Chapter 3
THE LOI TRADITION

Class is a concept linked to the wealth, property and occupation. The division of society into class is an almost universal feature of social structure since time immemorial. It has been true in ancient times when there were masters and slaves; in medieval period of history when there were feudal lords and serfs and in the modern time which is still being plagued by the specter of the gulf of difference between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Sometimes, membership of a class is hereditary whereas in some cases it is not. And when the membership of a class is hereditary, the class becomes a caste as one finds in the context of Indian society. In case of Manipur, there is less prominence of caste system as compared to other parts of India. Caste was not found in the early Manipuri society. Its existence can be traced only after the advent of Hinduism, in the first half of 18th century. The larger Meitei society has been under the influence of caste hierarchy and recognized three castes; namely, (i) the Brahmins with the highest position, (ii) the Kshatriyas to which a large section of Meitei claim affiliation and (iii) the untouchables, under which the Lois, Yaithibis and the people living in the hills were included. Thus, the idea of touchability and untouchability came to the minds of the Hinduised Meitei through the introduction of the castes. The Loi is presently one of the Scheduled Caste communities of Manipur. Lois have historically, emerged out of an important racial group of Manipur. Earlier, they were recognized as Chakpa and settled in the northern part of the Kangla. As we have already mention in the previous chapter that there was a continuous struggle among the seven principalities of Manipur; namely, (i) the Ningthouja or Meitei, (ii) the Angom, (iii) the Khumal, (iv) the Moirang, (v) the Luwang, (vi) the Sarang-Leishangthem and (vii) the Khaba-Nganba, to overpower one another until the emergence of the Ningthoujas or Meiteis as the supreme power. And ultimately the Ningthoujas or Meiteis under the kingship of Pakhangba subdued the whole and the name Meitei became applicable to all the tribes. However, Chakpa refused to merge with Meitei under Pakhangba and remained as the Lois by paying tributes to the Meitei king. Hence, they were given the name Loi meaning subdued and driven out from the Kangla. However, in later time, the status of Lois was degraded because of many factors. One of the factors was the sending of bad character people to the Loi

villages to punish them for committing crimes or disobeying the orders of the kings. Moreover, those who were captured in the wars were pushed to the Loi villages. Thus, the Loi villages became as a place for confinement of those people who defiled the orders of the king. The most important factor for the degradation of the status of the Loi was the adoption of Hinduism by the king and majority community of the land, the Meitei. The caste has been undergoing demographic and social changes over the centuries under the socio-political forces in the land. Thus, there is an age-old tradition of the Loi as a subjugated community and, finally, after Independence of India, becoming a Scheduled Caste out of it. Besides the Loi, there are six other scheduled castes in Manipur. However, the Loi occupies a special position amidst these communities due to its numerical strength valued so much in a democratic political set up and its historical and socio-cultural connectivity with the Manipur's majority or mainstream community. Therefore, before the discussion on how Lois emerged and transformed is taken as a general view of the scheduled castes in Manipur and the status of the Loi amidst them will be considered here.

The Scheduled Castes in Manipur

In Manipur, there are seven Scheduled Caste communities; namely (i) Loi, (ii) Yaithibis, (iii) Namsudra, (iv) Patni, (v) Dhobi, (vi) Muchi or Ravidas and (vii) Sutradhar. Of these, the Loi and the Yaithibi are the only indigenous scheduled caste communities of the state. The rest are the migrants from the outside of Manipur. Population of the Scheduled Castes in Manipur has been growing over the years and so is the case of the Loi. The Scheduled Caste population vis-a-vis the Loi is shown in the following table:

Table: 3.1

Distribution of Scheduled Caste Population in Manipur

Name of the Scheduled Caste	Population (%)
Loi	51, 668 (86.1)
Patni	3,335 (5.6)
Namasudra	3,312 (5.5)
Yaithibi	532 (0.9)
Sutradhar	147 (0.2)
Dhobi	80 (0.1)
Muchi	45 (0.1)
Total (%)	60,037 (100)

Source: Government of Manipur 2001 Census

The table shows that out of the total population of the Scheduled Castes, the Loi population is 51,668 constituting its 86.1%. Others are Patni 3,335 (5.6%), Namashudra 3,312 (5.5%), Yaithibis 532 (0.9%), Sutradhar 147 (0.9%), Dhobi 80 (0.1%) and Muchi 45 (0.1%) out of the total Scheduled Caste population in the state.

Emergence of the Lois

The Loi represent the largest section of the Scheduled Castes in Manipur. The Loi are settled in four districts of Manipur; namely, Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur and Thoubal and 32 villages. However, the Loi population of these eight Scheduled Caste villages constitutes the biggest chunk of the total Scheduled Caste population in Manipur. The Lois are also not insulated from many changes that have occurred during the period from their origin till the date. To understand these changes, it seems imperative to probe into how they emerged and what the tradition they have carried along.

