

Lairemmas and Their Role in Early Meitei Society : A Study on Ancient Literary Traditions

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Abstract

The widespread availability of female deities in the Meitei pantheon showed the importance of women in society. There has been subordination towards women as the male members of the society are considered higher in social position. Since the early period, women have shown the ability to blend both strength and tenderness in various scenarios. Nevertheless, their rights and capabilities were veiled by the patriarchy and its related social norms. To examine various aspects of women, the mythical narrations and literary traditions would supplement the historical sources to study the past. Though certain mythical narrations are doubtful about their historical value and facts, they reflect the then society. Prominently, the Meitei pantheon has a comparative number of Lairemmas (Goddesses) with that of their male divinity counterparts. Their role as a tutelary has various forms and understandings in society. This paper attempts to accurately project the Lairemmas and their role in early Meitei society.

Keywords : *Divinity, Lairemmas, Meitei pantheon, religion, myths, women, Meitei Society.*

Introduction

In early society, the socio-religious aspects were closely connected with the myths. Mostly, all the mythical religious characters are well connected to certain supernatural phenomena. A myth is defined as a story with symbolic elements representing cultural ideals (Caesar, et al. 2012: 274). Scholars have argued that all creation myths are probably rooted in the actual historical events of the past. The myths and legends furnished how the ancestors led socio-religious and economic life. Understanding myths might enhance the historical concept of women as essential agents of society. One may agree that women have always been a crucial socio-economic driver of society. However, their roles were ignored to be included conspicuously in the historical studies. There has been subordination towards women as the male members of the society were considered higher in social position. Scholars like Uma Chakravarti pointed out that although the subordination of women is a common feature of almost all the stages of history in most parts of the world, the extent and the form of that subordination has been conditioned by the social and cultural environment in which women have been placed (Chakravarti, 1992: 127-144).

As far as the context of Manipur is concerned, the Meitei pantheon has a comparative number of female deities with that of their male counterparts. Their role as a tutelary has

various forms and understandings in society. The prevalence of female deities in the Meitei pantheon engendered the acceptance of women in society. Women in Meitei society carried out their daily livelihood by handling the household chores along with economic activities such as getting vegetables and firewood, fishing, salt manufacturing, and pottery making (Singh, 2021: 3). However, M. Gourachandra's observation in forwarding note of Ksh. Shanta's *Anganba Khunaida Nupigi Shaktam: Image of Women in Early Society* highlighted that instead of accounting for their significant status in the actual sense, society seems to prefer worshipping women in various divine forms. Nevertheless, since the early days, the role of women was assumed to be marginalized in different historical periods.

Inclusion and exclusion of the role of women in history writing

The marginalized status has been the primary experience of women as shown in historical sources. It is argued that women have been systematically excluded from history writings (Shah, 2006: 6). Gerda Lerner also observed that all history written so far is the history of only half of the human race (Lerner, 1979: 3). Only by the 1970s, the studies of women and its related aspects have evolved as a part of significant feminist movement in India. Such a revolution opened up a larger platform and opportunity to study gender relations thoroughly. The historical records of early Meitei society concerning women are no less than such descriptions. The insertion of female deities as tutelary Goddesses has been found in most instances in ancient literature, myths, legends, epigraphical records, etc. *Lairemma* is a term connoted from the word *Lai* which means god. (Khagendra, 2016: 90). The opinion of N. Khagendra further states that the concept of gods and goddesses might have been invented by man due to the need for existence. B. Kulachandra Sharma stated that the origin of goddesses is obscure (Sharma, 2007: 62).

