



The Life Cycle Rituals of The Meitei Hindu

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Abstract

The lifecycle rituals practiced by the Meitei Hindus form an amalgam of Hindu practices and Meitei customs, showing cultural and spiritual flexibility. This analysis focuses on major life-cycle events: birth, initiation, marriage, and death, exploring distinctive practices, their meanings, and place in society. The rituals surrounding birth gives utmost significance to family and lineage through protective cleansing rites such as charting the birth and performing a ritualized wash. Important milestones in childhood such as Chakumba (first feeding of rice) and *Nahutpa* (Chudakarana with Karnavedha) are combined into one infused with purification and spiritual ascendance. Marriage is designated as a household event while also encompassing social relations. Death rituals show the blend of local custom and Hinduism where cremation of the body replaces burial. Symbolism within these activities includes entombing the spirit with objects to enable the spirit's travel to the afterlife or using logs decked with additional symbolical firewood layered to reflect connection with living ancestors. Special homage for sanyasis, babies, and women in childbirth exhibits the flexibility and open nature of these practices. The Meitei Hindu rituals may be transformed by modern society, but fundamentally, are always preserved.

Keywords: Meitei Hindus, life-cycle rituals, birth ceremonies, initiation rites, syncretism.

Introduction

Manipur an important region in the northeastern part of India serves as a passage to South-East Asian region and the Indian subcontinent from ancient times. It features a diverse cultural heritage and has played a very crucial role in history. The state is majorly populated by the Meitei and Naga communities; the Meitei's dominating the valley areas with their majority of the population. In terms of faith, the Meitei people are known for their great cultural legacy and deep-rooted traditions, mainly follow two religious systems: the native Sanamah religion and Hinduism. Since the Meitei are a community of the Sanamah religion, which relies on animism, their indigenous traditions and customs are still prevalent even after the Hinduisation of the Kingdom. Vaishnavism, however, became prominent during the reign of King Garibnawaza in the 18th century that eventually led to major changes in the kingdom's religion and rituals. Nevertheless, the community is still overwhelmingly dominated by a vast number of indigenous customs and philosophies that survive without any compromise in it. The fusion of these resulted in a new form of the Meitei-Hindus' life-cycle rites which are at the same time stable and vibrant among the Meitei- Hindu community.



On the other hand, in the Meitei Hindus rituals like birth, initiation, marriage and death the influence of the indigenous Meitei religion can be seen. On the other hand, unlike classical Hinduism which demands the performance of sixteen samskaras, the Meitei Hindu rites are fewer, more distinct, and influenced by local customs and regional beliefs. In contrast to the uniform sixteen samskaras of the classical Hinduism that is practiced in other parts of the country, Meitei Hindu rites are selective, localized, and influenced by ancestral customs and regional beliefs. Every rite, whether it is the burial of the placenta in the earthen pots during childbirth or the multi-layering of pyres in cremation is filled with actions that symbolize the interaction of these different religions.

Objective of the Study

This study attempts to understand the life-cycle rituals of the Meitei Hindu, especially the ones that significantly deviate from the pan-Indian Hindu practices to exemplify syncretism with Sanamahi traditions. The study will also examine how these hybrid traditions differ from the 16 samskaras performed by the Hindus in Indian Subcontinent and the ways the Meitei community maintains their cultural heritage in the middle of a religious transformation and modern influences. By using Arnold Van Gennep's classification of rites of passage into separation, transition, and incorporation, as the structure to look at the rituals of birth, initiation, and death to grasp how these rituals had kept the people's cultural identity in the face of change.

Birth rituals of the Meitei Hindu

The birth of an Infant in the family of a Meitei-Hindu is embraced by making the birth chart or Kundali commonly known as *Kuthi* by the local, for the newborn, recording the time and date of the birth. Following this ritual, the placenta is then placed in an earthen pot and buried in the backyard or *yenakha* as called in the local language. The mother is confined to the house for six days and not allowed to have certain foods. It was only after six days that the Svasti puja is performed and the newborn is received by the family giving a proper name of the clan. The whole *sagei* or clan is symbolically considered unclean for 10 days and only after 10 days that the whole clan is cleansed with the sacred water.

