pong learnt writing from the Chinese and Manipuris learned it from the Pong. The first supplies of paper might have been imported. In a short while, the Manipuris learnt the art of paper making and it became a small cottage industry in Manipur" [10].

The local texts or manuscripts called *Puyas* are one of the most important local sources of history. These manuscripts are mainly kept inside a "Lubak" (a wooden casket) to prevent them from rapid deterioration. A *Puya* is often themed on the subjects like the genealogy of a clan, charms, myths, religious philosophy, creation of cosmology, an administrative account of a particular clan, etc. *Puyas* are also treated as sacred texts. Reading *puyas* requires one to have taken a bath, changed into fresh clothes and lighted up specialized lamps made for the purpose. Due to such requirements, *puyas* are often touched and read only on auspicious days and special occasions.

There are different types of *puyas* dealing with different aspects. For instance, there are *puyas* strictly dealing with matters on the genealogy of clan and sub-clan, such as *Sanggai Phamang* [11] and *Langthabalon*. We also have *puyas* dealing with matters on the creation and cosmology of "Meitei Leibak", such as *Leithak Leikharol* [12] and *Khamlangba Erengba Puwari* [13]. There are also *puyas* dealing with matters on the ritual occasions of the ancestors and religious beliefs, such as *Thalloy Nongkhailon* [14] and *Erat Thouninraol* [15]. Furthermore, there are also *puyas* dealing exclusively with the matters of a particular deity, such as *Sanamahi Puya* [16], *Pakhangba Laihui* [17] and

⁷ Loh, Ka Sung, Dobber, Stephen, Earnest, Koh, *Oral history in South East Asia: Memories and Fragments*, Basing Stoke, Palque Macmillan, 2003

⁸ It is a musical art of Manipur which involves ballad singing accompanied with the sounds of a dholak or drum. The main discourse or depict is Khongjom War or Anglo- Manipuri War of 1891 heroic stories.

⁹ Moirang is a ballad singing art tradition of Manipur. The main themes is based on the story Moirang clan Kingdom or Chiftdom.

¹⁰ R.K Jhaljit, *A History of Manipuri literature*, Imphal; Public Book Store, 1987, p. 8

¹¹ Y. Mohendra Singh, *Sanggai Phamang*, Imphal

¹² It is an ancient narrative literary work on the creation of earth, genealogy of Kings, mythology and Moral teaching. This *puya* also portrays some goddesses including, Leimarel Sidabi, Nongthang Leima and Panthoibi.

¹³ Athokpam Yaima Landum ed *Khamlangba Erengba Puwari Neinarol*, Imphal 1993

¹⁴ Yumnamcha bhudhachandra, *Thalloy Nongkhailon*, Imphal (1986)

¹⁵ Mayambam Gourachandra ed, *Erat Thounirol*, Imphal, 1988

¹⁶ B. Kullachandra, *Sanamahi Puya*, Imphal

¹⁷ L. Suresh, *Pakhangba Laihui*, Imphal

Panthoibi Khongul ^[18].

While it is yet to determine who and when the puyas of Panthoibi Khongul were written, there exist many versions written by different maichous, one of which is believed to have been published during the reign of King Khongtekcha by Akoijam Tomba in 763 A.D. Another version of the puyas by Moirangthem Chandra Singh, which was published during the reign of Meidingu Charairongba, is believed to have influenced the process of Hinduisation in Manipur. The book, which was written based on Panthoibi's life and how she went on to be worshipped as a Meitei deity, throws light on the early culture and interpersonal relationships among various clans. The popular understanding among the Meiteis themselves is believed to have grounded on very classification through the names of *yek*, *salai* and *yumnak* (surname). The *yumnak* or the *sagei* (the smallest social unit) is believed to have been legitimized based on the *Thiren Layat Puya* and the *Loiyumba Shinyen* ^[19]. The *Loiyumba Shinyen puya* records the list of the *yumnak* of each of the seven clans as follows: Luwang-69, Ningthouja-131, Khuman-111, Moirang-80, Sarang Leisangthem-50, Angom-74, and Khaba-Nganba-23 ^[20]. These seven clans of each *sagei* further evolved in the organization of Meetei and then established genealogical ties brought forth by *Atiya Sidaba*, the supreme father of the Meetei confederacy ^[21]. Furthermore, the *Sakok Lamlen Ahanba Puya* records the establishment of Ningthouja Dynasty under the Pakhangba, and through the event of *Konna Chak* ^[22]. Having said that, all the seven clans belong to a single Meetei Confederacy, and with the victorious emergence of Ningthouja Dynasty, the power struggle among the various principalities was taken over by the Ningthoujas.