Depictions of Lairemmas (Goddesses) in the ancient literary narratives

Several gods and goddesses were depicted to be involved in the creation myths. Among them, Atiya Guru Shidaba (the father), Leimaren Shidabee (the mother), Asheeba or Atingkok Shidaba or Sanamahee (the elder son) and Konjin Tuthokpa or Pakhangba (the youngest son) are considered to be involved prominently. The creation myths popularly known as *Nongkhong Koiba* emphasized the role played by Leimaren Shidabee as a supporter of the younger son Konjin Tuthokpa or Pakhangba to make him the ruler of the universe. This conspiracy of mother – younger son duo was deputed by the elder son who went out to conquer the universe. To rectify the conspiracy, Atiya Guru Shidaba made the eldest son Sanamahee, the ruler of every Meitei household along with the mother Leimaren Shidabee (Khagendra, 2016:38 & Parratt, 2017:65). The narratives of the two sons of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati namely Lord Ganesh and Kartikeya of Hindu mythology appeared to be of a similar kind with the *Nongkhong Koiba* narratives of Meitei creation myths. Furthermore, Leimaren Shidabee is also considered the highest goddess amongst the female deities of Meitei. She is believed to have resided along with her eldest son Sanamahee in all the

Meitei houses. Despite being mythical, the creation myths depict the significant role of Leimaren in state affairs.

Myths, legends and folklore, which had been passed on through oral traditions, are the reflection of the particular society. These would have also disappeared if they were not relevant in society and would not have been preserved for more than two millennium years. Though certain mythical narrations in literature are doubtful about their existence, it is stated that the very narrations are the reflections of contemporaneous society. The ancient literature supplemented and authenticated the available archaeological sources to understand the then society. Th. Ratankumar Singh suggested that the myths are distorted and fragmented historical accounts, exaggerated to superhuman proportions (Thounaojam, 2011: 2). Thus, myths arose from the intensification of human qualities, representing desires, hopes, and aspirations. It had always been associated with religion. Stith Thompson perceived that myths are closely connected with the religious beliefs and practices of the people (Khagendra, 2016: 125). It had certain moral tags, often contradicting scientific and technological ideas of the modern age. It sometimes conveyed sacred, which involved gods or other creatures by representing dramatically. Such a description is well-defined in the context of early Manipur. The depiction of the Nongthang Leima (Goddess of Lightning) in the creation myths in *Leithak Leikharol* puya depicted the goddess as a savior of the earth.

Leithak Leikharol puya, an archaic Manipuri text mentioned that the responsibility for the creation of the universe was assigned to Atiyashidaba by Atingkok Guru Shidaba where the procession was said to be disturbed constantly by a form of strong wind Haraba Nungshit that resulted in the failure of the creation of universe (Hemchandra 2010: 31). So, Atingkok Guru shidaba made a beautiful lady, namely Khoinou Nongthang Leima, from his belly and distracted Haraba by her beauty to complete the creation (Singh, 2021: 43). Such narration is not purely based on historical facts, yet one cannot deny the fact that the ability and contribution of women have been reflected in the myths and legends of Meitei traditions. The Court Chronicle of Manipur Cheitharol Kumpapa has provided the notion of the willingness of Queen Laisna, the wife of the first Meitei king Meetingu (Meidingu) Pakhangpa (33-154 A.D.) to join the state affairs and administration by saying she also wanted to be a lai (god) (Parratt, 2005: 23). It is stated that she presided the Pacha Loishang (Women Court) along with ten other wives of the members of the Ningthou Pongba Tara (Singh, 2003: 25). It is argued that the Pacha Loishang determined the forms of punishment for women criminals. It can be considered that having a separate women's court led by the reigning Queen indicates the significant role women took in the judicial administration. The narratives of Lairemma Nongthang Leima can also be seen as a significant partaker in the mythical creation of the universe in the literary traditions (Hemchandra, 2010: 31). Ancient literature and legends projected several incarnations of goddess Nongthang Leima such as Wangamlon Panthoibi, Tanthong Leima, Lemthong Leima, Lamteng Leima, Heinoupok Leima, Changning Leima, Nunggoibi, Koloi Leima, Thumleima, Ngareima, Thareima, Phouoibi, Yot Leima, Watarei Shintheibi, Kon Leima, Khaipa Ningthou Chanu,

Moinu Chanu, Pithet Leima, Laiwa Leima Laishan Thanbi, Khabi Lukoi Chanu, Liklabicha, Yaibi Leima, Thongak Leima, Seeta Nupi, Charang Leima, Pithraibi, Khongdraibi, Shareek Leima, KhambaYangdei, Nungkhong Nunglaobi, Pukshri Leima etc. (Singh, 2004: 77).

