

## SACRAMENTAL ELEMENT AND CHARACTER IN THE MARRIAGE OF THE MEITEI IN BYGONE DAYS

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### ABSTRACT

*In the early days, man lived more or less like any other animal. At that time, sex life was absolutely free. Hence it was only maternity alone could be judged and paternity could not be determined. It was only practicable to know the paternity of children if sex relationship could be made an exclusive union of man and women. In men's aim to understand the paternity of children lie the seeds of the institution of marriage. And the concept of marriage as a sacrament came into existence with the emergence of the marriage institution. Marriage is an institution which permits man and woman to family life. A man and woman are socially permitted to become husband and wife and to have children by involving the right of sexual relations. At different places and various stages of human development, marriage came into existence in different forms. In this paper, a humble attempt is made to bring to light the sacramental element and character in the marriage of the Meitei.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Nupihaiba, Heijing Kharai Puba, Luhongba, Keinya Katpa and Loukhatpa*

### INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the institution of marriage is a landmark in the history of human society. Such an institution did not exist among the primitive people. In the early days, promiscuity was well founded and sex life was absolutely free. As civilization advanced, people gave up a habit of frequently moving from one place to another in search of food. They started to lead settled life. From promiscuity to monogamy there was a long march from pre-agricultural to agricultural economy in which monogamy and monogamous marriage were institutionalized. Thus marriage as an exclusive union of man and woman did not emerge one stroke.

The term 'Haijaba' or 'Nupihaiba' means proposal which is within the scheme of the marriage in Manipuri society. It is one of the primary steps in arrange marriage. In traditional Meitei society, there was go-between in the course of action for marriage. Either relatives or representatives of the parents of the expected bridegroom were sent along with presentation like fruits, sweet, pan, etc. to the residence of the girl to make a request to the parents of the girl for her hand. It was the custom in ancient days that if the girl had consented the proposal for marriage, she received the fruits and flowers or articles brought by the boy's family and put the flowers on her ear. When the covenant was reached for the purpose between the parties of both for boy and girl, the marriage was held sooner or later on an auspicious day. Nupihaiba was the first step in the process of a marriage which followed by the 'Yathanghaba'. It means to give formal order for the marriage. H.A. Colquhoun, I.C.S.

asserted that after the parents had settled the preliminaries, the announcement of the forthcoming marriage or 'Yathanghaba' was taken place. Waroipt and Heijing Kharai Puba or Heijapot Puba<sup>4</sup> were important components in the process of marriage. Ancient Manipuri texts - Panthoibi Khongul and Nungbal Pombi Luwaoba have made reference to Nupihaiba or Haijaba. L. Bhagyachandra stated that when an agreement was brought between the parents of bride and bridegroom, a day was fixed to hold the rite of 'Waroipt'. Waroipt was preceded the Heijapot. The folk tales of Khamba-Thoibi and Tampha Lairembi of Wangoo clearly reveal the custom. In ancient days, it was very common that the marriage ceremony was kept postponement for many days and months after the episode of Heijing Kharai Puba which was the last process in course of the marriage. The word 'Heijing Kharai Puba' or 'Heijapot Puba' means articles for the request. In the olden days, the essential items that to be included in 'Heijing Kharai Puba' were baskets of rice, fish, salt, fruits, two pots of intoxicating liquor etc. The rite of Heijing Kharai Puba cannot be performed without the fruits called Heikru (*Emblica officinalis* or Amla) and Heining (*Hogplum*) since the ancient times. Tradition says that on the occasion of the Heijing Kharai Puba of Tampha Lairembi the two fruits - Heikru and Heining were left out, hence the furious goddess had given the curse to the party of the bridegroom to turn into stone statues. From that onward till date the said two fruits become compulsory and inexorable articles of Heijing Kharai Puba ceremony. In case the mentioned fruits are not available as result of offseason, their stems or leaves have been used to substitute. If a marriage where the bride price has arisen it would be finalized on the day of Heijing Kharai Puba. The items that brought on the day of Heijing Kharai Puba were made an offer to ancestral gods viz ancestor of the clan and sub-clan, Sanamahi, local and guardian gods. After the offering was over, the articles were distributed to all the members present in the function mainly by the Arangfam who acted as an overall in charge in the management of the particular or concern ritual. There is no fixed date for Heijing Kharai Puba but it should be performed on an auspicious day even today. The society has no objection to executing Heijing Kharai Puba ritual even on the day of marriage. This ritual is permissible to carry out on any suitable day before marriage or in the morning of the day of marriage according to the convenience of the parties. The bride price was a common custom in the Meitei society which was consisted of a pair of bullocks, clothes, ornaments for the bride etc in early days.

