



## VAISHNAVISM IN MANIPUR : ITS ADVANCE

H. Ranbir Singh

Vaishnavism came to Manipur in a most unexpected manner from the east. About 1470 A.D. Thangwai Ningthouba, king of Manipur, better known by his reign-name, Kyaamba, the Conqueror of Kyaang (1746 - 1508), and his ally Choupha Khek Khomba, king of Pong, conquered Kyaang Khambat, a Shan kingdom in Kabaw Valley in a joint expedition, and shared its territories between themselves. As part of the celebration of victory, they exchanged presents, and one of the presents received from the Pong king was a little stone image of Vishnu riding on the back of Garuda and holding the usual weapons and the lotus. It is now covered with gold on all sides except the back. (Tradition has it that it was presented in a casket of eighty gold mohurs and there are eyewitnesses who saw the casket before it was lost). Tradition also has it that the king once fell ill and no physician could cure or diagnose his disease. The oracles were consulted and instruction was received through 'Amaibis' (accredited priestesses of the old faith who, under possession, gave prophetic or oracular utterances) that the king could be cured if worship was offered to Vishnu. Some Brahmins well acquainted with the worship of Vishnu were already there in Manipur. Kyaamba requisitioned the service of one such Brahmin, and the king was cured. (Prof. Minaketan Singh identifies Bhavaninatha son of Raghunatha Bhagavatacharya, a contemporary of Shri Chaitanya from Barahanagar in Gour). Thus began the regular worship of Vishnu in palace of the king, and a brick temple of Vishnu was built in the palace at Lamaangdon (now known as Bishnupur). Though the worship continued, the king was not initiated into the new faith.

During the reign of Khaagemba (1597-1652), in the year 1635 A.D. a new feature was introduced in the annual boat races; a special boat was set apart for the image of Vishnu mentioned above, supposedly for

the deity to witness the festival. It may be noted that Khaagemba also was not initiated into Vaishnavism. During this reign another important event took place. A copy of the Srimad-Bhagavatam was brought from Assam. For two hundred years from the reign of Kyaamba to that of Charairongba no other important event regarding the advance of Vaishnavism was recorded in the chronicles. But it was a period of incubation. Right from the time of Kyaamba (and perhaps even earlier) Brahmin families continued to come and settle in Manipur throughout this period, and they included worshippers of the Narasimha, Hayagriva, Ananta, and other incarnations of Vishnu, and worshippers of Ganesha, followed by the worshippers of Rama and Krishna. All these are on record in the, 'Bamon Khunthak' ('Immigration of Brahmins'). They must have brought with them their faith, their culture and their books, making an impact on the people with whom they came in contact. Since Vishnu worship was going on in the palace and was receiving support from the king and the people as mentioned above, one can guess that the Vishnu lore in the Puranas, the Mahabharata and the Srimad-Bhagavatam must be receiving attentive ears in the palace and among the people. Otherwise we cannot explain how king Charairongba (1698-1709) got formally initiated into Vaishnavism in 1703 from a Brahmin named Krishnacharya alias Rai Vanamali from Shweta Ganga, Puri. His descendants are now known by the family name of Guru Aribam or the family of the old Guru. The new faith worshipped Vishnu in the form of Krishna. Charairongba built a temple of Shri Krishna at Brahmapur. And the descendants of Krishnacharya are continuing the worship. This is the beginning of royal support to Vaishnavism. Tradition has it, and it is supported by the tradition of the Guru Aribam family, that Charairongba was initiated into the "Nimandi" (corrupt Manipuri word for the Nim-Lanka school of