The origin of the Loi is obscure; no historical records tell where they came from or when they settled in Manipur. Scholars differ about their origin. The following are the views expressed by the scholars about the origin of the Loi:

(i) Lois are mainly descendants of the Chakpa, who were important racial groups living in the villages near the hills of Manipur. "The descendents of the Chapka are now the Loi in the villages such as Leimaram, Phayeng, Koutruk, Khurkhul, Sekmai, Chairel and Andro" (W. Ibohal Singh 1986:6).

(ii) "These Lois are the Chakpa in origin" (Moirangthem Chandra Singh 1992:1). At one time they were independent but later they were brought to the subjugation by the Meiteis and to pay tributes to the Meitei King. Hence, they were given the name 'Loi' (Hodson 1908: 8-9). "The Loi are the distinct group of people in Manipur who speak Chakpa (which is a dialect of the Meitei) and worship Koubru and Panam Ningthou (Bareh 2001:174).

(iii) Within the Loi community, there were mixing many outsiders such as Takhel (Tripura), Mayang, Tekhao (Assamese), Kabo (Shan), Chinese etc, who were war captives, inhabiting the land as tributary community (Singh 2001:1).

(iv) It has been observed that persons who have committed serious offences were banished to the Loi villages (Sharma 1960:24).

(v) It may also be remembered that many of the Meiteis who refused to convert into Hinduism got branded as the Loi and were sent to faraway places by the King Garibniwaz who adopted Hinduism in 1717 A.D (Hodson 1908:10). "Loi" are the community who did not adopt Hinduism and for a long time they have been treated as separate tribe, even though they belong to the same class of the Meitei. This attitude of treating the Loi, as the lower caste, by the Meitei is an important factor to include them in the Scheduled Castes, though their habits are quite different from other Scheduled Castes of the country" (Devi 2002:10)..

The Loi are thus divided into three broad categies; namely, (i) Langam Loi (the conquered ones), (ii) Lanpha Loi (the captured ones) and (iii) the outcasts of the Meitei society and banished to the Loi villages. The Langam Lois paid tributes to the Meitei kings and ceased to be the Loi as soon as they stopped to pay the tribute. For example, Moirang ceased to be the Loi when they stopped to pay tribute after the reign of the King Loyamba in 12th century (Devi 2002:19). The Lanpha Lois were the war captives who were rehabilitated by the king of Manipur. The king allowed them to settle in various parts of the valley. Khagemba was the first monarch to make use of the Loi villages as places for detention of prisoners, for he is said to have sent the captives taken from the raid against Nagas, probably in the neighborhood of Maram in the north, to Sugnu village in the year 1645 A.D. King Khulchaoba transported a number of Manipuris to Eharai Loi village who had risen in rebellion against him under the leadership of Angom Ningthou. Further, the religious change in Manipur during the reign of Garibniwaza led to the wholesale deportation to the Loi Villages (Hodson 1908:9-10).

According to the text of old manuscript *Kei Loi Lingkhatpa*, written in archaic Meitei script, establishment of the Loi villages started during the period of Nongda Lairel Pakhangba (33 - 154 A.D) and lasted upto the period of Meidingu Khunjoaba (1652 - 1666 A.D). The following were the Loi villages established by the kings in Manipur.

I. During the reign of King Pakhangba (33-154 A.D) there were established the following 15 Loi villages: (i) Cakhpa, (ii) Kha Sekmei, (iii) Awang Sekmei, (iv) Koutruk, (v) Thongjao, (vi)Thoubaldong, (vii) Andro, (viii)

Phayeng, (ix) Leimaram, (x) Kakching, (xi) Sikhong, (xii) Ningel, (xiii) Tinshang, (xiv) Chairel and (xv) Loikok Leisangkhong.

II. During the reign of the King Kongyamba (1324-1335 A.D) there came up four Loi villages; namely, (i) Heiyel, (ii) Hangul, (iii) Phoubakchao and (iv) Waikhong.

III. During the reign of Ningthou Khomba (1404-1432 A.D) there were established three villages; namely, (i) Thanga, (ii) Moirang, (iii) Kameng.

IV. During the period of King Kiyamba (1467-1508 A.D) there came up four Loi villages; namely, (i) Waikok, (ii) Khurkul, (iii) Khamaran Kekam and (iv) Kumbi Tolong.

V. The King Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D) established five Loi villages; namely, (i) Wangoo, (ii) Nungoo, (iii) Sugnu, (iv) Langathel and (v) Pallel.

VI. Lastly, during the reign of King Khunjaoba (1652-1666 A.D) Arong Loi village was established.

VII. Besides these, there has been another Loi village, Kwatha, a few miles from Moreh which was established by king Charairongba (1697-1709 A.D) (Govt. of Manipur 1994:14).

