

## 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



faith of Radha-Krishna worship. It was during his reign that a variety of Kirtana music known as "Bangdesh" (from Bangladesh) was introduced and developed by a master musician named Leipaak Chaaba (popularly known as Konthoujam Ujhaa). More Brahmins came and Jhaljit refers to the interesting case of Hazarimayum Brahmins who married Manipuri women. Thus the initiation of the king and some of his nobles and subjects was the culmination of a long process of preparation beginning at least from the reign of Kyaamba. This in turn facilitated further cultural contacts with the rest of India.

King Mayaamba, better known as Gareeb Niwaz, (1700 - 1748), started with the Radha Krishna faith. The king pursued and propagated this form of Vaishnavism for nearly 20 years with great vigour and on a large scale. Ascetics, pilgrims and Brahmins arrived as before, but in larger numbers. He popularised the Bhagavata Purana. (Jhaljit observes that about two years before his formal initiation, some mendicants including the religious preceptor of the king of Assam arrived in Manipur; and a Brahmin, Sita Ram, who had gone to Assam on a cultural mission returned to Manipur in 1716. All this seems to indicate that the form of Radha Krishna worship into which he was initiated, was not the Chaitanyait form as held by Jhaljit, but some other form, probably 'Nimandi' as held by Prof. Minaketan. This is a point for further investigation. There is a strong tradition, that 'Nimandi' Vaishnavism was prevalent in Manipur. Elderly people even used to speak of putting on 'Nimandi' for putting on tilak in the Goudiya style. The very currency of the word 'Nimandi' confirms this). In any case Vaishnavism became the state religion of Manipur and Garib Niwaz went about pushing a through with his usual vigour. But the 'Ramandis' (corrupt Manipur for Ramanadis), followers of Ramananda and worshipper of Rama, Sita and Hanumana, were also beginning to assert themselves. About 1728 A.D. a preacher named Shantidas arrived from Sylhet to preach this form of Vaishnavism. At first the king was not willing, but Shantidas was a capable preacher, and he must have been able to strike some inner chord in the mind of

the king as a result he switched over completely to the new faith, and with his characteristic vigour, and even greater vigour bordering on fanaticism, he began to enforce it with a degree of ruthlessness. He set up a temple of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana at Wangkehi, and another temple of Hanumana at Mahabali on the Imphal river, and began regular worship. He got the Ramayana and the Mahabharata tendered into Manipuri. We do not know how much of the Mahabharata was completed. All the Ramdas of the Ramayana but only some Parvas of the Mahabharata are now available after the devastation of Manipur by the Burmese. In the Manipuri Ramayana, which followed Kirtivasa, Rama was conceived as an incarnation of Vishnu. Gareeb Niwaz's high-handed manner of enforcing his new faith provoked stiff opposition from the adherents of the old faith. It is believed that he burnt many books of the old faith, (the names of the books he burnt are however known and other copies of these books are available). This was an act which should be condemned by all sensible people. His imposition of fines on those who did not follow the new faith was very unfair and unjust. So far I have given an account of what is available in the books of history.

The question that arises is, how in the late 17th and the 18th centuries Vaishnavism took hold of Manipur to such an extent as to receive State support and ultimately to become State religion ?

(a) Buddhism I think was out of the question, as the negativism and austerity of Hinayana Buddhism had little in common with the Meitei world of Pagan zest in life, and of gods mixing with men, having oracular communication with them, intervening in human affairs, helping or hindering them, and showing favour to individual men or groups when propitiated; and this on top of the increasing hostility with the Burmese.

(b) The intrinsic appeal of Hinduism in its Purnaic form must, on the other hand, be strong. With increasing familiarity with the contents of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas, the Meitei mind must have been intrigued and impressed by the stories of the Puranic gods, and their human appeal, the wider conceptions of space and time and





the cosmic cycles, the more subtle conceptions of cosmogony and theogony, the higher vision of human destiny and of the spiritual powers of yogis and rishis, and the sanction of their conceptions. The doctrine of the "avatara", the Divine incarnation in human form, of Rama and Krishna, who were adored expressions of the Divine, and their stories must have moved the mind of the Meiteis. The figure of Krishna, who was not only the all-pervasive Brahman, but was also very human and was the friend of the Pandavas giving them guidance at every step - and was, in his mercy, ready to forgive and protect all those who would approach him in humility and a spirit of self-surrender, - must have been attractive. The high ideals of conduct, the honesty, sincerity, final piety and high mindedness of Rama, the patience, chastity and kindness of Sita, the brotherly affection and loyalty of Lakshmana and Bharata, the loving care of Krishna for his devotees and his skill in the manipulation of situations to protect his devotees and strengthen their faith the truthfulness of Yudhishthira, the self-sacrifice of Bhishma, the unquestioning surrender of the Pandavas to their lord, Krishna, and their love of justice and desire to protect the weak from the strong, the generosity of Karna, all these and a lot more in the episodes of the Mahabharata and the Puranas - an inexhaustible storehouse of entertainment, wisdom, piety, and moral and spiritual guidance, - must have, in their total impact, proved overwhelming. Add to this, the myth of descent from Arjuna through Chitrangada, and the wizardry of the Hindu preachers in finding equations and weaving local myths into the variegated pestry of the Hindu mythological universe, - and the Meitei was right there in the heart and centre of the main stream, successors to the whole Hindu heritage of the right.