To become husband and wife, a man and woman need to undergo any one of the following rituals in the Meiteis society:

- Luhongba
- Keinya Katpa and
- Loukhatpa

On the day of the betrothal ceremony, the bridegroom and his company including parents, relatives, friends etc proceeded to the house of the bride with the socially prescribed articles of marriage. As and when they reached the house of the bride, the groom was warmly welcomed by the mother or aunts of the bride after passing a fire kindled to drive out the evil spirit. Later on, this tradition is known as 'Diyuti okpa'. Panthoibi Khongul refers to the existence of such a tradition. After that, the ceremony of marriage began to initiate with socially accepted norms at the residence of the bride.

Marriage with full ritual had incorporated with Mei Latpa (Kindling of fire or worship of fire by kindling) or Iratphu Latpa (installation of water pot). Kujabapunba - tying of bride's palm with that of the groom, Leikoiba - walking around the groom and spreading of flowers upon him by the bride, Leihukpa - placing of garlands on both i.e. putting of two garlands known 'Kundopareng' i.e. garland of Jasminum/ Pube-scenes on the neck of groom and in turn the groom remove one of the garlands and put it on the neck of the bride, Kangsubi Lanba - passing over sweetmeat made of sesamum and molasses etc were compulsory steps in the process of the completion of marriage. The cited procedures are still observing by the Meiteis in the marriage ceremony. Quoting from Mr. H. A. Colquhoun I.C.S, regarding the Meiteis marriage as:

"The actual ceremony is held at the bride's house; a large party assembles..... The bride is sitting in front of the bridegroom. Mantras are recited, and the ancestry of the pairs up to the great-grandparents is repeated ..... the bride walking ceremonially seven times around the groom and casting flowers upon him; garlands (leipareng) are placed on both and the company prostrate themselves before them. They are then seated side by side, and their innaphi, or chadars, are fastened together,..... The bride then enters the cooking room followed by the groom. The pair sits on the same mat, and place pan (Panna khutap), and subsequently sweetmeats (Kangsubi) in each other's mouths. Offerings of the pan are made to them by friends and relatives. The party then marches to the bridegroom's house, the bride being carried in a litter at the head of the party. A large and substantial wood bed is a prominent feature of the procession."<sup>tt</sup>

In the marriage ceremony of the Meiteis, prayer was offered to the ancestral spirits for blessing as well as for information about the inclusion of a new member to their Sagei (clan). Sweets, pan, fruit etc. were made an offer to the ancestral spirits. An omen was also sought through 'Chiruknungshang' and setting free of the mudfish in the water which is termed as 'Ngamuthaba'.<sup>15</sup> The marriage ceremony was ended with a grand feast called 'Mapamchakouba' on the 6th day of the marriage rite.

T.C. Hodson recorded about the grand feast called 'Mapamchakouba' as :

"..... on the sixth day following there is a feast at the house of bride's family, and the ceremony is then completed"

Marriage with limited rituals confined to those women who had eloped and spent one night or more or kidnapped women, or a woman who was not formerly married but was a wife of someone known as "Mou." Such women were also allowed to get married without performing sacrificial rites viz, Mei-Latpa and Iratphu-Latpa but the remaining items were the same.

Keinyakatpa was a very common form of solemnizing a tie among the poor, or an already married man and woman, wife of someone, husband of someone or widows or widowers or, girls or women who already been eloped or kidnapped. This ceremony has been practicing and in-active in the society since the ancient period. It was very simple and short but also less expensive. In the performance of Keinyakatpa, two garlands of kundo were offered to the god Sanamahi or Lainingthou Sanamahi. The two garlands of kundo which were made an offer to the god Sanamahi or Lainingthou Sanamahi were placed on the necks of the couple by themselves in front of parents, guardians, relatives, friends, and members who were assembled on that occasion. After that, they bowed down their heads before the ancestral gods and Sanamahi as well as the

elders or member present. The articles that were brought by the groom's family for the purpose of 'Keinyakatpa' were offered to the deities such as Sanamahi, ancestral gods, and guardian gods or Lamlai. With the completion of the offering the items to the respective gods or deities, they were distributed among member who was attended the Keinyakatpa'. B. Kullachandra Sharma advocated and remarked that the rite of 'Apok-asha-thaba' is not required in the case of Keinya Katpa ceremony. The Keinyakatpa ceremony came to an end with the offering a feast to the new couple by bride's family on the same day or another convenient day.