There are various prominent literary works along with Leithak Leikharolpuya which associated with the early Manipur, such as Panthoipi Khongkul, Poireitol Khulthok, Numit Kappa, Thawanthaba Hiran, Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba, Thangwairon, Tutenglon, Phouoibi Waron and so on. The Panthoibi Khongkun, a reliable archaic literary work written by Akoijam Tonboi in 763 A.D. about Goddess Panthoibi of the Meitei pantheon, provided rich sources about various phenomena that women folk had gone through (Singh 2009: ix). The period of Akoijam Tonboi coincides with the reign of King Kongtekcha Yoiremba (763-773 A.D.) (Singh & Singh, 1989: 6). The Goddess Panthoibi had also been depicted in existence from the beginning of the Manipur civilization. Some other arguments remarked by scholars like E. Nilkanta that the text was written during the reign of Loiyumba (1074 – 1122 A.D.) as there is a reference to Lairemma Panthoibi was worshipped and the Heisnam clan took care of the goddess. R.K. Jhalajit opined that Panthoipi Khongkul's legend was probably written only in the 17th century A.D. (Devi, 1988: 21-22). Despite such discussions and debate regarding its writings, the literary works contributed significantly to the historical construction of socio-economic and politico-religious aspects of early Manipur through the depiction of Lairemma Panthoibi's life journey. N. Khelchandra Singh opined that the text of Panthoibi Khonggun furnished the early traditions of marriage as well as the origin of the Lai Haraoba festival in Meitei society (Singh, 2004: 78-82). She is depicted as a princess born to the Meitei king. The tradition of mangkat (bride price) was brought to the girl when she was asked for marriage and sent off with dowry to Taram Khoinucha's house after marriage is evident (Singh, 2009: 35-38).

One may consider the bold ethos of Goddess Panthoibi in the Panthoipi Khongkul as it shows a young woman who seemed to challenge and went against the social norms of patriarchy by having extramarital affairs with her previous lover Nongpok Ningthou. The notion of the elopement and settling with Nongpok Ningthou in Nongmaijing or Langmaiching Hill may also be considered as a probable result of her marriage to Kanglei king Khaba Shokchrongba's son Taram Khoinucha without her interest or full – consent. To escape from the eyes of Panthoibi's husband, she and Nongpok Ningthou showed themselves as animal and birds. They also disguised themselves as Tangkhul and went to perform *Phou Yanba* (agricultural activities) at Nongmaijing Hill. Panthoibi later became the daughter-in-law of the Angom clan after becoming the wife of Nongpok Ningthou (Devi, 2010: 13 & Nilbir, 2017: 43). Another episode of putting child's cut-off head and fingers in her tungol (fishing basket) indicates that she was not an ordinary woman but a woman with divine power. Her nature was probably different from any other ordinary woman in the then society. These norms and traditions depicted through the life journey of Panthoibi may have been accepted in that particular society. It is stated that Panthoibi was leisurely involved in weaving, agriculture, and fishery (Devi, 1988: 29-30). One may assume that Panthoibi has been projected as a woman involved in almost every socio-

economic sphere. Without any doubt, she was shown as an independent personality. Lairemma Panthoibi is still worshipped among the Meitei community as a deity for well-being, prosperity, kindness, loving, generosity, and righteousness to those who seek her blessings. PanthoibiKhongkul mentioned the beginning of performing rituals with the annual grand feast by Panthoibi's father-in-law KhabaSokchrongba when the latter came to realize her divine association (Singh, 2009: xvi). The Lairemma continues to be worshipped by the Meitei community from the first day of the Meitei month *Mera* (October-November) which is called *chaorelhouba* for five to ten days every year which usually collides with the Durga Puja festival celebrated by Hindus.

