

# Editorial

Wednesday, Feb. 21, 2018

## Understanding peoples in need

Technological advancements are an all-pervading phenomena, one which is impossible to miss. And so, our small and relatively remote state has been engulfed with such changes that are hard to ignore. Though physically and geographically hard to access, technology has made its mark on the public. The virtual world has shrunk and information is now just a click or a swipe away. The state Government is also doing its bit to promote and propagate the integration of technology in every department and systems, albeit in a rather frustrating and for-the-sake-of-it manner. Despite such advancements and progress; or attempts at progress, the plight of a section of the public with disabilities and difficult physical deformities remains almost impossible when it comes to accessing these public facilities and services. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 was an Act to give effect to the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of the People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region. However, almost two decades on, we still have yet to see even the most basic groundwork to implement the recommendations and directions of the laws which is aimed at making all and every public facility accessible to the differently able and physically challenged persons. More surprising is the fact that these recommendations are not something which would put a financial constraint on the Government as it entails very basic changes and alterations or additions to the present infrastructures to make them more accessible. The total absence of such facilities at the public places in the state indicates a total lack of regard and consideration for this section of the society more than anything. Discounting the weak and infirm will only add to the woes of the Government. It should instead focus on making the most of its citizens by empowering them to contribute to the society. The contributions of outstanding persons like Prof. Stephen Hawkins, a multiple paraplegic in the field of science, or that of Marla Runyard, the first legally blind paralympian to compete in the Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, or Ludwig Van Beethoven who composed some of the most famous musical compositions after he became completely deaf cannot be ignored. One would surely admire the achievements of Helen Adams Keller, the deaf and blind American author, political activist and lecturer. All these extraordinary people managed to overcome their physical and mental constraints and outshine everyone in their respective fields because of the support, guidance and understanding provided to them. A government which cannot render even the most basic assistance for its disadvantaged citizens, for all its achievements and advancements, cannot claim itself ideal. Understanding the everyday ordeal of these people can shape the holistic development of a state or a country. It is for all of us to try and make the world that little bit easier for the physically less fortunate citizens, and the Government has a very urgent and important task of living up to its own claims of a fair and considerate setup.

## SC allows Centre to withdraw force from Darjeeling hills

**Agency**  
New Delhi, Feb 21: The Supreme Court today allowed the Centre to withdraw the remaining four companies of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) from West Bengal's violence hit Darjeeling area after March 8. A bench of Chief Justice Dipak Misra considered Attorney General K K Venugopal's submission that the deployment of the central armed forces fell under the Central government's administrative domain and allowed it to withdraw the remaining CAPF companies from Darjeeling area. The apex court also set aside the

Calcutta High Court order that had restrained the Centre from withdrawing CAPF from the state's hill regions on the ground that normalcy had not returned. The apex court had earlier permitted the Centre to withdraw four of the eight CAPF companies from Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Before that, the Centre was allowed to withdraw seven of the 15 companies of CAPF from Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts for deployment along the borders of Jammu and Kashmir and in the north-eastern states and to the poll-bound states of Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh.

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# Phases of Manipur Culture: A Historical Perspective

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Who we are and how we live in is one way or the other the outcome of our geopolitical situation, but to point at particular individuals or events would not help us understand how "we" as a people, a community, or a society came to be. Rather, we must go back to the past, dissect it, and seek the answer within. Our history, just like any other, has undergone its own metamorphosis. At different phases, it has been composite or multicultural. For a more careful analysis, I have classified three phases of cultural sequences with regards to the state of Manipur before reaching the so-called post-modern: 1) Early Period of Exclusive Composite Culture, 2) Medieval Period of Inclusive Multi-culture (12<sup>th</sup> century to 19<sup>th</sup> century), and 3) Modern Period of Inclusive Composite Culture (19<sup>th</sup> century to 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).