Thus, altogether 33 Loi villages have been historically recognized. Among these only eight Loi villages have been included in the list of scheduled castes under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Order Amendment Act, 1956. The following are the eight Loi Scheduled Caste villages of Manipur:

(i) Andro

(ii) Sekmai

(iii) Phayeng

(iv) Khurkhu,

(v) Koutruk

(vi) Leimaram

(vii) Kwatha and

(viii) Tairenpokpi

The Government recognized only eight Loi villages under the Act and not all the Loi villages, considering that these villages are socially, economically and educationally backward community. However, the Government's recognition of only eight Loi villages in the list of the Scheduled Castes in the state later resulted into a conflict between the scheduled caste Loi villages and the non-scheduled caste Loi villages on the issue of inclusion of the non-Scheduled Caste Loi villages demanded for their inclusion in the list of the Scheduled Castes and the issuance of scheduled caste certificate to them. The scheduled caste Lois argued that all the non-scheduled caste Loi villages had been upgraded long ago by the Meitei rulers through a social process known as *Pana Thokpa* (a social process of abandoning the habbit of meat and liquor consumption) and therefore they no longer deserved to be included in the category of the Scheduled castes (Govt. of Manipur 1994:9).

Social Structure

Traditionally, before adoption of Hinduism, the Meitei and the Loi had the same social structure and culture. But with the adoption of Hinduism, the Meitei distinguished themselves from the Loi who retained the Meitei tradition of society and culture. However, the Meitei too carried along most of the structural units and the cultural elements which were added to the Hindu cultural elements. Therefore, the Lois are also having a social structure similar to that of the Meitei, consisted of the similar units like clan, lineage, family and marriage. The structural units are being discussed here.

Clan

Like the Meitei, traditionally the Lois also divide into seven exogamous social divisions equivalent to the clans called *Salais* or *Yeks*; namely, Ningthouja, Angon, Khumal, Moirang, Luwang, Sarang-Leishangthem and Khanganba. Each salai has a number of lineages (*yumnak*) and the prime function of a salai is to enforce the rule of exogamy (Bareh 2001:176-177). So, marriage within the same salai is not allowed. If it is done the couple will be outcast from the society.

Lineage

The Loi family follows patrilineal and patriarchal system. Only the male members are counted and their names are written in the Sagei Puran (written record of each Yumnak). Father is the head of the family and the lineage is counted through father's line. He is respected by every member of the family. His command is obeyed

by all and even a married son does not do anything that will displease him. The relationship between the father and other members of the family are based on respect and obedience on the part of other members and love and authority on the part of head. He looks after and maintains the family, including married ones, until he is incapable of looking himself. He is the priest of the family and performs any form of family worship. At the time of marriage of children in the family, his consent is necessary. If any marriage takes place without his consent, he may excommunicate the son or daughter or grandson or granddaughter. He distributes his property among his sons. However, the paternal home is kept for the youngest son. In the Loi community sons are considered more important than daughters as the responsibility of the family falls on the shoulders of the sons after the death of the father. However, daughters are also not neglected. They are treated as equal to sons and are provided with household articles such as a pair of beds, a wooden almira, chairs, tables, brass or bell-metal utensils and clothes at the time of marriage (Devi 2002:26-29). Thus, among the Lois, close ties exist between the male members of the family.

Family

Among the Loi, family functions as an important institution of integration. However, their community (caste) itself becomes a big family through intermarriages among the clans. The Loi do not have the family of the Hindus called joint family. Their family is in-between the nuclear and extended family systems, having a father, a mother, a married son, a daughter- in-law and the other children, including one or two grand children. A Loi householder is assisted by his wife in maintaining the household. The Lois maintains a relationship based on affection and mutual understanding. Children show deference to elders. Seniority usually accorded high-low status sequence among siblings. Avoidance relationship exists between a married woman and her husband's elder brother or elder kinsmen and between daughter-in-law and parent-in-law. Daughter-in-law shows her respect to the relatives by covering her head with cloth. Close ties exist between male kins. Siblings generally maintain close ties even after marriage. Generally an elder married son is separated after the younger one is married. However, if he is not capable to build his own house, he may continue to live with his parents. Thus, their family follows the custom of serving parents by sons and daughters-in-law. However, with the impact of western education and economic development, nuclear family gained popularity among the Lois also (Devi 2002:21-22).

Marriage

Before the conversion of the Meitei into Hinduism in 18th century there was no restriction on marriage between the Meiteis and Lois. But after the conversion, the Meitei considered themselves as the highest caste in the society. So, social laws were made to restrict their marriage with the low caste communities (Singh 2001:4). Thus, only the Loi of the villages of identical industry could intermarry. For example, the Loi of the salt making villages would intermarry, but their marriage with Phayeng, silk rearing village, was not likely (Hodson 1908:74). According to L. Bino Devi (2002:37), 'the Loi society permits marriage within the same caste but prohibits the marriage within the same clan'. Thus, Lois are endogamous with regards to their caste and exogamous with regards to clan.