From *Loiyumba's* time (1094-1122), Meitei society started to transition from Mechanical to Organic solidarity ^[23]. It provided a class society. The people who were essentially peasants had become artisans too and started rendering feudal services called *Lallup* to the king. This development of *Lallup* ^[24] systems was the manifestation of the emergence of feudalism in the social, administrative and political system of the Meitei kingdom. It meant the emergence of a class system in Meitei society ^[25].

Puyas are different from Royal Chronicles in understanding the historiography of Manipur. Some of the notable royal chronicles, which serve as the most important sources of Manipur's past are *Cheitharol Kumpaba* ^[26] and *Ningthourel Lambuba*. The *Cheitharol Kumpaba* notes that the king of Manipur Kyamba had introduced the system of Cheithaba or counting of year in 1485 A.D. ^[27]. *Cheitharol Kumpaba* is a manuscript which records historical events, ruler of Ningthouja Dynasty, royal excursion, pilgrimage, records on death and marriages, migration of Brahmins and Muslims

(Meitei Pangal), a military expedition, etc. The chronicle records events spanning two thousand years covering the reigns of eighty-eight kings of Manipur from Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D. to King Budhachandra 1955 A.D. 'Ningthourel Lambuba' is another Chronicle which throws light on various events happening from the first century to the eighteenth century during the reign of Ningthouja Dynasty. The chronicle plays a special role in explaining various military expeditions of Manipur kings to the neighbouring states. However, one notable demerit of the manuscript is the absence of time frames and genealogical chronology in its records.

Puyas, therefore, not only records events but are also influenced and shaped by the emerging socio-political system. In this context, a prominent Manipuri historian, Gangumei Kamei says that "the idea of the past was greatly influenced by the need of the present and by desired for glorification by the posterity". This means that the action of the past is interlinked with the objective, themes and manner of the historical evidence. But in Puyas and Chronicles, the king and nobility played the main part to preserve the documentation of the past to legitimize his power and authority on one hand, and to use the same as means to bring all the diverse subjects under one group/community of the same mother on the other hand.

Influence of Hindu Tradition on History Writing

The adoption of Hinduism in Manipur as a state religion towards the beginning of the Eighteenth century marked a new phase in the social and cultural history of Manipur ^[28]. In this case, Khuraijam Bijoykumar in his work on *Hinduism Among the Meiteis of Manipur: A Study of Continuity and Change* argues that 'what has the Meiteis of Manipur valley gained through the process of Hinduisation? And why did the Meiteis follow Hinduism?' ^[29] He provides two discourses on the conversion of Hinduism i.e. religion and non-religion factors. He mentions that:

"The reason might be that the Brahminical influence imparted legitimacy to the monarchy without the use of force, threat or coercion. The king also had reason to be elated when the Brahmins gratified him by linking Meitei traditional legends to Hindu mythology. This mythical reconstruction deified the sovereign by attributing a sacred status to him. Therefore, the king of Manipur might have patronized the Hindu religious preceptors not out of zeal for religion as such but as a means to their legitimized consolidation of the monarchical structure" ^[30].

"Another reason for the adoption of Hinduism by the king could be the 'policy for the political survival'. Manipur

¹⁸ M. Chandra Singh, (edition) *Panthoibi Khongul*, Imphal, 1987. Introduction. See, R K Jhalajit, *A History of Manipur Literature*, 1987 (2nd Edition), pp 151-152 writes that Nongpok has been identified with Siva and Parvati with Panthoibi.

¹⁹ It was written in the reign of Loiyumba King of Ningthouja clan. He had turn the clan into surname by providing according to the occupations.

²⁰ Gangumei Kabui, 'A note on *Loiyumba Shinyen* (the first written Constitution of Manipur), in Naorem Sanajaoba (eds) *Manipur Past and Present*, New Delhi, p.308

²¹ Kh. Chndrasekhar Singh (ed) *Sakok lamlen Ahanba Amasung Meihourol Sakok*, Imphal, 1992, p.5

²² Y Bhagya Meitei (ed), *Sakok Lamlen Ahanba Puya*, Imphal, p.5

²³ From Simple to differentiate society based on skills and occupations.

²⁴ *Lallup* literally means 'war organization'. Originally, it was extended to military service. The general system of the *Lallup* is based on the assumption

of every male between the ages of 17 to 60 years to place his service of 10 days in every forty at the disposal of the state. For more further detail See chapter, '*Lallup System*' of Kabui, G (1991), p.126.

