

Laiharaoba in Meitei culture: The Rejoicing of the Gods

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Abstract— Laiharaoba, one of the most popular and important socio-religious festivals of Manipur is an integral part of the culture of Meiteis, living in the valley of Manipur. The festival is performed to please the God and is celebrated to venerate the Umanglai (sylvan deities). Despite the dominance of Hinduism for about three hundred years this festival stands supreme through the vast rituals, dances and music enshrined in the soul of the people has preserved the essence of Meitei civilization and theories of cosmogony. The festival demonstrates extraordinary aesthetics of performing arts of the Meiteis. However, Laiharaoba is an act of worship and a very significant event which has been in vogue for over a period of two thousand years. This unique pre-Hindu religious festival can be understood only from the experience of the Meiteis. The lengthy and complex rituals, songs, dances, and ceremonial prayers of Lai-haraobaincorporate the Meitei way of life and its civilization. The philosophy of Laiharaoba is based on its ideas on interaction between the world of the gods and human world, the proper understanding between them resulting in the prosperity of mankind. Thus, this festival explores the creation myth of the Meiteis and the basis for their well being..

Keywords— HijanHirao, Khencho, maiba & maibi, Pena, Umanglai

I. INTRODUCTION

Laiharaoba or the rejoicing of the god is celebrated by the Meiteis, the major community of Manipur dwelling on the plains. Out of the total area of 22,327 sq. kms of the state of Manipur the area of the valley where the Meiteis live is only about 2000 sq. kms. However, the civilization of the Meiteis is a very old dating back to at least five thousand years. And Manipur has got more than two thousand years of recorded history. In its long period of history, the state has gone through a number of favourable and adversaries. There were many incidents of people entering the state from different parts of South-east Asia, China and India at different periods of time. The origin of the Meiteis is shrouded in antiquity and in spite of the influx of foreigners; the Meiteis have been preserving its distinctive culture through all the ages. In the early part of the 17th century people from mainland India came to Manipur and Hinduism was introduced. Since then a conflict between the original Meitei tradition and the Hindu tradition has been there. In course of time, Hinduism became the dominant religion in the state. But the ancient Meitei culture is kept alive through the practice of Laiharaoba. It is the most vital part of Meitei culture and history. Despite of the dominance of the Hindus, this religious festival remains uniquely free from Hindu elements.

Through the prayers of maibas and maibis (priest and priestess) and largely through the rituals Laiharaobareigns supreme and has successfully preserved the distinctive culture of the Meiteis.

An attempt has been made to trace its origin by scholars from different discip-lines like archaeology, history, and literature. The existence of more than 350 abodes of the sylvan deities in various places of the valley of Manipur is the sole material evi-dence to appreciate the rich and varied living traditions. The Meitei tradition refers to the dynamic role of seven divine girls called Lai NurabiTaret and the nine divine youths called LaipungthouMapal. They are revered in the traditional Maibi Dance depicting the ancient creation at the beginning of the days which is played in the Lai-Haraoba festival. This is still a living custom. Among the vital Lais (gods/deities), there are four MaikeiN-gakpa (the guardian of directions). Koubru is the guardian of the north-west, Thangjing, of the south-west, Wangbaren, of the south-east and Marjing, of the north-east. In addi-tion to these, Loiyarakpa and Chingkhei-Ningthou are also considered as principal deities of the directions. These are the prime deities for whom the Umanglaiharaoba fes-tival has been celebrated.

Existing myths, literary texts and his-torical works have also contributed in pro-viding ample sources of the Laiharaoba and its origin. Throughout the centuries the three main rituals officiates, i.e. the maiba (priest), maibi (priestess) and the Pena Asheiba (Pena Singer) were credited for preserving the oral tradition of Laiharaoba. A myth connected with the notion of why Laiharaoba has been performed is described in Meitei early manuscripts like Panthoibi Khongkun, PakhangbaPhambal, LeithakLeikharol, and ThirelLayat among others. One of the myths says, the Gods held the first Laiharaoba on the Koubru peak (believed by the Meitei to be the earliest settlement area) by the month of Mera (October–November), so that their descendants should imitate them and perform the same as it had been done by the deities so that they will never forget the secret and sacred story of the creation of this universe and the birth of different lives on this earth. The text Panthoibi Khongkun mentions a faded account of the inception of the stylized performances of dance and music associated with it.

The rituals of Laiharaoba are con-ducted by priestesses (maibis) and are per-formed by the people on an open field be-fore the shrine of their deities and ancestors ascended to divinity. The maibi call up the spirits of these deities/ancestors from the rivers and pools and transfer them to the idols (masks) placed in the shrine. The rituals are then performed with the idea of giving pleasure to God and the ancestors (Lais); hence

the name Laiharaoba (God-pleasing) is given.

Generally, Laiharaobahappens to be celebrated for 10 to 15 days, but some are celebrated for a month. It takes place during the month of (April-June). The celebrations are held mainly before seasonal crop bud-ding begins when the earth symbolized as the mother is ready to receive rains from the sky, symbolized as the father. Some Laiha-raoba is also celebrated during winter. In this way, we may associate the Laiharaoba-festival with the Dionysus festival of the an-cient Greek.