Generally marriages are performed (i) after engagement or bride begging and (ii) after love or elopement. To engage a boy and a girl for marriage, there is a Loi custom according to which the boy's parents beg for the girl as a bride. It indicates superior status of the girl's family. According to the custom, the boy approaches the girl and if he obtains a positive response from her, negotiations (*waroipot*) between their parents will progress. After the *waroipot*, the bride's parents are presented the *heijapot* which includes cooked pork, small dried fish and betel nut. It marks the beginning of marriage rites' performance at the bride's residence (Bareh 2001:178). However, such performance will be short when a girl elopes with a boy and stays overnight in his house. Rather, *'Loukhatpa'* (acceptance ceremony) was performed by the girl's parents on request from the boy's parents in order to acquire social recognition of their husband-wife relationship. Earlier, the custom of marriage by service was prevalent and during the period of the service, the married couple was used to stay at the bride's natal home, known as '*Ya-onginba*' (Singh 2001:5). However, this custom has now disappeared and if a married couple stays at the residence of the bride, it is considered matrilocal residence for them. Among the Lois dowry is not practiced. But some gifts are given by the parents of the bride at the time of the marriage, which include household articles like bed and bedrolls, clothes, utensils and ornaments.

Divorce, remarriage of divorcées and widow remarriage are permissible under the Loi customs. However, no ritual is performed in such cases. For divorce, approval of the parents of the couple is necessary and a divorce case is decided by the village

elders. If someone is found guilty of divorce, one has to pay the price to one's spouse (Singh 1998:113).

Economy

The Loi villages were imposed with different industries to occupy and to pay their tributes to the king and an occupation could not be changed without permission of the king. According to Kei-Loi Lingkhatpa (manuscript), the following were the traditional occupations of the Lois:

I. Silk manufacturing

The Loi of Phayeng, Leimaram, Koutruk and Khurkhul villages reared silk worms and paid tribute of silk items to the king.

II. Salt manufacturing

The villagers of Shikong, Ningel and Waikhong were the manufacturers of salt and paid salt every month to the king as their tribute.

III. Blacksmithry

The Loi of Kakching village were the blacksmiths. Their real duty in the life was to excavate iron ore in the neighborhood and manufacture nails and daos for the state's purposes.

IV. Sel manufacturing

The Loi who manufactured coins for currency were known as the Sellois. The duty of the villagers of Hangul, Heiyel and Phoubakchao was to manufacture 'Sel' I,e, coins and paid 'Sel' coins to the king as tribute.

V. Carpentry

The occupation of wood cutting and house building was in the Wangoo, Nungoo and Sugnu villages. They cut timbers every month for the king.

VI. Pottery manufacturing

The occupation of the villagers of Andro, Chairel, Thongjao and Thoubandong was to manufacture earthen pots. They paid these earthen pots in tribute to the king.

VII. Fishing

The Loi of Thanga, Arong and Moirang villages were engaged in fishing occupation and paid fish items in tribute to the king.

Besides these occupations, they were predominantly engaged in agriculture of food grains, reared animals like hen, duck, cock, pig etc. and produced country liquor known as *Yu* for home consumption as well as for using in the rituals and ceremonies. They produced sufficient paddy for domestic consumption. *Kalei* is the alcoholic liquor produced by them, which is sometimes used as medicine by the Meitei.

Village Polity

Traditionally, most of the Loi villages were looked after by its village officers. The chief of a Loi village was given the title of Khullakpa. He was appointed by the king and never inherited the position. The officers of the Loi villages are as follows:

I. Khullakpa

Khullakpa was the controller of the village, who executed both the administrative and religious functions. During the monarchial rule in Manipur, the Khullakpa enjoyed much power in administration of the village. He was the head of the village and supreme executive authority of the village. He was the arbitrator in the small matters in the village, and also a religious priest. With the help of other officers of the village he disposed of cases related to divorce, theft, elopement and other cases in the village. Also, he had the power to investigate the quarrels, occurring within the village. Decisions made by him and other village officers were used to be taken as final. Moreover, Khullakpa enjoyed a very high socio-religious status in the village. During the village Lai-Haraoba, he used to be the chief for managing the celebrations of Lai-Haraoba rituals. A special seat was reserved for him at the time of other social and ritual ceremonies of the village.

II. Luplakpa

Lup means organization and *Lakpa* means controller. Luplakpa was the second rank officer in the village next to Khulakpa. He was appointed by the king of Manipur. His function was to assist the Khullakpa in his work.