The ceremony though similar with the Jatakarma, it is not completely elaborate. In contrast, the Jatakarma ceremony in mainstream Hindu tradition is welcoming of the newborn into the world. Immediately after birth, the father performs rites such as touching honey and ghee to the baby's lips, whispering sacred mantras, signifying the infant's introduction to sacred mantras. The ceremony purifies both mother and child and is followed by Namakarana, the naming ritual that classically occurs on the tenth or twelfth day.

Although the rituals share certain similarities, regional variations and local cultural influences have caused them to evolve uniquely, adapting to the traditions and values of the Meitei community.



RITUALS OF INITIATION

Chakumba Ceremony

The Chakumba ceremony is very much similar with the *Annaprashana* ceremony of the Hindu Samskaras, that is the first time feeding of solid food to the child after birth. Normally, the local ceremony is conducted when a child's age is six months to one year, it also depends on the household's customs and the child's readiness for solid foods as well. It is a transition ritual of the child into the community gradually and the start of the child's physical development being supported by solid food. Besides, this event is accompanied by praying for blessings from the gods for the child's health and success.

The child is typically dressed in a traditional dress, and adorned with silver neck chain, bracelet and *Khong-shee* (Silver anklets). The ritual sacrament is administered by a priest or an elder of the family. Articles such as books, toys, and money are laid out in front of the child during this rite, allowing the child to choose among them. This symbolizes a way of determining the child's future or destiny in specific fields of life. The family and guests celebrating the occasion ends the event by having a feast. It is indeed a significant rite which serves not only as a medium for bonding among the family and community but also reflects the cultural heritage and values of the ancestors.

Nahutpa: The Combined Ceremony of Chudakarana and Karnavedha

Chudakarana (Mundana) and Karnavedha are two different Hindu sacraments (Samskaras). However, the Meitei Hindu community uniquely combines these two sacraments into a single ritual called Nahutpa (ear-piercing), which is a mixture of these two activities. The combined ritual is not only spiritually significant but also culturally significant, representing landmarks in a child's early life. The shaving ceremony (Chudakarana) involves shaving the child's head and leaving a tuft at the crown, which is the *śikhā* or *cūḍā*, and it represents spiritual focus and purification. The practice of keeping the *śikhā* or *cūḍā* is traditionally observed only for male children. It is the first step of childhood, and the shaving is considered a way of purifying the child from karmic influences and facilitating mental and spiritual growth.

By contrast, Karnavedha means piercing the child's ears and placing gold earrings in them. The ritual is considered very lucky and is a symbol of the child's health, beauty, and spiritual protection. It is further believed that it energizes certain points in the body, thus promoting the overall well-being of the child. The ceremony is performed for both male and female children.



During the Nahutpa event, these two ceremonies are fused to complement one another in terms of purification and adornment. Inviting family and community members to partake, the occasion is celebrated with rituals, prayers, and blessings in which the divine is asked to grant the child health, success, and spiritual growth. The combination of the two Samskaras into one event reflects the distinctive cultural practices of the Meitei Hindu community and preserves the values of tradition and community as a whole.

Luugun thangba (investiture of Yajnoipavita)

The Upanayana is a very important Hindu rite of passage, often called the sacred thread ceremony, which basically celebrates a boy entering the stage of studenthood or Brahmacharya in life. In Meitei Hindu society, this sacred ceremony is known as *Luguun Thangba* (wearing of Yajnopavita). As per the original Hindu texts and custom, the ritual is performed when the boys are between the age group of 8 to 12 in the Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya varna and consisted of the Yajnopavita (sacred thread) investiture. Nevertheless, Meitei Hindus carry out the ceremony in a manner that does not differentiate by castes and age group, thus highlighting the characteristics of equality and inclusiveness, which are in contrast with the customs of other Hindu communities in various regions of India. Such a ritual is accomplished for each individual of the Hindu society in Manipur, advocating the togetherness and a common cultural identity. The thread stands for light, knowledge, and a pledge to live according to the principle of dharma as laid down in the Vedas. In the ceremony, the priest teaches the child the Gayatri Mantra and the child promises to be disciplined, humble, and dedicated to learning. The rite, honoured by prayers, rituals, and communal gatherings, legally establishes the bond of a child with his guru (teacher) and is the very first step of the spiritual and educational journey.