²⁵ Kh. Bijoykumar, *Hinduism among the Meiteis of Manipur: A study of continuity and Change*, unpublished M.phil desertation paper, submitted to JNU, New Delhi, 2000, p.9

²⁶ *Cheitharol Kumpaba* was introduced under the King of Kyamba.

²⁷ Khelchandra and Ibungohal, *Chietharol kumbaba*, Imphal; Manipur Sahitya Parishad, 2005, p.20

²⁸ T. C Hudson, *The Meithies*, Davit Nutt, London, 1908, see in introduction.

²⁹ Kh. Bijoykumar, *Hinduism among the Meiteis of Manipur: A study of continuity and Change*, unpublished M.phil desertation paper, submitted to JNU, New Delhi, 2000, p. 7

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.7

had been witnessing frequent attacks by Eastern countries like the Shan, Burmese and Chinese. For instance, during the reign of Garibniwas who converted the Meitei to Hinduism, the Manipur-Burma wars were fought over three decades (17.17-48). It was also impossible to protect against such frequent attacks by such strong forces of Burma and China, even when all men in the country from the age of 16 to 60 years were taken into the army. So the king had to take help from the western countries to protect the eastern attacks. At that time western countries like Ahom of Assam, Takhel or Tripura were already Hindu states. After the conversion to Hinduism, Manipur came into closer contact with neighboring Hindu states like Assam, Tripura, Cooch Bihar, Sylhet, etc. Matrimonial and military alliances were forged with these Hindu states”^[31].

The adoption of a new religion among the Meitei’s moved them to a new pattern of life. According to Geertz; religion, like any other component of culture, is an orderly system of symbols^[32]. From different directions, the Hindu priests and scholars deliberately attempted to promote the newly introduced state religion. Many Hindu sculptures along with many temples were constructed. The best example is the Temple of Hanuman which was built on the eastern bank of the Imphal River by the then King Garibaniwaj.

The most remarkable and unfortunate event regarding the Puyas was called *Puya Meithaba* in the history of Manipur. Chronicle records that ‘17th ni nongmaijing meitei lairik manghalle’. This can be translated into English as “on the 17th day of Sunday in the year of 1654 Saka (1732 A.D.), with the initiation of the Guru Santidas, the King Garibaniwaj sending a message on horsebacks to every corner of his kingdom mostly to all the Meitei Maichous, and collecting the old manuscripts or puyas from them forcefully, had set ablaze, burnt and destroyed all of them in the front of *Kangla Uttra*”.^[33] It is believed that more than 120 precious books written in Meitei Scripts on culture, religion, history, politics, geography, literature, medicine, astronomy, ethics, etc. were turned into ashes in this.^[34] This occupies an important reason for turning the discourse of Manipur history into a Hindu origin. Such a coercive re-orientation of Manipur’s past as a Hinduised past nevertheless attracted huge opposition from many protagonists and Meitei Maichous alike. However, colluding with Santidas Gossain (the religious guru of Hinduism and the main protagonist in the forceful conversion of Meeteis into Hindus), the then king deliberately meted out severe punishments to those against the imposition of Hindu religious and socio-cultural affairs by the Hindu priests on the Meeteis. Further, with the help of the king, the Hindu priests established Brahmasabha, the highest authority of religious affairs. The Brahmasabha then published a book known as *Wayen Lairik*, containing rules and regulations on religious and socio-cultural affairs, which were imposed on the Meeteis thereby moulding deeper the aspects of the Hindu religion.

It is also admitted that *Brahmanas or Bamons*^[35] came and settled in Manipur, transforming the religious and social history of Manipur. The early Meitei knowledge of historical methods was then influenced by the grand narrative of Hinduism and changed ancestor worship to Brahmanical faith. The then king established *Pundit Loishang* (Royal College of Priests) to further study and understand the rites and rituals, philosophy and thought of the early Meitei past. In such context, Gangumei Kamei observes that,

“The past and the present exist side by side in the Meitei psyche. Since there was no technology of printing before the British rule the chronicles and historical texts were not printed or published but kept in the Pundit Loishang. The Cheithrol Kumbaba was an official diary: the royalty’s views and version were recorded.”^[36]

During the reign of King Chandrakirti, the process of Hinduization was made to further progress. The King adopted *Chingol Iruppa*, a traditional religious belief of the meeteis, and on that occasion, Nongpok Ningthou (the first Meetei person who started Meetei civilization at Koubru hill) and Panthoibi (wife of Nongpok Ningthou) were identified as Mahadeva and Parvati.^[37] Book of *Meetei Pura Bijay Panchalli* was also written, which contained a number of religious and social constructs based on the theories for Hinduisation during his time.

