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## **GODDESS EMOINU AND HER SIGNIFICANCE IN THE LIFE OF MEITEI WOMEN**

### **Introduction to the Meitei**

The Meitei is the major ethnic group of Manipur, which is a small state in the north-eastern part of India (Chakravatti, 1986; Singh, 2011). It is a hilly state with nearly 90% of the area covered by hilly region while the remaining is valley. From the mythological and legendary stories, the people of Manipur formerly inhabited the hilly region as the valley area was submerged under water. It was during the first century that the people established settlement in the valley. Manipur is the home of a variety of communities viz; *Aimol, Chothe, Hmar, Kuki, Paite, Thadou, Kabui, Rongmei, Liangmei, Tangkhul, Zeme, Maram, Kom, Mao, Maring, Purum, Zou, Vaiphei, Sema, Simte, Meitei, Muslims, Nepalis* and so on. People who inhabit the hilly region are known as *Chingburoi* (hilly people) and are represented by tribes and those who inhabit the valley are known as *Tamburoi* (valley people) and are represented by Meiteis.

The Meitei state is known by different names in the early period by the neighbouring states (Goshwami, 2009; Sudhir, 2012). It was known as '*Kathe*' by Burmese, '*Mogali*' by Kacharese, '*Mekhali*' by Assamese, '*Mogalu*' by Bengali, '*Kase*' by Awadh and Shaan. It was during the reign of king Pamheiba in 18<sup>th</sup> century that the state came to be known as Manipur. In early period the term '*Meitei*' did not exist rather the people formed small different ethnic groups and settled in different place. During the period of Nongda Lairal Pakhangba (33A.D.- 153 A.D.) these small different ethnic groups clubbed together into seven different clans based on their closeness of blood ties and finally absorbed into a common umbrella called '*Meitei*'. The Meitei community has seven clans namely *Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba, Sarang- Leisang* and *Angom*. Under this clan system, inter-marriage between the same clan and same lineage is strictly prohibited. The society is patriarchal and the clan system is formed under patrilineal system.

According to Hodson (1908), the term '*Meitei*' has been derived from '*mi*'-man and '*thei*'-separate. They belong to Mongoloid race and their language

is called '*Meiteilon*' which belongs to Tibeto-Burman group of languages. They are regarded as the most advanced group of Kuki-Chin people. The Meiteis have their own script and are very rich in literature. Folklore, folktales, myths and manuscripts are the characteristics of early Manipuri literature. *Puyas* (archaic script) were written by different well known people during various periods of early Manipur. These manuscripts are of great significance to the scholars in recollecting the history of early Manipur.

### Gods and Goddesses

The Meitei uses the term '*lai*' to denote gods and goddesses. They worship a number of deities and more than three hundred sixty deities exist in the society. According to Tylor, animism is belief in spiritual beings and it is regarded as the first stage of religion. Likewise, the Meitei religion possesses elements of animism, fetishism, totemism, ancestor worship as well as Hinduism. *Atiya sidaba* or *Atingkhok sidaba* or *Sidaba Mapu* is the supreme of all Meitei gods. He was the creator of the universe. He had three sons; *Ashiba*, *Achiba* and *Konjintuthokpa*. After creating the universe he ordered *Ashiba* to create mankind and other living things on earth. *Ashiba* created living things based on what he had seen from his father's abdomen and also created atmosphere, soil, sun, *Khongjom Nubi* (a constellation), rivers and so on. *Atiya Sidaba* then thought of giving his throne to his son, so he called his three sons and asked them to move round the universe seven times. He told them that the one who came first after circumambulating the universe seven times would be given the throne. *Konjin Tuthokpa* ascended the throne and came to be known as *Pakhangba* while *Ashiba* or *Sanamahi* became the king of every household residing in a shrine on the southwestern corner of every household. *Leimaren Sidabi*, the mother earth, is represented by an earthen pot filled with water and is enshrined to the left of *Sanamahi*. *Sanamahi* together with *Leimaren Sidabi* reside in every Meitei household and are revered as the main god and goddess of the group. Therefore *Sanamahi* is regarded as the religion of the Meitei before the advent of Hinduism. The Meiteis believe in polytheism and their gods and goddesses can be categorized into four types:

- i) *Yum lais* - household deities includes *Laininthou Sanamahi*, *Leimarel sidabi* and *Emoinu*. They are worshipped every day in every household for the well being and prosperity of the family.
- ii) *Maikei ngakpa lai* - directional deities namely *Koubru*, *Thangjing*, *Marjing* and *Wangbren*. These deities reside in the hills and are worshipped to protect the people from various disasters caused by the evil spirits.
- iii) *Umang lai*- village deities. There are 361 umang lais and are worshipped annually for 5-10 days at the time of *Lai Haraoba* for population growth, peace, economic well being and to bring solidarity.

- iv) *Apokpa* - ancestors of seven clans. It was the most important features of Meitei belief. They are worshipped for population growth, wealth and to ward off the misfortunes of the lineages or clan.
- v) *Lamlai* - gods of country side

As mentioned above, the Meitei profess *Sanamahi* religion (Asho Kumar, 2000, 2016; Parratt, ed. 1998). However, during the reign of king Pamheiba, the religion took a turn. He introduced Hinduism to the Meitei people and forced to follow it. Those who were against his principle were exiled from the state. One of the peculiar things we observed is that though Hinduism was practiced widely, the Meitei people never cease worshipping their traditional deities. It goes hand in hand till now.

Ancestor worship is the most important characteristic feature of Meitei beliefs (Singh, ed. 2016). Each and every clan has its own ancestral god to whom specific edible items and tools are offered in rituals on specific days and in specific months. *Lai Haraoba* (merry making of gods) is a notable worship of *Umang lais*. Formerly there were only nine *Umang Lais* but later the number increased to more than three hundred due to the expansion of lineages during the period of Nongda Lairal Pakhangba. *Umang lai* is the status assigned to administrative heads and functionaries of different areas in the state who rendered relentless and selfless service to the people. *Sakok Lamlen* (an old text) makes mention of the naming of village chief as *Umanglai*. They are worshipped collectively at village level for the maintenance of peace and prosperity. Notable worships of these deities are *Moirang Haraoba*, *Chakpa Haraoba*, *Kanglei Haraoba* and *Kakching Haraoba*. These worships involve a series of rites and rituals, chanting of hymns, and giving oracles by *Maiba* (priests) and *Maibis* (priestesses) though the nature of worship varies from one *Umanglai* to another and from one village to another. *Lai Haraoba* is a social, cultural and political institution where the thoughts, art, literature and beliefs of Meiteis are reflected. It gives a platform for social gathering of the villagers to strengthen solidarity and proper functioning of the village.

The Meiteis have a firm belief in magical power, evil spirits, black magic, oracle, witchcraft and evil eyes. The concept of evil spirits and taboos also existed. *Hellois* (witches), *Hingchabis* (vampires) and *Saroi Ngaroi* (evil spirit) are elements which are believed to occupy the outside world. Due to this reason, the elders restrict movements on certain days and time to avoid unwanted happenings.

Rites and rituals are inseparable aspects of every religion. Various rituals, rites and ceremonies are performed by the priests and the priestesses to appease the deities and evil spirits to cure diseases, to increase productivity of food, to ward off evil spirits affecting the health, both at household level and at village level. The role of the priests and the priestesses in Meitei religion is manifold. It is also through them that oral tradition is kept alive and stories

of the past are relayed through generations. When Hinduism was adopted as the state religion, Hindu ceremonies became more popular. Brahmins who performed these ceremonies enjoyed better positions than the traditional performers.