Female are not permitted to bear the Yajnoipavita; instead, they wear a necklace made of wooden beads called *Urik*. The ceremony for women is distinct and not known as luggun thangba; for women, it is called Laiming Louba, which involves taking upon the name of a guru or spiritual guide.

Death Rituals

The death rituals of the Meitei people offer a remarkable perspective on how the community combines its native practices with Hindu-influenced ones. Such rites reflect the Meitei philosophy of life, death, and the world beyond. The rituals in the course of time, have changed, interweaving Hindu practices with the old animistic faith of the Meitei's. The performance of the ritual depends on different factors like the age, gender, and social status of the dead, and the spiritual and cultural ethos of the community.

According to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the Royal Chronicle of the Meitei kings, which records that during the reign of King Khagemba burial was the way through which the dead were disposed of,



and the bodies were buried outside residential enclosures. After the 18th century when King Garibnawaza started performing Hindu-inspired cremation rites, the practice of burial was change to cremation.

When a person death is near, the dying person is moved to a small temporary hut called *khangbok shang* which is a metaphor for the detachment from the household.

The death of a person is recognized officially only after examining the vitality by the *Maibas* (the Meitei priest) and when *rigor mortis* sets in, which is considered the last leave of life. The deceased person is cleaned, clothed with new garments, and put in a coffin, the act that do not resemble with the Hindu rites and thus distinctly marks the Meitei death customs. The family members see to it that the body is taken out of the house in a foot-first manner which is a symbolic gesture showing the soul's leaving for its last journey. Before carrying out the death to the crematorium, the family and the close kin offer *biksha* (offering of foods and items) and pray for the last time.

For the cremation, the pyre is geometrically prepared, with the firewood set in seven layers to symbolize the *pu taret* (seven generations of ancestors). The fire which was kindled from the house of the dead person is used to set the funeral pyre. Thereby, showing the spiritual link between the individual and his household. The male relative who is the closest to the deceased and is most probably the eldest son sets the pyre on fire, at that point women and children leave the place after the fire is lit as per the established tradition that confirms the Meitei rituals' patriarchal framework. The process of cremation incorporates different symbolic acts, e.g. small boats or threads could be there on the funeral pile that stands for helpers on the soul's way to the other world. Afterward, the ashes are gathered, and a bamboo container holds the frontal bone for the upcoming ceremonies.

The mourning period is marked with strict observances and rites that reflect the family's love and respect for the dead and their intention to guide the departed soul to the afterlife. The kept frontal bone of the deceased is carried to the holy Hindu places like Vrindavan which is a symbol of the assimilation of Hindu traditions into the Meitei customs. The family is also restricted from consuming fish, salt, and some other foods during this time as a gesture of purity.

The deceased family decides whether the dead will be a sanyasi or prerta and if the family choose the later, a special ritual call *Kira-thangba* is performed. In this event, a knife is inserted into a bamboo stalk and a wet cloth is tied around the knife's handle, carrying the idea that the soul is in the knife until the śrāddha ceremony is completed. The responsibility of making sure that the cloth tied to the knife's handle is always wet is given to one person, most probably to the eldest male heir of the family who has already taken the Upanayana (sacred thread) ceremony. Women are not allowed to performed the *Kira-thangba* ritual.