Similar to various forms of female deities, the Meitei community has had a good number of goddesses in their pantheon since the early period. Lairemma Phouoibi is another goddess associated with fertility, agriculture, harvest, and food. The Phouoibi Waron signifies Lairemma Phouoibi is being highlighted in the form of a deity as Phouoibi or Goddess of Paddy (Gourachandra, 2013: 2). A portion of such indication of Lairemma Phouoibi as the Goddess of Paddy from the Phouoibi Waron has been quoted below :

...*TayamLouramchanapamenumaikot II*
Loimomphouincheina II
Thangaichepnakotpabukotyonbi II
Loimomchepnachaibabuchaiyonbiphouwa O II
Tayamlouramchasingnahumailenghounahumbabu II
HumyonbiPhouO nangbuKoujariye Lao II (Gourachandra, 2013 : 4-5)

Free Translation :

The workers or farmers in the field winnow the grains from the plants properly.
The workers use the Phoueenchei or cheirong (Meitei threshing sticks)
to push the grains to separate the chaff.
The workers who fan or winnow are to call the paddy grains.

From the passage of Phouoibi Waron, the connotation of terms like Thangee, loimom, and Phou indicate the paddy. The term *Tayam Louramcha* indicates farmers or field workers who are meant to work in the field properly to induce the goddess Phouoibi and prosper immensely through the harvest. Using a female persona to specify objects like paddy is not new in Meitei society. However, the personification of a female figure for the staple crop of a region shows the effort put to give respect and importance to the women in society. It may be assumed that the female personification of Paddy shows an instance of predominantly participation of women in the economic arena. Lairemma Khoinou Nongthang Leima is depicted as an incarnation of Phouoibi who was sent by Tengbanba Mapu (the creator) to have phoucharong (rice panicle) as well as to have a prosperous society (Nilbir, 2017:65). She is worshipped during the harvesting period of crops of November to January

by the Meiteis. To give offerings to Lairemma Phouoibi, Maibas perform rites and rituals with various items like black hen and rice beer by addressing according to the harvest result of the previous year (Parratt, 1980: 92). After performing the rituals, the Maiba then mixed rice and some flowers, which are then placed on a banana leaf to throw out in the four corners of the harvest field. Before the threshing of grains, the offerings comprised of the sheaf of paddy topped by a winnowing fan and a whole banana leaf is presented facing northwards. It would then be covered with white cloth topped with betel leaf, flowers, sugarcane, and rice to offer to the goddess facing southwards. The phoukouba or calling of rice ceremony is an important ritual to perform, especially when specific unlucky incidents like theft or trespass by a cow before storing the treshed grains. Thus, it would be agreeable to say that the PhouKouba ceremony has induced Lairemma Phouoibi to remain in the arable field to provide a satisfactory harvest in the upcoming year.

The LairemmaImoinu or Yumoinu is another Meitei goddess that every Meitei household holds to worship. The Meiteis believe that by worshipping LairemmaImoinu, the women are blessed and polished with kind, loving, forgiving, and suitable as a daughter, the wife, and mothers in and around their families and society (Nilbir, 2017: 94). The origin of LairemmaImoinu is obscure yet the mythical narration of Imoinu being the mother of Meitei clans like Khuman, Mangang and Luwang. The three sons went out in search of the mother Malem Leima who incarnated herself in human form (Meitei, 18-20). It is believed that to be blessed by Imoinu, one needs to perform rituals in the hearth area of the kitchen from the fifth day of the Meitei month Wakching (December-January) for seven days every year. Khagendra in his comprehensive work of Land of Gods and Goddesses mentioned that Imoinu Ahongbee (Imoinu the bountiful) is more concerned towards the female members of the family (Khagendra, 2016: 161). It is perceived that the goddess formulated rules and regulations to be followed by women in general. LairemmaImoinu has been considered a household deity and is believed to remain a guardian angel. Every traditional Meitei household has a phunggalairu or hearth in the kitchen where the Lairemma has been believed to dwell. Despite having and praying daily by Meitei households, LairemmaImoinu has been worshipped and celebrated annually on the twelfth day of the month of Wakching or December – January interface month within the respective households. The performing of the rites and rituals or the Erat Thouni for the goddess every year would signify a healthy-wealthy and prosperous socio-economic generation (Nilbir, 2017: 97). She has usually been honored by offering a small amount of cooked rice by the family member of the household before having their meal. Generally, the Meitei community still believes that to please Imoinu, the family members need to be respectful and have neat surroundings. It is stated that the one who pleases the goddess by following her wishes, such as being disciplined, tidy, and working hard in life would prosper in every way by the grace of the very goddess (Budhichandra & Manisana, 1992: 25-27).