### **Goddess Emoinu Ahongbi**

Goddess *Emoinu* is one of the manifestations of goddess *Leimarel Sidabi* whom *Atiya Sidaba*, the supreme god, created from the left side of his body with an aim to procreate and establish mankind. On being directed by *Atiya Sidaba* to create another goddess to look after the human beings, *Leimarel sidabi* created *Emoinu*, the goddess of wealth. *Emoinu* resides in the hearth of every household called '*Phungga Lairu*' (*Phungga*= hearth, *Lairu*= most important). The *Phungga Lairu* is an important place in the Meitei household with great religious significance. It consists of a small hole dug in the western corner of the fireplace which has a tripod stand over it to support cooking vessels. The iron tripod feet of the *Phungga* should not be moved and fire in the *Phungga* should never be extinguished at dusk. Absence of fire in the hearth at dusk is considered a taboo. There may be a scientific reason behind this as smoke from the fire can repel mosquitoes and other insects. The hearth also has great social significance as folktales were narrated at night sitting around it as a means of recreation and enjoyment. The norms prevalent in the Meitei society are believed that such to have been framed by the Goddess *Emoinu*.

The goddess has many manifestations. *Leithak Leikharol* (manuscript of Meitei cosmology) mentions of *Konjin tuthokpa* (youngest son of Supreme god *Atiya Sidaba*) being surrounded by *Lai nura Taret* (manifestations of goddess *Emoinu*) *Hipokpi*, *Yaipokpi*, *Hireima*, *Yaireima*, *Hikubi*, *Yaikubi*, and *Yaisna* when *Asiba* (eldest son of *Atiya Sidaba*) tried to kill him. When the goddess comes to fishing, the deity takes the form of '*Ngareima*' (goddess of fish), during agriculture as *Phouoibi*, during war as *Lanleima*, when it deals with salt producing practices as *Thumleima*, when it comes to book and work as *Sinleima* and in the hearth of the household, the Goddess takes the form of *Emoinu Ahongbi*. The Meitei people believe that Goddess *Emoinu* monitors the way of living and behavior of the members. If the Goddess is pleased, the family will be blessed with wealth and prosperity. Thus, the Goddess *Emoinu* occupies a very important place in shaping the behaviors of the individuals specially women folk who are assigned to look after the household. *Khuman kangleirol* (a manuscript) makes mention of *Khayoirol Nganuthumbi*, sister of *Khuman King Yumoiba*, being married to Meitei King *Luwang Guru Punshiba* as his ninth wife. They had a son named *Senba Mimaba* and got separated. When *Senba Mimaba* grew up, one day he went for hunting to his father's place and shot a deer in the King's court, which was a manifestation of Goddess *Emoinu*. This led to the identification of

father and his son. Later his son begged for the Goddess which resides in the hearth of King's court. Senba Mimaba brought the Goddess to the Khuman place and thereafter was blessed with wealth. Therefore, worshipping of Goddess Emoinu started since the very early period before the small different groups merged into whole as Meitei. However, wide spread worship of Emoinu prevailed during the reign of King Khagemba(1597-1652) who took stern steps to popularize the teachings of the goddess. His son Meidingu Khakta Khoinal( Khunjaoba) followed his father's steps to maintain the popularity of the goddess as a result of which the state was blessed with wealth and prosperity.

### **Beliefs and Values associated with Goddess Emoinu**

The Meiteis have a firm belief in worshipping household deity with devotion for well being, wealth and prosperity of the family. Goddess Emoinu prescribes certain codes of conduct to women to assume the ideal image. Though men are not much aware of the codes, women take the responsibility to impart the knowledge to daughters so that peace and prosperity remains in every household. While men remain busy in earning bread for the family, women look after the family by preparing food, cleaning and washing for all. The tasks performed by women are necessary for the smooth functioning of the family. And the codes prescribed by Goddess Emoinu help them to perform in an appreciable manner.