III. Khunjahanba

The literal meaning of *Khunjahanba* is **the oldest villager**. He was the chief organizer of meetings, festivals etc. in the village. The proposals of the

villagers were mainly communicated through him and he had to inform all the matters decided by the village officers to the villagers. However, at present, he is consulted in socio-religious matters only.

IV. Yupalba

Yupalba was the fourth ranking officer of the village. He was the manager of wine brewed from rice and tasted the quantity and quality of the brew every year. He was also responsible for entertainment of strangers and sometimes performed the duties entrusted to the Kullakpa in the absence of the latter.

V. Telloihanjaba

Telloihanjaba was the leader of army of the village and expert in archery. His main duties were to lead the villagers during the war or at the time of hunting.

VI. Telloihidang

Telloihidang was the assistant of the Telloihanjaba of the village. He also had done the work of collecting money for Lai-Haraoba and other socio-religious festivals of the village.

VII. Heijanglakpa

Heijanglakpa was the chief organizer of sports festivals in the village like race, "Mukna Kangjei" (local wrestling done with hockey stick) etc. He also collected baskets from the villagers when required for the socio-religious festivals of the village.

VIII. Pakhanglakpa

Pakhanglakpa was the officer-in-charge of the unmarried men of the village. T.C. Hodson wrote, "the Pakhanglakpa (lakpa of the young unmarried men) is the man who looked after the young men's club and the custom of keeping the young men in one dormitory is known to have been at no distant date common among the Loi communities" (Hodson 1908:60-61).

IX. Naharakpa

Naharakpa was the in-charge of the young lads who were younger than the Pakhang. He had the same powers and functions as that of the Pakhanglakpa. The only difference was the age-group under his control. Generally, in most Loi villages, there was no exact line of demarcation of the age of "Naha" and "Pakhang".

X. Loumilakpa

Loumilakpa was the officer who looked after all the properties of the village which were owned by the villagers as a whole as well as individual property of the villagers. He leased the village-lands to the villagers and collected revenues from the leased-out cultivated fields and home lands.

XI. Loumidang

Loumidang was the assistant of Loumilakpa. His main function was to assist all the works undertaken by the Loumilakpa.

XII. Chabolhanjaba

Chabolhanjaba was the officer-in-charge of the grand feasts of the village. So his main duty was to organize the village when the necessity of such occasions arose. For such occasion, he would look after the place of the grand feasts, the place of cooking, who would be the cooks, who would contribute for the grand feast etc.

XIII. Laiselungba

Laiselungba was the officer-in-charge of the village gods. So, his main duty was to look after and maintain the gods worshipped by the villagers.

All these village officers enjoyed the elite status and respect in their village. Khullakpa usually discussed all the matters and problems with his officers. They were each given different type of functions relating to administration, judicial, customary laws, entertainment for the villagers and were also allotted functions related to the welfare of the youth in the village. In this way, the chiefs along with his officers were responsible for maintaining law and order in the traditional Loi villages. Besides,

these traditional village officers, the villages also had organizations like *Singlup*, *Leirup* and *Keirup* which are discussed below.

(i) Singlup

Singlup took the responsibility for the development of the village such as construction of roads and bridges, digging of tanks, cleaning of lakes etc. Besides, it also took the responsibility of sending representatives to the house where death or illness took place in the village. It helped the bereaved family with wood, money and labour for cremation (Singh 1968:97).

(ii) Leirup

Leirup was also an organization for every Leikais (lane) for the developmental activities like construction of roads and bridges, embankment of rivers and digging of channels in the fields (Devi 1994:67-74).

(iii) Keirup

Keirup was a military organization. Persons belonging to Keirup were messengers of war. When a war broke out, they went to the battle field. Besides, they were also responsible for catching tigers which were coming to the villages. Therefore, they could be considered as village guards (Sharma 1960:27).

However, with the development of a new system of administration, specially after Manipur became a part of the Indian Union, all these village organizations gradually ceased to function smoothly except the death is a natural phenomenon and the organization of Singlup gives moral as well as financial suport to the deceased families. Even today, when a member of a family dies, the villagers help the bereaved family in the form of giving woods for cremation. It is obligatory for every family to send at least one person to attend the funeral procession to the cremation ground.

Of the 13 traditional village officers, only 8 are found in the two Loi villages of Koutruk and Leimaram. Theese are (i) Khullakpa, (ii) Luplakpa, (iii) Khunjahanba, (iv) Yupalba, (v) Pakhanglakpa, (vi) Naharakpa, (vii) Loumilakpa and (viii) Laisungba. Moreover, with the introduction of modern administrative system, specially the Panchayati Raj in the villages, the position and status of the Khullakpa

along with his village officers has lost its power and status in some degree. Even the Khullakpa cannot impose strict actions and discipline upon the villagers. Thus, they enjoy the high prestige and status only during the socio-religious festivals of the village.