It can therefore be noted here that, such an imposition and changing of the discourse of Manipur history through newly re-oriented grand narratives of the Hindu priests had adversely impacted upon the religious and socio-cultural historical past of Manipur, while also at the same time changing the whole value system of Manipur society in the writings of history. A new era of Brahminical imagination in Manipur in both political and cultural then began to take shape during the 19th Century, more so with a few *Bamons*^[38] or *Bamon* migrated to Manipur starting to take part in the Royal Courts. With the *Sanskritization* of Manipur, the very aspects of Manipur society were re-framed based on local Hindu norms and traditions. Such a forceful re-calibration of historical facts to suit Hindu grand narratives not only distorted and changed the belief and cultural practices, but also had deeply sanskritized time and chronology of the Meitei community. For instance, it can be mentioned here of the Cheitharol Kumbaba accepts hinduised classification of three eras viz. *Kalyabda, Sakabda and Chandrabda* in it, as against those of early Meitei time cycle viz. *Hayi, Haya, Langba and Konna*.

Colonial Historiography

Manipur started to come into contact with the colonial British in the aftermath of *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*. During the reign of Garibaniwaj, the Manipur kingdom invaded and defeated the upper territory of Burma many times. Going further, the king and his army invaded Sagaing in Upper Burma.^[39] Unfortunately, after the death of the king during the time, his

³¹ Ibid. 8

³² Geertz, C, *The Interpretation of Primitive Culture: Selected Essay*, New York, Basic Books Inc. Publishers, 1973. p.4.

³³ *Cheitharol kumbaba*, opcit p. 93

³⁴ Cited from N. Khelchandra, *Ariba Manipuri Sahitya Itihas*. Imphal, Manipur Sahitya Parishad, 1996

³⁵ They are court Pundits/Maichous commissioned by King. They transforms whole narrative of Meitei puya into Hindu tradition.

³⁶ Gangumei Kamei, *Lectures on History of Manipur*, New Delhi, Akansa Publishing House, 2012, p. 16

³⁷ Cited from Sunitikumar Chatterjee, *Religious and cultural integration of India*, 1967. See, R K Jhalajit, *A History of Manipur Literature*, 1987 (2nd Edition), pp 151-152

³⁸ Bamons are locally refers to as Brahmin of Manipur.

³⁹ D.G.E Hall, *History of South East Asia*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1981. pp. 364

successors became weaker. This was further aggravated by disunity among them. At the same time, neighboring Burma became more powerful and thus had gotten a chance to invade Manipur. According to R. Boileau Pemberton, “the first great invasion of Manipur by a Burmese took place in 1755, commanded by a relative of Alompra. And this was the first occasion, according to him, on which the Burmese appear to have owed their success entirely to the use of fire-arms: their weapons, like those of the Muneepoorees, having, up to this period, consisted almost entirely of the dao, spear and bow and arrow^[40].”

Due to the invasion by Burma, the kingdom of Manipur suddenly lost its independence and experienced political turmoil under the wrath and atrocities of the Burmese forces for seven years. This is called the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* (Seven Years Devastation, 1819-26). To fight back and expel the Burmese forces from the valley of Manipur, the then king of Manipur, Jai Singh, sought help from the British army.^[41] Although the British attitude towards the kingdom of Manipur was more or less friendly in the beginning, it was believed to be just a means for the expansion and consolidation of their hold over eastern India and Burma. For instance, *The Treaty of Yandaboo*, signed between the then Manipur king and the British imperialists on February 24, 1826^[42] indicated that the latter intended to use the small hilly kingdom of Manipur as a pawn in the British imperial design towards the annexation of Asian countries. Even though Manipur was liberated from Burma, she gradually became a victim of the onslaught of British imperialism, mainly because of increasing mutual distrust and dissensions among the ruling princes of the State^[43].

The political relationship between the two countries had undergone certain changes after the Burmese War of 1885. Later, *The Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891* marked the end of the era of a sovereign and independent Manipur, and the beginning of a new one in the history of Manipur, under the sway of British rule. This war also marked the completion of the British conquest of the Indian sub-continent^[44]. As a result, Manipur was reduced from an independent kingdom to a protectorate status under the British Empire. The British, as in other parts of their colonies, took advantage of the inner conflicts and petty fights within the Royal family of the kingdom of Manipur. The British appointed and dethroned kings of Manipur at will to suit their interests.