The Meitei traditional house has a separate entity called *Kei*. Before taking rice from it, they have to pray to the Goddess *Phouobi*, a manifestation of Goddess Emoinu, as a form of seeking permission for the act. The people believed that when buying vegetables or rice from outside, storing is to be done in their proper storing vessels before being cooked. The Meiteis pray to the household deities *Lainingthou Sanamahi* and *Leimarel Sidabi* before retiring to bed, before stepping out of the house, and after coming home to yield better result for the day's work.

Morning is considered as the most important phase of a day. It decides the fate of the day, thus bad and unwanted things are avoided in the morning. Before stepping down from the bed in the morning, one has to smoothen hair and clothes, offer salutation to mother earth by touching the floor and then the forehead three times. One should then step down from the bed by blowing through both noses and then choosing the unblocked side as the auspicious one to take the first step of the day. Prayer to the sun before brushing and cleaning is believed to bring good fortune.

### **Behaviours of all prohibited by Goddess Emoinu**

Goddess Emoinu prohibits certain behaviours to ensure prosperity in the family.

- i. Water used to rinse the mouth after a meal is considered impure and is not to be used to make hair.
- ii. Garments should not be used to dry hands.
- iii. Cutting dry wood at night.
- iv. Sleeping with the fireplace (*Phungga*) light off.
- v. Easing tickling sensation of ear while talking with others.
- vi. Expressing anger by drawing lines on the floor.
- vii. Desecrating body parts in frustration.
- viii. Whispering to someone in public.
- ix. Holding grudges and being jealous of others' wealth or achievement.
- x. Violation of taboo.
- xi. Pouring used water in the Sumang (front courtyard).
- xii. Eating in dark or dim light.
- xiii. Touching kitchen utensils while eating
- xiv. Breaking ladle while cooking
- xv. Eating rice by men cooked in Uyan (an earthen pot used to prepare curry)
- xvi. Sitting directly on the floor for meals
- xvii. Eating *Chajik* (overnight leftover)
- xviii. Walking under *Polangkhok* (a long straight bamboo used to hang clothes for drying) and *Konthong* (three/four bamboos placed horizontally at the entrance of the house)
- xix. Ill-treatment of wives.
- xx. Having pre-marital sex.
- xxi. Eating of *Yelhen* (a clan specific avoidable food).

#### **Behaviours of all prescribed by Goddess Emainu**

Goddess Emainu prescribes the following conducts.

- i. Offering prayer to the three important phases of the day: *Mangang* (morning), *Luwang* (noon) and *Khuman* (night).
- ii. Keeping family matters within.
- iii. Being honest, straight forward, helpful, forgiving, tolerant, considerate, patient, faithful to spouse, dutiful.
- iv. Showing sympathy and respect to older people as their own parents.
- v. Believed in myths

Behaviours of women prohibited by Goddess Emainu:

Meitei women use a wrapper called *Etum-phi* while taking bath. Entering the house in wet *etum phi* or changing *etum phis* frequently is prohibited. The goddess does not favour over makeup by women. Display of bad temper or anger by thumping on the ground is strictly prohibited. Habits of gossiping, laughing with open mouth, engaging in adultery, flirting with young boys, and countering husbands are not encouraged.

Cleanliness of the house and its surrounding is maintained by women. However sweeping the floor in haste or when someone is eating is not prescribed. Utensils that are used for dinner should not be kept unclean overnight. Softness and tenderness are believed to characterize women. They should not make sound while walking and cleaning inside the house, for it irritates the deity.

The Goddess does not appreciate women who scratch their head while talking, keep secret for long time, express anger with murmuring sound and who do not give attention to personal hygiene. Women should not be rough while handling cooking utensils or taking out rice from *Chengphu*, a rice storing vessel. Tasting or smelling dishes while being cooked is not allowed. Leaving cooking vessels empty after serving meals is also strictly prohibited as it invites shortage of food.

Women are prohibited from disrespecting their husbands and in-laws, kicking children, cooking unwashed vegetables, eating meals on unclean floor, eating in concealment, touching wallets, cupboards and other household items prior to brushing teeth in the morning.