After India's Independence, Manipur was governed by the non-elected Chief Commissioner and Council of Ministers till 1971. It was only after the North-Eastern Area (Reorganization) Act 1971 that the state was granted statehood with a responsible government. The people of the state could elect their representatives in government through elections from 1972 onwards. As a consequence, the traditional administrative pattern of Manipur also changed and the Scheduled Caste people, including the Loi, also, experienced a new era of political life. It marks the beginning of contemporary political system in the Loi villages as well.

Thus, in the environment of the democratic governance after Independence, the traditional village (caste) panchayat structure has also been immensely influenced. The traditional village organization, though still persisting, has almost lost its authority over the villagers. They are now concerned only in the religious matters of the Lai-Haraoba of their respective villages, e.g., deciding the number of days for performance of the Haraoba, selecting the persons to serve the gods and goddesses, arranging the programme of the Haraoba etc. Previously, the village officers were appointed by the king for administrating the village, but now Khullakpa and other members of the traditional village (caste) council, such as Luplakpa, Yupalba, Pakhanglakpa, Nahalakpa, Loumilakpa and Laishelungba are elected by the villagers for a period of four years, out of the most responsible persons of the village who have attained the age of over forty years.

Culture

Traditionally, the Loi have their own customs and tradition which continued with them. The Loi culture can be analysed in terms of religion, festivals, ceremonies, food habits, dress and housing patterns.

Religion

From the historical time, Lois are the worshippers of the traditional Meitei gods- Imung Lais (household deities), Lamlais (deities belived to exist in the wild land), Umang Lais(forest deities) and Apokpa (clan god). Every day, they worshipped Leiningthou, Sama Mehi and Laimaren Sidabi, the Imung Lai (household deities)

with *Dhoop* (incense stick) and *Thaomei* (lamp). There is also specific worship for them as it is believed that if a family falls into trouble, it is due to the wrath of Sanamahi who is the lord of household. Therefore, a priest or priestess (*Maiba* or *Maibi*) who knows *lairon-tilon* (language of the gods) is hired and offerings are made on Tuesday (Devi 2002:48). They also worshipped these deities on two major religious occasions; namely, Cheiraoba and Saroi Khangba. Koubru and Panam Ningthou are the two important forest deities for Lois and Meiteis. Therefore, the inhabitants of all the Loi villages, except Andro, worshipped Koubru while the inhabitants of Andro worshipped Panam Ninthou who is enshrined in a temple at the northern corner of the village. Besides these deities, the Loi also worshipped *Numit* (Sun god) and *Tha* (moon). *Numit* is worshipped by the Loi people of Phayeng in Sajibu (April) and they offer a white fowl and a white pigeon. In Andro, offerings are made to both *Numit* and *Tha* , the latter being worshipped every month on the auspicious day of full moon (Hodson 1908:103).

Festivals

Some of the traditional annual festivals of the Loi are *Cheiraoba* (New Year Day), *Ningol Chakaoba*, and *Lai Haraoba* (Merry making of the gods).

Cheiraoba was earlier known as Shajibu Lakyei Taiba Kum or Kishinaba. It was a ritual ceremony performed on the first day of *Sajibu* (April- May) by every household in the honour of household god, Sanamahi and goddess Leimaren Sidabi. On the day the villagers make offerings of uncooked food to their household deity. Then, the food was cooked and shared among the members of the household and on this day they remained free from the activities in the field or elsewhere. At present, the ceremony is performed not only on the first day of Sajibu but on a certain day of the same month (Singh 2001:6).

Another festival, *Ningol Chakaoba*, is celebrated on the second day of *Hiyangei* (October- November). On this day married women are invited to share a meal with their brothers. It was the custom of the some Loi villages like Khurkhul to invite all the married women of the host's yumnak. Therefore, the person who was to host this feast during that year was chosen from among the members of a particular yumnak (Bareh 2001:183). However, at present, only real and putative sisters are invited by the parents and brothers of the married women.

Lai Haraoba is the most important traditional ritual-cum-festival performed by the Lois in the honour of the village deity and his wife. The Lai Haraoba of the Loi

communities is called Chakpa Lai Haraoba (Bino Devi 2002: 53) and in all the Loi communities it does not fall in the same month, e.g., the Lai Haraoba of the Koutruk is held in Phairen (February-March) while that of Leimaram is in Lamta (March-April). A little shift under the impact of Hinduism is observed with reflect to the traditional fervour and enthusiasm in the ritual ceremonies of the Lai-Haraoba. The replacement of liquor by water and meat curry by fish curry is found in the rituals of Lai-Haraoba. In the past a community hunt was performed and the animal killed or captured was sacrificed to the father-god and mother-goddess. Such a community hunt is no longer performed because of the fact that animal sacrifice is prohibited by the new religion of Hinduism.