Many of the British officers, who were living in the North Eastern Frontier of British India devoted themselves to writing history, ethnography, geography, economy and political representation of the region. R. B Pemberton's *Reports on the North Eastern Frontier of British India-1835*

is considered the first account of colonial writing on Manipur. He was a young British officer who voluntarily helped Gambhir Singh in the liberation of Manipur from Burma^[45]. His reports on Eastern India and Burma are discussed in a Pong Chronicle which refers to the Shan invasion of Manipur. He writes that “nine or ten times the Burmese army swept the Manipuris from one extremity to the other, with the apparent determination of extirpating a race, which they intended to subdue permanently^[46].” He also further writes on the origin of Meeteis inferring from the puyas that, “we may safely concluded them Meeteis to be descendant of Tartar colony of China”^[47].

McCulloch's work *Accounts of the Valley of Munnipore and surrounding hill Tribes*, which was published in 1859 at Calcutta, deals with the early history of Manipur, particularly the eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century; is widely accepted as another important colonial writing. He was a political Agent of the East India Company and stayed in Manipur for nearly 23 years from 1844-1867.^[48] In his writings, M.C Culloch remarks that “Hinduism with Munniporees is but a fashion. But they thus profess Hinduism, they had not given up their ancient worship and three hundred deities are still appropriated sacrifice of things abhorrent to real Hindus.^[49] He has also given interesting ethnographic accounts of tribes and communities of Manipur. He mentions the Meitei state formation in the valley, arguing that “from the most credible traditions, the valley appears originally to have been occupied by several tribes, the principal among them being Khuman, Luwang, Moirang and Meitei migrating from different directions. In this narrative, the Khumans were the most powerful and then after their decline, the Moirangs were powerful for a while”.^[50]

R. Brown, a political agent of Manipur, in his work *A Statistical Account of Manipur-1874*, which deals with the history and culture of the Manipuri peoples and mentions that “in their intercourse among themselves, the Manipuris are ceremonious”, while also at the same time speculating Meeteis' origin as “should it be a correct view that the valley of Manipur was at no very distant period almost covered entirely by water, the origin of the Munniporees from the surrounding hill is the proper and only conclusion to be arrived”.^[51] Colonial historian, Alexander Mackenzie, who was also serving as a colonial administrator in Bengal and Burma is also an important contributor in colonial historiography of Manipur. His writings deal with the British policy towards the hill tribes inhabiting different parts of North Eastern Frontier of British India. He writes that “by the beginning of the second half of the 19th century the British moved a step further. In 1851, the British Government, along

⁴⁰ R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, AOI, New Delhi, 1991[1835] p. 41.

⁴¹ Captain Jenkins and Lieutenants Pemberton and G. Gordon, became the first Europeans to advance to the Naga Hills, blazing a path through the forest between the hills and the low banks of Assam and Northern Cachar. They were aided and accompanied by the Raja of Manipur, Gambhir Singh, with 400 Manipuri sepoys. National Archives of India, New Delhi, Foreign Department, Branch - Political (henceforth NAI, FDBP), Consultation No. 70, dated the 5th March 1832.

⁴² R. Brown, *Statistical Account of Manipur*, New Delhi 1886 (2001), pp.64-66.

⁴³ Gangmumei Kamei, *The Anglo-Manipur War and its aftermath* and also see in Lal Dena (ed) *History of Modern Manipur (1826-1949)*, New Delhi; Orbit Publishers, 1991, p. 48

⁴⁴ Ibid p. 49

⁴⁵ In executing the route survey, Captain Jenkins and Lieutenants Pemberton and G. Gordon, became the first Europeans to advance to the Naga Hills, blazing a path through the forest between the hills and the low banks of Assam and Northern Cachar. They were aided and accompanied by the Raja of Manipur, Gambhir Singh, with 400 Manipuri sepoys. National Archives of India, New Delhi, Foreign Department, Branch - Political (henceforth NAI, FDBP), Consultation No. 70, dated the 5th March 1832.

⁴⁶ R. B Pemberton, *Reports on North Eastern Frontier Of British India*, The Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta. 1835 p. 40

⁴⁷ ibid pp. 40-41

⁴⁸ He married a Manipuri princess and helped Maharaja Nara Singh when the Kuki influx happened in Manipur. He died in 1885 at Shilong.