Songs which are vitally associated with the Laiharaoba festival like Ougri, Khencho, Anoirol, and LairemaPaosa are believed to be the earliest form of perform-ing arts and folk songs of Manipur. The phi-losophy of Anoirol imbibed in the Laiha-raoba dance is handed down from genera-tion to generation and it is the most compli-cated part of Laiharaobaand it is the dance of creation of man. It represents the energy released by the Gods. One of the basics forms of Laiharaobadance has now become the Thabal Chongba(dance in the moonlit night) dance. In Manipur, the pure oral narr-atives can be seen in the songs of Thabal Chongba accompanying with drums and other musical instruments, while performing during the night. Today it is not sung in the occasion of Thabal Chongba dance but it becomes a part of Laiharaoba festival where it is sung till today. Even today it is one of the most popular group dances in the Meitei society which is generally performed during the spring season. Thus, mythology is almost tied to society and religion as they cannot be separated.

Khencho is another old poem. It is said to have been sung at least before the 17th century. Full of consonantal alliteration it has a charming rhythmic music. Khencho is related to the creation myth of the Meiteis where the minor gods and goddesses praise the wonderful deeds of the supreme lord for the creation of the world and man.

Let us rejoice, let us rejoice!

Let us rejoice with radiant rejoicing!

O Chirong above the shrine, rejoice!

With firm steps let us plant out feet upon earth,

Not faltering.

The cowry shell with the closed eyes

The fish that leaps at the brightness of the place of embarkation.

The sesame plant, heavily laden,

The mustard leaf in abundance, the black mus-tard seed,

Let us store it, let us store it!

The underlying philosophy of the hymn says when someone dies body is separated from the soul and the mortal body gets merged into the mother earth. The immortal soul who roams around gets a new body i.e. in-carnation with the help of the talisman of Ougri spell. Such divine acts of Supreme Lord are praised by the lower deities and eulogize the divine work as the most gor-geous one and address the Lord as omnipo-tent.

The poem HijanHirao is sung in the Laiharaoba festival when the presiding dei-ties are ascending to the heaven. For the rea-son the community offer a boat for the deity to ride on it. It

is rendered by the maibi and the Hiroi (boatman) as:

O boat, boat

We are not rowing you

but the Sovereign God,

We are not cutting the journey short,

O God!

O boat, boat,

We are not rowing you

But the Sovereign Goddess

We are not cutting the journey short,

O Goddess!

We are rowing for the prosperity of the village, the country,

For peace in the land we are rowing,

For the long life of the king we are rowing,

For the abundance of the rice crop, for fish, we are rowing.

Having eaten of the early rice harvest,

Having carried all your belongings,

Let us now row the boat,

Wearing the ritual cloth, the black cloth

Having carried all your belongings,

O let us row and row!

After the merry making, the gods and god-desses are supposed to ascend to the heaven in boats. And the boat here is used symboli-cally as a medium of spiritual transportation which brings abundance, prosperity, happi-ness and welfare of the people. Thus, Lai Nongaba (gods ascending to heaven) ritual of Laiharaoba is strictly observed by the Meiteis as the most essential ritualistic part of the festival. In this festival, the three main performers i.e. the maiba, the maibiand Pena singer perform the mimetic rhythmic movement reflecting the creation myth of the indigenous Meitei community. Twisted with the creation myths originated in Mani-pur, Laiharaoba carefully represents the evolution of plants and animals (including human being), architecture, the art of weav-ing, agriculture and its rites, love lore of Gods, Semi Gods, and legendary heroes and household responsibilities and values. In short, it exhibits human life from cradle to grave. Creation myth can be well expe-rienced when we carefully observe the vari-ous rituals processes of the Laiharaobafes-tival from the very beginning till the end.

II. CONCLUSION

The Meiteis believe that creation begins in their own fertile and beautiful valley, and their Laiharaoba tells the story of that crea-tion. Thus, Umanglais of Manipur may be studied as the product of the universal prac-tice of worshipping nature and natural oc-currences which also serves as the radiating centre of Meitei culture and philosophy. Man, in the early time did not understand the phenomenon of nature.

The Meiteis believe that by observing the festival of Laiharaoba, the blessings of the deities are invoked and, in return, the human beings on earth will be blessed with happiness and prosperity. The human beings, through the observance of the festival, exalt the virtues of the - TaibangMapu (Supreme God). This is the philosophy behind

the present-day performance of this festival. It combines with the rituals and beliefs, the Meitei philosophy of the creation of the Un-iverse, man and galaxies of Gods. In the midst of polemics and complexities there is a moving philosophy that controls the elements of the massive rituals structure. Lai-haraoba is a complicated ritual ceremony to humanize the divine forces operating in the cosmic and natural orders or bring those forces into positive interaction with the human order. It can be stated quite safely that the cosmic order exists because of the concordance of the forces mentioned above operating in the different orders subservient to it. In Meitei tradition, ritual and ceremonies are closely interwoven in life (social and religious). All the legends, myths, tales, songs and hymns are found in Laiharaobain a modified form or in a direct way. So, there are some summation and omission and also some contradictory and supplementary elements that are useful in building the cultural heritage of Manipur..

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