Within the Meitei pantheon, the female deities such as Ireima or Irai Leima (Goddess of water) possibly enhance the study of women and their significance in the Meitei society.

Ireima or Luirala Shaphabi is depicted in the legends as the only daughter of Chingdai Ningthou who settled on the hill. She requested her father Chinngdai Ningthou to support Prince Tabung when political conflict (with his uncle Tonaba) was inevitable for the Meitei throne in Kangla after the death of Tabung's father Meidingu Telheiba (Nilbir, 2017: 86). Luirala was promised by Tabung to enthrone her in the Meitei throne as Leimarel after he became the king at Kangla. However, he forgot to do so after he became the king and married Angom princess Nongballon Lamphel Ngambi to be politically powerful. In later narration, King Tabung was defeated by his rival Chingshong Ningthou. Luirala brought the cut-off head of Meidingu Tabung, her love interest to the Kangla to pay homage to his motherland. Then, Luirala was lifted as a goddess of water as she managed to bring the cut-off head of Tabung through the Iril River. She is believed to be one of the incarnations of Nongthang Leima as well as Haoreima Sampubi for carrying the cut-off head of Tabung in the haosam or Sam (basket made of bamboo which carries with a sling on the head). Ireima was respected by Nongballon Lamphelngambi the widow of Tabung and paid homage to Ireima by worshipping her in grandeur every year by Tabung's son Lairenba. LairemmaIreima in present day is worshipped along with Tabung Naha Shaphaba within the valley of Manipur such as in Kangla, Sekta, Keibi, Moirangkampu, Bamonkampu, Irilbung, Keirao, Kshetri, Urup, Langdum, Pungdonbam, Sawombung, Pukhao Laiphram, Pukhao Khabam, Pukhao Naharup etc. Apart from these Lairemmas, the Meitei pantheon included Lairemmas such as Thumlei or Thumkhong Lairembi (Goddess of salt), Ngareima (Goddess of Fish), Shilleima (Goddess of work), Yumjao Leima or Pitanga, Haorok Konthou Lairembi, Wangoo Tampha Lairembi, Hiyangthang Lairembi, Phousupat Lairembi of Kakching. These female deities have been significant despite being overshadowed by their male counterparts in society. They are still believed worshipped by the Meiteis in day-to-day life for the concerned subject. For instance, Phouoibi, Ngareima, Panthoibi, Emoinu, and Shilleima are worshipped to seek the blessing of hard work and prosperity.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the mythical narrations reflect the polygyny system of marriage where yoibus were the more privileged and favored wife of the king whereas the yoiheis stayed less significant. The narration of Laiyingthou Awangba and his two Leimas (wives) depicted a polygyny marriage where both wives had sons each (Nilbir, 2017: 98). The perception of Lairemma Panthoibi's enthronement and inclusion in the Meitei pantheon with Nongpok Ningthou as a godly couple is interesting to highlight in the social history of a strictly patriarchal society. Apart from such social traditions, the mythical narrations portrayed the political involvement of women through the creation myths in Leithak Leikharolpuya. The narration showed the responsibility Nongthang Leima took up during the universe's creation by the order of Atingkok Guru Shidaba. Such narration of Nongthang Leima's contribution to state affairs despite lesser authenticity as historical facts. The ability and contribution of women had been prominently reflected in the pieces of literature and legends

of the Meitei traditions. Various female characters reflected as divine figures for prosperity and protection showed the crucial role upheld by the women in the early Meitei society. Women of Meitei society have always been a significant socio-economic driver. The notion of women as administrative functionaries is referred to as pawns of peace-making among various neighboring powers. H. Sudhir opined that the status of women was not high despite being involved in the public sphere of the market, and exchanging ideas (Sudhir, 2020: 156). In addition, Lairemma Panthoibi was depicted as a married Meitei woman who embraced the prevalent social norms and tradition. Nevertheless, the episode of her extramarital affairs with her lover, Nongpok Ningthou furnished an unusual social norm that that particular society might have accepted. Hence, further research and study is needed to understand the exact social system prevalent in society.

Acknowledgement

The authors highly acknowledge the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for granting the fellowship of Doctoral Fellowship 2021-2022.

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