Furthermore, a bamboo shelter is erected where food is given as a ritual to the dead soul. The person who performs this ritual stays away from other household members, makes his own meals separately, offers a portion to the departed soul, and only then does he eat. He needs to be very careful to keep the cloth around the knife handle constantly wet as, according to the belief, if he fails, bad omens will befall him. These are the customs that bring out the Meitei's very profound belief in the worship of ancestors and not at all a straightforward process but a perfect fusion of Hindu and remote tribal spiritual elements. The śrāddha ceremony takes place on the 11th, 13th, or 15th day after death depending on the caste of the deceased and it is considered the end of the mourning period. It consists of giftings to the Hindu priest, feasts, and prayers for the soul's release.

The rites for *sannyasis* (ascetics) are markedly different from those of the householders or *preta*. Sannyasis who have given up worldly life are considered to be the ones who attain liberation and hence, do not performed the same rites. Their cremation is done in saffron-coloured clothes instead of white ones, and certain things like banana leaves are not part of the rituals. The rites depict the spiritual detachment and freedom which are the characteristics of the ascetic way of life and the belief that the soul of a *sannyasi* is liberated from the cycle of rebirth.

In the case of a woman dying in childbirth, the emphasis is on purification rites. The husband and other family members get protection rites done by the *maiba*. Item like salt discs are put around the house as symbolic objects to protect the household from the malevolent influence of the spirit. The community's fusion of animistic beliefs with Hindu customs is highly emphasized by these practices.

Element of Meitei Animistic Philosophy in Hindu death rites

Meitei concepts about the afterlife are an interesting mixture of native and Hindu perspectives. Traditional Meitei view of the universe tells that after death the soul has to pass through different places like *Khonghampat* and *Thongngak* Hill before it can reach the realm of the dead. To help the departed overcome difficulties on their path, the rituals sometimes use the symbolism of a small boat and a thread. The invocation of *maibas* and *maibis* (traditional priests and priestesses) in such rites is indicative of the continuous presence of pre-Hindu spiritual heritage in the people's lives.

Among the Meitei Hindus, it is thought that a soul may go to heaven only if the remains of the dead are thrown into the Ganges River. Also, according to the Hindu beliefs, the soul has to cross the Baitarani River if it is to be in the afterlife, a notion that is based on Hindu eschatology. The similar points to the distinct belief systems, that are also followed by the Meitei community at the same time, is the common respect for rivers as the holy way through which the soul passes after death.

The various things that are used in the Meitei rites for the dead are full of deep symbolic meanings. The coffin (*ku*) is a representation of the burials that were practised in the old days before the coming of the Hindus; firewood that is arranged in layers stands for ancestors; the white and silk cloths serve



as wrapping and are a mark of respect to the dead; pine sticks are used for lighting the funeral pyre; threads are there to help the soul in its journey; and dolls (laidhi) are there in the coffin for the purpose of stopping consecutive death from following one another in case of bad luck. Every single thing is skilfully selected to be in accordance with both the spiritual and cultural aspects, thus allowing for a perfect blend of age-old tradition and respect. Such a synthesis of cultural traits not only illustrates the community's faith in their ability to undergo changes and still keep their cultural heritage but it also serves as a living tradition that continues to reconcile religious belief, ritual, and identity amid the alterations in the religious and social spheres.

Conclusion

The life-cycle rituals of the Meitei Hindus are a clear reflection of a gradual historical process of adaptation which was not shifted overnight. These rites are a balanced combination of the local cosmology and Hindu religious beliefs, which indicates how the community managed to maintain continuity in the midst of changing spiritual and social scenarios. Every ritual is like a living document of historical memory, safeguarding the old values and at the same time, adopting the new theological idioms brought about by cultural contact.

The Meitei's were not so much hands-on with their native traditions, as they were influenced by Hindus, rather, they reinterpreted and restructured them to be in harmony with the moral and religious sensibilities that were developing. By doing this, they turned the external effects into cultural resilience tools. The survival of such traditions till today is a testament to the Meitei's ability to turn change into continuity, which is one of the main features of their historical experience.

Therefore, the rituals are not only an act of religion rather, they are, in fact, the everlasting emblems of a civilization that has gone through time continually to reproduced its own unique identity.



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