⁴⁹ McCulloch, *An account of the Valley of Manipur*, (London 1859) reprinted in 1990 Delhi, Gain Publication, p.17

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 4

⁵¹ Op. cit. R. Brown, *A Statistical Account of Manipur-(1874)*, Delhi, KM Mittal, 1975. p. 28

with their recognition of Chandra Kirti made a declaration and avowed publicly their determination to uphold the present Rajah, and to resist and to punish any parties attempting hereafter to dispossess him".^[52] His work is of major help for the researchers working on the colonial historiography of Manipur. His work not only surprisingly depicts the colonial intentions and how the same was carried out in NEFA, but also occupies a special place for Manipur. E Dun's *Gazetteer of Manipur*, 1886, officially published in 1891 also deals with the political history of Manipur since the Anglo-Burmese war. He mentions that Manipur was an independent kingdom, giving original documents with authentic maps of Manipur. He also mentions that the country maintained professionalism like professional class, domestic class, commercial class, agricultural class, indefinite and non-productive people.^[53] He also says of Meiteis that "tribe appears to have absorbed the rest, and is divided into seven families, the members of which do not intermarry, and whose names perpetuate the memory of the original tribal divisions in the form of seven clans".^[54] For the colonial expansion and more accounts of the Manipur colonial history, the Semi-historical work of James Johnstone, *My Experience in Manipur and Naga Hills*, 1896; occupies an important contribution. The work; focusing mainly on military operations, diplomatic relations, administrative accounts and records of boundary affairs with Burma; traces Manipur's origin as Mongoloid writing "Meiteis or Manipuris are a fine stalwart race descended from an Indo-Chinese stock, with some admixture of Aryan blood, derived from the successive wave of Aryan invaders that passed through the valley in pre-historic days"^[55].

By the early twentieth century, increasing accounts of colonial ethnographers' interest in Manipur could be seen. For instance, T C Hudson's *The Meiteis* not only gives an ethnographical account of Manipur, but also gives an interesting account of the history, religion, culture, and different characteristics of the people of Manipur. According to him, "religious dissent was treated with the same ruthless severity as meted out to political opponents and wholesale banishment and execution drove the people into acceptance of the tenets of Hinduism".^[56] He further writes that,

"Hinduism is of comparatively recent origin though the records of the Brahmin families claim in some cases that founder of the family settled in the valley at so remote a date as the middle of 15th century"^[57].

Hudson also states on the question of women, that "every girl knew how to weave and was given a loom as part of her dowry. Nearly every housewife was capable of weaving all the clothes needed by her family".^[58] Furthermore, Robert Reid's work *History of Assam Bordering Area-1942* tries to depict on the factors as to how the Anglo-Manipuri battle and the colonial rule in Manipur had happened through official documents. His work also throws light on anti-colonial

movements like the Kuki Rebellion (1917-1919), the movement of Jadonang and Gaidinliu (1930-1933), and the Women Agitation of Manipur Valley (1939-40). Notwithstanding the fact that his work may find contradictions with the contemporary writings of history, it became an important source of validating issues and events. Moreover, Abdul Ali's *Note on Early History of Manipur-1923* and Ethel St. Clair Grimwood's *My Three Years in Manipur and Escape from the Recent Mutiny-1891*, among others can serve as important sources for understanding and reconstruction of colonial historiography of Manipur.

Colonial official's historiography generated a vast amount of knowledge on the unknown history of Manipur. Compilation of colonial information in textual forms such as survey reports, tour journals and geographical narratives contains strategies for control ranging from boundary demarcation to identifying, locating, classifying and bounding the natives within a specific territory. For instance, Bernard Cohn promulgated an idea called *Investigative Modalities* which was instrumental in sustaining colonial rule, issuing commands, maintaining law and order and generating other forms of information about the people the British were ruling.^[59] Another form of knowledge is the 'survey modality'^[60] which the British deployed extensively in the North-Eastern Frontier right after the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26.

Over time colonial officials might have started to understand the true nature of the society to a certain extent. Nevertheless, colonial writings were not the same as puyas in describing Manipuri history. According to Alexander Mackenzie, Manipur valley represented "the great highway" between Cachar and other parts of Assam on the one hand, and Kubo valley on the other hand (Northeast Frontier of Bengal: latest edition: p.149). Therefore, colonial historiography deals mainly with the ideas of differentiation between *primitive*, *traditional* and *modern*. Their writings also show that they are more scientific, rational and advanced. On the other hand, the traditional values and norms were termed irrational and non-scientific.

Writings of Local and Post-Colonial Historiography

A sense of history emerged among Manipuri scholars in the late nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. They started to see the past with certain beliefs, desires and values. Their mode of discourse also falls into a similar manner to the past.^[61] This gives their knowledge of the past diverse perspectives, despite being limited. Understanding, crafting and reconstructing historiography has started to take an important area of study during the time, and more so contemporarily.