(c) By the 11th century A.D. out of an uneasy and chaotic heptarchy of seven clan-principalities, the Ningthoujas or Meiteis emerged as the dominant power in the valley of Manipur, only the Khumals and Moirangs remaining independent. The Khumals were finally defeated in the 13th century, and the Moirangs were given a crushing defeat in the 15th century. But from about this time the problem of 'national' consolidation of the seven clans under a

Meitei monarchy arose. Expeditions beyond the frontiers of Manipur against Burma, Tripura, etc. might be indirectly helping in the process. But the search was going on, sub-consciously and half-consciously in the beginning, but more and more consciously as the centuries passed by, for a god higher than the different gods of the various clans, and for a faith which was higher and devotionally richer than all the differing faiths - a rallying point or centre of loyalty for the newly emerging 'national' entity of the seven clans under a Meitei 'nationalism'. This, it is evident, they found in affiliations which worked out in subsequent history). In itself, Vaishnavism worked primarily at the spiritual level, and marginally at the rising Meitei 'national' consolidation. That was largely why it found increasing favour with successive kings, though the consequences were much wider and much richer.

Gareeb Niwaz was a political genius of a high order, a great administrator, with a burning zeal for national consolidation and for building a powerful state with extended territories. That explains why earlier he was zealously propagating Vaishnavism as he inherited it from his father. That all explains why, when faced with a choice, he made a decisive option for Rama, the ideal king, the ideal of Dharma, (for Gareeb Niwaz's heart and soul was working predominantly at the rajasic political level). He was in a hurry to see that the whole process was completed in his life time, and that explains his drive and a degree of ruthlessness in enforcing the new faith. In Gareeb Niwaz the groping desire of the Manipur kings of that period for using Vaishnavism as an ideological weapon for Meitei 'national' consolidation found its clearest and most articulate consciousness and its most result determination.

(d) As stated earlier the ruthlessness of Gareeb Niwaz provoked resistance. There are besides, other aspects in the cultural heritage of Manipur which had deeper roots in the Meitei psyche. To this we now turn. Early Manipuri literature was a synthesis of the languages and literary traditions of the various clans now composing the Meitei community. Early Manipuri poetry, which was generally set to tune, and



which normally sang of the aetiology of the gods and heroes, creation and war, of patriarchs and the origin of families, and of love and high adventure, stirred dim racial memories, and was deeply moving, and had a natural beauty all its own. The tradition continued, and the greatest and the most monumental example in this line was the "National Romantic Legend of Manipur," the great love story of Khamba and Princess Thoibi (12th century A.D.), which grew at the hands of wandering minstrels into a great national epic with numerous episodes, reflecting all aspects of Manipuri life and society; and was condensed and reduced to writing, into the great epic romance, "Khamba-Thoibi Sheireng" of 34,000 lines by the illustrious poet Hijam Anganghal early in the twentieth century. What is more, this was considered to be the seventh birth of the hero, the noble figure of a human being and his beloved a divine princess, struggling for union birth after birth, ending each time in their tragic death, (the story of each birth providing rich material for Meitei balladry), and ultimately attaining fulfilment in their last and final birth as Khamba and Thoibi but again meeting with a tragic death shortly after. The ideal was passionate love, love at white heat - romantic love at its most passionate intensity - which by its very nature could not be domesticated. This along with the myths of creation was the theme of the Lai Haraoba (Jubilee of the gods festival of Moirang. Similar was the story of Lai Haraoba at Meitei Kangleipung, the early Meitei kingdom.

Though circumstances forced the Meitei men to live a Spartan life, always ready for offensive and defensive, and a good part of his education consisted in the martial arts, and a good part of his active life was devoted to compulsory military service, he found his heart's solace in these stories of love and adventure. But flaming passion - the truth of the heart in human love - had its own illumination. A little twist, and there was the enteral love of Radha and Krishna. From the illumined vital plane, they then moved on to a new spiritual plane. The transition was so natural and inevitable; and the latter came as the spiritual fulfilment of the earlier movement by an inner logic

of the heart, and the providence of God. As the Gita says, God gives His grace in the way in which the grace is sought. Thus during the reign of Maharaj Jai Singh (1759 - 1763; 1763 - 1798), popularly known as Rajarshri Bhagyachandra, the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism became the state religion without any element of force or violence. Jai Singh's life, his personality, his spiritual attainments and devotion to the Vaishnavic culture of Manipur were great; and a grateful people lovingly gave him the name Bhagyachandra and adored him as an incarnation of Narottan Thakur, a saint of the Vaishnavic order of Shri Chaitanya. This led to a most creative and a most glorious period on the social and cultural history of Manipur.

With Vaishnavism came the Mahabharata and the Ramayana with their high ideals of Dharma. With it came the Puranas, and above all the Shrimad Bhagavatam which deeply moved the people with its devotional fervour. With Vaishnavism came the Dharma-Shastras and the Hindu social organisation which was adapted with great imagination. With it came the famed Rasa dance and the Sankirtanas which had a place round the year in the Hindu Vaishnavic Calendar, and in all the rites de passage of an individual.

But the tradition of Gareeb Niwaz also continued. Bhagyachandra offered his throne to Shree Govindajee and deemed himself as His servitor, and also deemed Shri Ramjee Prabhu (the deity of Gareeb Niwaz) as the Senapati. To prevent the people from becoming too soft, emphasis was laid on strengthening the earlier Spartan virtues, upholding the example of Bhishma, etc. and inculcating the Hindu ideal that anybody who would die fighting without a moment's thought of turning his back to the enemy, would attain "Sanatan-Dharma" (i.e., Veera-gati, the way of the Hero) and go to heaven in a chariot of flowers. This was a living faith with the earlier generations.

Manipur thus became fully integrated into Hindudom, but her earlier traditions were not abandoned; but enlarged, enriched and reinterpreted; and Hinduism was fully 'indigenised'.