### **Behaviours of Women prescribed by Goddess Emoinu**

An ideal woman, as perceived by Goddess Emoinu, is one who regards her husband as god, can pacify her husband's anger, wake up early and keeps the house clean, does not take meal before her husband does, who is pure and honest at heart, casual only to her husband, looks after children with love and care, remains faithful and loyal to her husband even in his absence.

Giving fire from the hearth at night is believed to be equivalent to giving away the goddess thus resulting in decrease in wealth and prosperity. Therefore denial to give fire to others at night is a must. However, no such restriction exists during the day though the frequency should not exceed more than three times; be it rice, vegetables or money. While lending, they should not let others to take the objects from the owner's wallet or containers by themselves. Rather the owner should make sure to hand over the objects to the borrower to ward off ill-luck as the goddess is believed to be insulted if not done so.

Women are expected to stay away from gossip or the habit of borrowing. They should not let neighbours influence their decision making. Wise use of resources is considered a womanly quality. Personal hygiene and purity of

soul and body should be strictly maintained as the body is considered as the temple of god. Daily routine of offering prayer should always be treated with priority. Failure to do so is believed to result in misfortune and accidents.

### **Ways of worshipping and rituals associated with the goddess**

Goddess Emoinu is worshipped every year as the Goddess of wealth and prosperity by the Meitei on the 12th day of the Meitei month of *Wakching* (December-January). It is believed to be a very auspicious day to worship the goddess of wealth to bring peace, prosperity and well being of the whole family. On this day every household offers fish (mostly white colored), fresh seasonal vegetable and flowers to the goddess. Lights are lit up around the homestead at dusk and offerings are made to the goddess. Though this day is dedicated to the goddess, daily worship is carried on by offering a small quantity of cooked meal twice a day before lunch and dinner. To make special offerings on any day as desired, two *Athenpot* (offering which consists of rice, seasonal fruits, flowers and vegetables) are arranged on a bamboo tray (*lukmai*). One *athenpot* is offered to *Lainingthou Sanamahi* (household deity) and the other to the goddess at the hearth. The ritual items are sanctified by sprinkling water with a bunch of herbs called *tairrel*, *pungfai*, *napu nashen*, *napi* and chanting hymns simultaneously. The goddess is invoked by chanting a particular hymn called '*anji*'. After the completion of the rituals, the offered items are cooked and served to the members of the family. On this day of worship, peace in the family is strictly maintained in the family and lending or giving away valuable objects is strictly prohibited.

At the time of marriage, the goddess is associated with one of the most important rites called '*Chengluk Nungshang*' (a vessels which consist of rice) which is kept sealed for five days in Phungga Lairu of the bride's house. It is a way of worshipping the goddess for happiness and prosperity of newlywed couples. The lid is opened on the fifth day to look for any indication of cultural importance.

Goddess Emoinu influences the life of Meitei women. A close and intimate relationship between the goddess and Meitei women is evident as the life of a woman revolves round the goddess. At the time of pregnancy, a woman along with her husband offers prayer to the goddess facing north east on any convenient day in the third or fifth or seventh months of her pregnancy to be blessed with well being and prosperity of her unborn child. The ritual items consist of wax, Khoiju Leikham (a leaf used to produce smoke to ward off evil spirits), sareng (*Wagallo attu*). The items used in such worship indicate an attempt to ward off evil spirits who may cause harm to the unborn. The words which recite after invoking the goddess go as follows:

*'Chingu ebungo sidaba Lairembi ema Sidabi, Emoinu Ahong Achaobi!  
Lainingthou Lairelbi anina pibiba nanaigi pibuknungda leiriba nawa asibu;  
nungai yaiphaba punshi nungshangba, kapyangba tapyangba, mithoi*



*mihenba pinabiyu. Chingu nasem thokni yokpiyu, na-ngakthokni ngakpiyu.  
Khoiyum nayok thokni yokpiyu. Chingu khoiyum Lainingthou yoibu khoimom  
Lairelbi animakki natik nahaibu, nanai nawada happiyu, thoujal lalkubiyu.'*

'O Lord Sidaba, O goddess Sidabi Emoinu! Bless your gift growing inside my womb with long life and success. Nurture and protect it as your own. Bless me with the strength to impart your teachings.'