In such a context, Haodejamba Cheitanya published *Manipur Itihas* in 1890 and printed at Calcutta. This was dubbed as the first local writing on the history of Manipur as it highlighted how Manipur's history could be written without being influenced by colonial writings. Later, his other works like *Takhel Ngamba* or *History of War between*

⁵²Op.cit. A. Mackenzie, *History of the Relation of the Government with the Hill tribes of North Eastern Frontier of British Bengal-1884* p.155.

⁵³ E Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur*, Calcutta, reprint Delhi: Manas Publications, 1992 (1886), p. 27

⁵⁴ Ibid p.13.

⁵⁵ James Johnstone, *My Experience in Manipur and Naga Hills*, (London 1896), Delhi; Vivek Publishing House, reprinted in 1971, p. 97.

⁵⁶ T.C. Hudson, *The Meiteis*, (1903), New Delhi, Neeraj Publication House, 1975 pp. 10-11

⁵⁷, ibid. p. 69.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 27.

⁵⁹ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 5-11.

⁶⁰ Cohn suggests that the word survey means a "form of exploration of the natural and social landscape"

⁶¹ Their writing has been mostly influenced by vedic interpretation and the Aryan origin of Manipur past.

Garib Nawaj Maharaja of Manipur and the Tipperahs and the Burmese in 1902 further brought out the distinct sense of local historical writings on war. In 1917, P. Parijat published *Manipur Purabritta*, which is considered the second local writing on the history of Manipur. The work describes the dynasty history of Manipur based on the chronicles. Khumanthem Kaomacha Singh's work *Manipur Itiibritti* published in 1934 (reprinted in 1980) has then given some aspects of the religion and cultural history of Manipur. Furthermore, W. Yumjao Singh points out how the history of Manipur valley was formed in his work *Manipur Itihas* (1947 second edition). His archaeological work *Report on the Archeological Studies* (1935), which is considered the first archaeological history of Manipur, also deals with archaeological findings such as the coins of Manipur.

Through the writings of Mutum Jhulon in his work *Bijoy Panchali*, which tried to associate Meitei traditions with the Vedic tradition, a new narrative was formed. The new hinduised narrative got stronger momentum and support owing to the same getting commissioned by the Royal Court, the literati which were composed mainly by *bamon* pundits. Along with Atombapu Sharma, Jhulon heavily sanskritized the name of the Manipuri Kings, rivers, villages, old traditional religious notions and deities. Meanwhile, R.K. Sanahal's work *Manipur Itihas* published in 1947 brought out a few changes in the historical writings in Manipur. He, therefore, introduced, through his work, an important modification for the use of sources from the past.^[62]

It is important to note that the writings of Manipur history during this time tilted towards a heavily hinduised Manipur past. In those texts, the Kingdom of Manipur was found to be prominently mentioned as one created by Lord Shiva in the last *Satya Yuga*. To suit their narratives, many myths were further created to legitimize their writings. In 1908, Hudson published his *The Meitheis*, which created a historical debate in the Royal Court^[63]. Responding to this, P. Parijat claimed that Meiteis were Aryan. Historian Phurailatpam Atombapu Sharma further went on to claim that Manipur was identified with *Manipurna* from the Mahabarata epic in his work *Manipur Itihas* (1940). To counter such argument, historian Naoriya Phullo, who rejected the effort of Atombapu school of thought, had written on historical perspectives of Meitei religion and philosophy. In his works, *Meitei Houfam Wari* 1934 and *Eigi Wareng* 1940, Phullo suggested ways to realize the Meitei history, culture and religion. Such works and arguments show that the court pandits played a crucial role in the writings history of Manipur.

Nevertheless, the post-colonial historiography, and more so with the contemporary historical writings, local historical scholars' interests seem to have taken up the discourse on the perspectives of pre-hinduised Manipur historiography, and reconstruction of the history of Manipur based on the same. These scholars have wanted the best ways to research the past, try new modes of historical narrative, split history into pieces, and used historical sources to their ability to learn about the past. In this context, Joytirmoy Roy's work *History*

of Manipur (1958) has set historical stages^[64] and showed a historical trajectory in comparison to earlier works. Later in 1963, L Ibungohal Singh's work *Introduction to Manipur* 1960 was released giving new perspectives on the understanding of the Manipur past, as against the sanskritised version.