Ceremonies

Within the Loi village communities, when a child is born a number of ritual ceremonies are performed for welfare and longevity of the life of the child such as *Yapanthaba* (Swati puja), *Chawomba* (weaning) and *Nahut-Nareng-Tamba* (ear lobe boring ceremony). These ceremonies are given hereunder.

(i) *Yapanthaba* (Swati puja) is performed on the fifth day in the case of a male child and on the sixth day in case of a female. On this day, the family offers pork, chickens and vegetables mixed with fermented fish and chilly known as *Singju* to some relatives who are invited on the occasion.

(ii) Another ceremony *Chawamba* (weaning away) is performed on completion of the third month of a child's age, within which time the mother weans away the child from breast feeding (Bareh 2001: 180-181).

(iii) *Nahutpa* (ear lobe boring ceremony) is performed after the completion of three-year age of a child. It was celebrated collectively, once in a year, as a community ceremony for all the children, who attained the age of three, to signify the transition of the children from the grace of god to the grace of human being. The ceremony was performed at the residence of the oldest boy among the children, whose ear-lobe boring ceremony was going to be celebrated on the same day and occasion (Singh 2001:5).

Lois also believes that the soul of the dead goes to heaven, and a person should not die inside the living room as it defiles the place. Therefore, dying person is

taken out to a newly constructed hut. Cleaning the corpse and covering it with clean cloth are done in the hut. It is encased in a wooden coffin which is carried to the crematorium by four men. The villagers accompanying them sing funeral songs known as *Meiring Eeshei*. After cremation, a little amount of bones is taken and placed in a small pot and buried at *Lu*, **a small hump of land** (Devi 2002:42). The eldest son-in-law sanctifies the house with a *Tairen* leaf (a particular leaf). *Kritan* (recitation) or *Chak-khangba* (public feast) which is the last rites ceremony of a death person is performed during December-January when the villagers are free from agricultural activities (Bareh 2001:181). Thus, the Loi have a strong community sense. They regarded themselves as the members of a very big family and do all the works jointly. For them, son-in-law is the important person who performs the rituals for the dead among his in-laws.

Besides, they also perform a number of ritual ceremonies for promoting overall welfare of the community, such as *Langban Kamaiba, Singja Pokpi Churumba, Khunthong Lakpa, Saroi Khangba* and *Apumbi Khurumba*. These are as follows:

(i) Langban Kamaiba

Langban Kamaiba is a grand feast arranged by the members of a lineage on a day of the first fortnight of *Langban* (August-September) for the overall integration and solidarity of the concerned lineage. The ceremony is still performed by the villagers with some variations in the menu of the feast (Singh 2001:6).

(ii) Ashimal Thaba

Ashimal Thaba was performed on a day of the second fortnight of *Langban* (August-September) to secure divine protection from the deceased ancestors by the male head of a household.

Now, it is known as Langban Tarpan and some of the families engaged Brahmin to perform the offering of the meal to the soul of the deceased forefathers in a feast at which members of the concerned lineage, relatives and friends are also entertained. The whole period of the second fortnight of Langban is now regarded as a period of propitiation of the deceased ancestors and a ritual is performed on the

morning of all the days of this period by offering fruits and flowers to the souls of the deceased forefathers in a pond or running stream, which is being regarded as one of the forms of the holy Ganges.

(iii) Singja Pokpi Churumba

Singja Pokpi Churumba was celebrated in the month of *Langban* (August-September) in the honour of the village deity and his wife to seek good omens from the deity about happenings of the year to come. The whole ceremony consists of a number of rituals like inviting the deity to the ceremony and offering of the cooked food and liquor. No significant changes are observed in the process of performing these rituals, but substitution of fish curry and water for meat curry and liquor is noticed under the impact of Hinduism (Singh 2001:6).

(iv) Khunthong Lakpa

Khunthong Lakpa is performed without any change on the first Saturday of *Lamta* by menfolk of the village to protect villagers from the spirits who are believed to come down from the heaven to the earth in the month of *Lamta* and enter the village from the four directions (Singh 2001:6).

(v) Saroi Khangba

Saroi Khangba is performed by womenfolk of the village on all but the first Saturday of *Lamta*, to protect the villagers from the evil spirits who are supposed to be the cause of the worldly sufferings. No significant change is evident in the process of performing this ritual.

(vi) Apumbi Khurumba

Apumbi Khurumba is also performed without any changes by the womenfolk on an auspicious day of *Lamta* to please the spirits of the children, died before attaining the age of three years and at the same time to prevent the recurrence of unfortunate incidents (Singh 2001:7).