It is a tradition to include the goddess in every ritual or ceremony performed in the house. *Apokpa Khurumba* (ancestor worship) is mainly done when a couple fails to bear a child. In the past, worship of *Apokpa* was done together with the worship of Goddess Emoinu. Today such practice is no longer followed as *Apokpa* is worshipped independently.

### **Contemporary Place of the Goddess in Meitei society**

The beliefs and ways of worshipping goddess have evolved over time. Modernity and increase in population are the two main factors. The Meiteis no longer live in kutcha houses with earthen floor. Concept of keeping Phungga is neglected in building a new house. It is replaced by gas stoves thus the place of the goddess is no longer restricted in Phungga Lairu but got shifted from the hearth to the gas stove in kitchen. But still in many families, the way of offering the two meals before it is taken by the family is still practiced. The various norms of behaviour circling around an individual have loosened its grip as lifestyle has changed.

The traditional worshipping of goddess on 12<sup>th</sup> day of Wakching is no longer confined to the household. Rather it has become an activity of the whole locality associated with rituals and celebration which includes *Pena* performances (a traditional musical instrument), reciting the tales of the Goddess, chanting of hymns invoking the Goddess, folk dances and various cultural programmes. Local clubs take the initiative to mark the celebration by lighting candles at night in and around the locality. People prayed for the sustenance and peaceful co-existence of the community on the occasion. Every family offers white coloured fish which denotes purity and fresh vegetables to the goddess and prayers are offered to seek blessings for the well being of the family. Brisk sale of white coloured fish on this day is a feature of the celebration.

The bringing up of the celebration on the locality level was to preserve the importance of the Goddess. Though there is a vast change in the traditional worship of the goddess, its significance and value is still maintained.

### **Conclusion**

Goddess Emoinu is an important deity of the Meitei around whom the life of the people revolves. As women are assigned the task of managing the economy of the house, they are expected to perform in the ideal manner as prescribed by Goddess Emoinu. They are expected to be respectful to their

husbands and remain engaged in domestic activities. Though the society is patriarchal, Meitei women do not remain completely subjugated to men. They enjoy certain amount of freedom in taking part in decision making within the family. However such importance is enjoyed only by women with good conduct. Their conduct, therefore, becomes very important and the Emoinu codes of conduct help in moulding their characters and personalities to earn respect and live with dignity. Further, women being given full responsibility of educating the children, the knowledge inherent in them is passed on to their children as they are entrusted with the task of taking care of them.

Men spend a lot of time and energy in earning which needs to be managed properly. Proper management is possible only when women have a good concept of spending and saving with wisdom. Mismanagement of resources or extravagance often leads to shortage which results in unrest and disharmony within the family. Such a situation can be averted if women refrain from the habit of borrowing to meet requirements. Cordial relationship with the husband and in-laws strengthens family ties and nurtures a bond to remain united in adversity.

In the present day society, traditional behavior has become diluted under the influence of westernization, modernisation, globalisation and inclination towards the material world. In a world where people are lost in a sea of opportunities and competition, deviation from the expected behaviour is on the rise. Crimes become normal features in the society. Law alone cannot eradicate such evils from the society. Deviation from the normative can be checked only when the society re-emphasizes the codes of conduct of Goddess Emoinu directed towards women as they are treated as carriers of culture. Further, popularity of the codes of conduct can be increased through media and performing arts as time spent by mothers with children in general and daughters in particular has decreased greatly due to greater utilization of time in tuition and coaching as a part of academic pursuit.

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