Having said so, there have also been writings in the post-colonial era, still tilting towards a hinduised Manipur. For instance, mention can be made of R K Jhalajit Singh's *A Short History of Manipur* published in 1965 which covered the ancient, medieval and till the merger of Manipur to India. Most of his writing was influenced by Atombapu School of thought. Later in 1966, *Vijoy Panchali*^[65] (four volumes), written by Mani and Mangi Singh was published. In this work the genealogy of King was again traced back to the mythological story of Babrubahana, son of Arjuna, thus linking the history of Manipur to the Mahabarata, and thereby trying to create a common Indo-Aryan past.

Along the same time, Arambam Saroj Nalini's *The Religion of Manipur*, which was published in 1980, had given a critical methodology in the collection of sources and analysis of sources on the history of Manipur religion.^[66] In the work, Nalini points out three distinctive features of religion in Manipur, which are the ancient beliefs, the rituals and the historical development of religion in Manipur. Naorem Sanajaoba's edited works *Manipur: Past and Present* (four volumes) further provide different aspects of the social history, political history, cultural history and religious history of Manipur. The works also provide a critical study of the understanding of Manipur historiography. Furthermore, Gangumei Kamei's *History of Manipur in the Pre-Colonial Periods* (1991), has made periodization based on ancient and medieval with emphasis on the state formation process. However, in the aftermath of Puya Meithaba and the subsequent hinduisation of Manipur, along with *bamons* or Hindu priests' run royal courts; the distorted version of the Hindu pundits overpowered those of Meitei maichous. This has thus resulted in a deeply reoriented version of the historiography of Manipur over time.

Conclusion

The construction of history in the pre-colonial era was mainly influenced by the Meeteis' understanding of the concept of history. Such an understanding has been the result of long-existing traditions and norms through the edicts of the *puyas* and *maichous* of the time. However, the long-existing norms and traditions came to an abrupt end after the same got Sanskritised and hinduised, which was made possible by the then kings of Manipur, in exchange for their bids to help them materialize their sense of invasion and greed. To this end, the *puyas meithaba* will go down in the history of Manipur civilization as the most unfortunate man-made incident which has brought irreparable damage to the socio-cultural and historiography of Manipur. Over time, Manipur history has been tainted as part of Vedic history with the following dominant grand narratives of Mahabarata and Ramayana

⁶² R. K. Sanahal use to write history by collecting sources from newspaper, visit Calcutta library, and other related document with Manipur past. Simply, he contradicts what other have done before. However, he also mainly deal with vedic interpretation of Manipur past.

⁶³ Hudson identify Manipuri Language as Tibeto-Burman.

⁶⁴ He made division of Manipur history into Puranic Age, Uncounted Period, and till merger of Manipur to India. This is also first widely circulated Manipur History in English medium.

⁶⁵ *Vijoy Panchali* consisted of five Volumes. In these volumes, a new narrative of Manipuri King linked to the Indo-Aryan past was introduced.

⁶⁶ She developed that local have possessed their own belief system known as Meitei Religion, in later a synthesis religion came into being with close association with Bengali Vaishnavism which known as Meitei Hindu (a different form Hindusim from elsewhere)

getting appropriated to the events and genealogy of the Manipur past through their writings. Despite a little respite in such narratives from the colonial writings about Manipur and its past, because of the imposition and appropriated acceptance of the hinduised version by the pandits in the king's royal courts the Sanskritised narratives are found to be deeply rooted in the historiography of Manipur, even to date. Recapitalizing the pre-hinduised version of Manipur historiography, despite its huge necessity, becomes an impossible task for the present historians and researchers working on the subject due to the loss of the sources of Manipur's past in the fire. The local writings can be great sources of the historiography of Manipur. However, except for a few, most of the writings are influenced by Sanskritised Brahmanical norms and values. While it is true that colonial history gives us a truly scientific account of the Manipur's past, its writings have also not shied away from creating divisions among the Manipur communities, as could be seen from Bernards Cohn's idea of demarcation policy, survey methods and spatiality, etc. Besides, the royal chronicles despite dealing mainly with the royals' histories tend to be somehow hinduised as could be seen from its incorporation of Vedic chronology.

Nonetheless, the various sources and narratives are great sources in the historiography of Manipur as they are means for validation and reconstruction of the Manipur past in its truest sense. The sources inform us of the varying perspectives of the different periods in the history of Manipur. Those little archival sources of puyas and preserved local writings and oral history which could escape and live through the *puyas meithaba*, undoubtedly become the most important sources of Manipur historiography. Besides, the birth of a true sense of history writing through the late twentieth century is another important step forward in studying, understanding and constructing and reconstructing the Manipur past for more reliable historiography of Manipur.

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