Food

The Loi normally takes pork, chicken and fish along with many vegetables. Rice is staple food for them and is also used to distil the country liquor called *Yu*. They produce it both for domestic consumption and sale (Bareh 2001:176). Yu is required for their ritual ceremony and public feast. Here, Kirti Singh (1980:20) opines that the degradation of the Lois in the lower social status was not due to their occupation; rather it was due to their mode of eating, living and clothing.

Dress

The dress of the Loi is similar with the Meiteis, except the sacred thread which the Meitei men wear. The male members wear dhoti and kurta. Women wear *Phanek* (a loin cloth), blouse and *innaphi* (chadar or cloth sheet). During the marriage and Lai haraoba ceremonies, menfolk wear *white dhoti* and *white kurta* and sometimes they wear these along with white cotton shawl. Women wear *phanek mapan naiba,* **a loin cloth with long horizontal strips and embroidered border** and *innaphi.*

House

The traditional Loi houses are made up of wood, bamboo, mud plastered wall and a thatched roof, facing towards south while the Meitei's houses faced east. The house is divided into different parts. The front of the house is reserved for *Mangol* (verandah) where all the visitors are received and also a place for family as well as community discussions. The right side of the Mangol is known as *Phamel* (sitting place of the elder persons) and a mat is always rolled out here in the day time. It is the place of the elder member of the family and no one is allowed to sit here. The other side of the Mangol is known as *Naktha* where dead bodies are placed. The next part of the house is *Thoubomka* where the eldest son lives with his family. It is the place where the Lois keeps their household goddess *Leimaren Sidabi* in the left side and worship. The next to it is *Laplenka* room for elders. *Ningolka* is the fourth room which is allotted to the eldest daughter of the family. Next to Ningolka is the kitchen. The left side of the kitchen is for cooking and the right side is the place of the household god *Sanamahi* (Devi 2002:24). Thus, their pattern of house showed a well-organization and respectability among the family members. Each member of the family is allotted a part in the house and no one is allowed to cross one another's place while sleeping and sitting. However, at present, most of their houses are made up of wood, with mud plaster wall and tin roof, sometimes, with cement plaster wall with tin roof.

The Loi- Meitei Interactions

Earlier, there existed a close social and political relationship between the Lois and Meiteis. Like the Meiteis, the Lois are also divided into seven clans and also there was a strong occupational interdependence between the two. There were occupational groups which supplied finished goods in the form of pots, silk yarn and home-brewed liquor. And there was no restriction on marriage between the Meiteis and the Lois. The earlier rulers of Manipur Moriya Phambalcha and Tonkonba had married Chakpa girls, Lei-oi Nung-oibi and Tarangnu, respectively. It is also observed from the history that Chakpa's give political support to Nongda Lairen Phakhangba to ascend the throne of Manipur at Kangla (Kabui 1991:59-83). It was only after the advent of Hinduism that the orthodox Hindu Meiteis looked down upon the Lois who did not adopt Hinduism and continued the habit of eating pork and drinking alcohol. Marriage rules were changed to put restrictions on marriage with the Lois. Intercommunity interaction between the Lois and the Meiteis was also restricted.

However, the post-Independence period has brought changes in the relationship between the Lois and the Meiteis. With the coming of modern education, the people of younger generation are freely mixing and Meiteis are eating with the Lois even though there is a feeling that the Lois belong to a lower caste. Marriages between the Lois and the Meiteis are practiced to some extent. Thus, the intercommunity interaction between the Lois and the Meiteis is getting more and more flexible, and social contacts between the two have now resulted into numerous matrimonial ties (Singh 1998:117).

In sum, the Lois of Manipur are also undergoing discernible changes in the contemporary times. Many of their traditional customs and practices have been Sanskritzed owing to their voluntary acceptance of Vaishnavism. Some replacements of the indigenous rituals by new Sanskritic rituals have taken place (Singh 2001:5). According to H.M. Bareh (2001:185), the post-Independence period has made an impact on social, political and economic life of the Lois. Now-a-day, the interaction between Lois and Meiteis has increased. Educated persons are freely mixing and eating with one another, resulting into changes in matrimonial alliances. With the introduction of the Panchayati Raj system in Manipur in 1960, the village Panchayats has been set up in the Loi villages. Although traditional caste councils continue to exist, their powers have reduced and they mainly look after the Lai Haraoba of their

respective villages (Devi 2002: 99). Also, a few educated persons have come forward to instill a sense of unity among the Lois and they have set up an association, All Manipur Loi Association, to forge group-solidarity among them. These, changes among the Lois in Manipur are taking place mainly after Independence due to Sanskritization, new legislations and western education. Nonetheless, some of the traditional customs of the Lois are continuing till date to some extent. However, with the passage of time, many of the changes have been observed among the Lois. The social gap between Lois and Meiteis has reduced, leading to numerous matrimonial ties between the two communities. They have sanskritized many of their traditional customs and practices. Also, their traditional caste council has lost much of its power and has become weak.

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