Loukhatpa was a very simple form of betrothal which was applied only to those who became husband and wife by way of elopement or by kidnap against the wishes of the bride's family. When a man and woman entered into family life and lived together as husband and wife without executing any marriage ritual like Luhongba or Keinyakatpa, a formal social recognition was necessary which could be achieved only performing Loukhatpa ceremony. The couple who were living as a husband and wife without conducting any one of the ritual like Luhongba, Keinyakatpa or Loukhatpa, they were deprived of many social privileges in Meitei society. As for instance, she was not authorized to join all important religious and social functions and debarred from leading off the marriage procession etc. Some orthodox in-laws disagreed to take food prepared or cooked by her. She was also not permitted for entering her parents' residence. The husband was also not allowed to hold the post of Piba of his Sagei, if he was eligible. It is said that for many causes they were excommunicated without executing any ritual. But later on, a formal recognition was assigned to them by performing Loukhatpa ceremony. It is very important to point out that if a controversy came into occurring between the families of the bridegroom and bride before marriage or, bride's family or parents refused to perform marriage ceremony because of some reasons, marriage could have been done by the family of groom without the family of the bride. In such case also Loukhatpa ceremony needed to be performed after some months or years to bring harmony between the two families as well as to strengthen the family tie with social status. The ceremony of Loukhatpa was very plain, uncomplicated and unelaborated. In this ceremony putting of garland on the necks of both husband and wife by each other was not the integrated part as putting garland on each neck of the couple was seem to be totally debarred. Other processes in this ceremony were almost the same as that of Keinya Katpa except none performance of putting garland on each neck of the couple. The rites of 'Apok-asha-thaba', offering prayer to Lainingthou Sanamahi etc were a very imperative part of 'Loukhatpa' ceremony. In the early Meitei society the unmarried couple, the husband and wife were not only looked down upon but also they did not authorize to enjoy certain privileges. No doubt, the objective of the marriage was to secure sanction, declaration, and evidence of the public for copulation or intercourse. But some elements of religious sanctity have existed in the marriage of Meitei as it comprised conveying information to ancestral gods and deities and their ancestors in ascending order known as 'Purol ahum' with the seeking for their grace, a performance of Lai-tin thaba rite etc. The ritual of 'Lai-tin thaba' forms one of the focal and fundamental parts of the marriage ceremony of the Meitei. In the case of 'Luhongba' a formal invitation which contained a garland of Kundo flowers along with betel leaves and a nut was sent to the bridegroom by the family of bride one day before Luhongba ceremony. This was carried out a boy of the bride's family, usually by the younger brother of the bride if she had younger brother along with one elderly man for guiding the boy.' On the day of the marriage ceremony, at the residence of the groom certain ritual like preparation of Ishaihu (water-pot) had been initiated. In the water pot, full to be brim, one bud of Langthrei (*Blumea balsamifera*), one bud of Sangbrei (*Pogostemon*

parviflorus) and a white flower were placed and wax candles were lighted. Fruits, betel leaves and nut were laid. The person who had been conducting the prayer first made himself sanctified and then sanctified the groom by sprinkling holy water with hymns. Dr.L.Bhagyachandra Singh said that “the said person who acted as priest for conducting the prayer asked the groom to pray and worship Salai Sidaba, Leimarel Sidabi, Lainingthou Sanamahi and bow down to his own parents for the blessing. The parents of the groom gave blessing their son for success in future and married life. After the rituals had over the groom had started to proceed for bride’s residence. Before starting for the residence of the bride for marriage ceremony the breath in both sides of the nostril of the groom was observed. If the breath of groom was on the right nostril, he would start moving with the right leg first”. In the Meitei marriage system, worshipping of ancestral spirits, seeking of blessing from them (ancestral gods or deities), informing the inclusion of the new member to Sagei gods or ancestral gods etc were a very important characteristic. Apart from these, the couple bent down three times before the ancestral gods or deities and bows to their families’ elders especially the elders of brides which became a very indispensable component in the marriage of the Meitei. It is said by Yagyendra Bahadur Singh on the marriage of the Hindu that:

“Marriage is the most important samskara, being the base of the whole structure of the society. It is a sacrament regulating one of the primary instincts and providing a proper way for the social recognition to biological function. It has become an institution- for paving the way to preserve one’s own progeny and for the proper development of human society”.

## CONCLUSIONS

The rites of Laitin thaba/ Apok-asha-thaba (offering of oblation to the ancestors), worshipped of Almighty God, ancestral gods, deities, Lainingthou Sanamahi, local and guardian gods etc, the ritual of invoking the ancestors for their blessings, the rite of ‘Meetam Nga Thaba’ (lit, sending away of fish or set free the two fishes in the pond) etc were the dominant features in the marriage of Meitei. It may be noted that the marriage of the Meitei was a union of the male and female not only to satisfy a biological need. If we consider the marriage of the Meitei as only to get social sanction for becoming husband and wife and for the satisfaction of biological needs, to beget their children, to struggle together or if we think marriage was nothing more than a social contract and most of the male marry to fulfill the desire for children and satisfaction of sex, it will be inappropriate and misinterpretative and may lead to the wrong notion. Thus, through the ages, the marriage of the Meitei is not only for the satisfaction of the biological need. It is a settled institution having a religious character attached thereto.

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