### Early Period: Exclusive Composite Culture

The beginning of the Early Period, i.e. the Period of Exclusive Composite Culture, may be located in 33 AD, when Nongdai-Lauren Pakhangba ascended the throne. It was the dawn of a new historical period: the seven Meitei yeks or clans were amalgamated or acknowledged the suzerainty of Lainingthou Pakhangba, and peoples of different ethnic origins, like the Mon-Khmer speaking Austronesians, the Tibeto-Burman and the Siamese-Chinese speaking Mongoloids were assimilated into one cultural and political unit. The influences left by these new cultural groups are reflected today.

For example, the use of betel nuts and leaves, coconut and rice in worship, holding the wedding ceremony at the bride's residence, cremation of the dead and burial of pieces of bones and ashes by fixing megaliths over the spot, offering of food to the spirit of dead, use of cowries and conches, the game of 'Kang Saannaba' which has similarities with the indoor game called 'Saba', the design of Meitei Yumjaos houses that look like an inverted boat, are said to have come from the Austronesians. The names of places like Jiri, Oinamlong, Kamblong, Dikhu, and Nongpo, are said to be of Austronesian origin. Even the name used by the Burmese for Meitei—Kase/Kate—is a derivation from the Mon Khmer language Khasi or Khasiya.

As for extant Tibeto-Burman Cultural traits, examples that can be cited are the worship of Boroi (Lainingthou), Bathou Buroi (Langi-Laurembi), and Mainao (Phou-oibi), the Goddess of Paddy of the Tibeto-Burman Chacharis. The use of clothing such as khudei, phejiamandphane is also exhibited by Tibetan-Burman Bodos and Chacharis. The belief of considering it an omen if a cat or snake crosses the road in front of a person is still prevalent among Meiteis are believed to be of Tibeto-Burman origin.

The Chinese-Siamese linguistic group of people too left their mark. Even today, many of us do not cut our nails and hair on the day of our birth. We throw broken teeth over the rooftop, we do not take the seats and utensils meant for our elders, we avoid using loud colours and heavy ornaments at old age, we do not sleep with our heads pointing north, and we do not sweep after dark. The importance Meiteis give to clan/lineage (sagei-salai) bears similarity to how the Yi/Wu-man ethnic group of Yunnan held theirs in high esteem. When meeting someone new, they would frequently ask about their clan name and family name. These similarities are believed to be of Chinese-Siamese origin.

This period of exclusive composite culture lasted till the period of Meidingu Loiyumba (1074-1112 AD), a period of about twelve hundred years. It cannot be said that

cultural incursions did not occur during this long phase—Naotingkhong (663-763 AD) married Chingrembi, a Mayang princess and a number of her followers were absorbed in the Meitei fold; while Meidingu Khongtekcha (763-773 AD) worshipped Shiva and Devi, as per Phayeng copper plate. Nevertheless, they did not disturb the cultural traditions and religious practices of the society. Pakhangba and his descendants continued to identify Sanamah as the State God and a household deity, propagating the principle religious philosophy that truth means knowledge, realization, and Sanamahi.

### Medieval Period: Inclusive Plural Culture

**Beginning of Plural Culture:** Once Meidingu Loiyumba (1074-1122 AD) ascended to the throne, a new era of administrative reforms began. Most important of all was the Loiyumba Silyen, also known as Yumnak Mashil (Surname wise assignment of Duties), issued in 1110 AD. It gave invocation and assignment of duties for worship, economic activities, rules on royal decorum, costumes, rewards, administration of justice, etc. Thirty yumnaks were assigned to design and weave cloths, and forty-five families to look after the forty-five abodes of the gods.

Prof. Gangumei wrote that this Loiyumba's royal decree "laid the foundation of the emerging feudal form which existed till the end of the nineteenth century." It strengthened the socio-economic and political order in the kingdom, and encouraged subsequent kings to work on territorial expansion, particularly in the fertile plains of Trans-Irrawaddy basin of northern Burma. Mention may be made of Meidingu Khumbomb's (1263-1278) defeat of the Shans, Meidingu Ningthou Khomba's (1432-1467) conquest of Tamu, and Meidingu Kiyamba's joint venture with Pong king Chaopha Khekomba for conquest of Kabaw valley followed by distribution of boundary between Manipur and the kingdom Pong on the east, repulsion of the invading Mayang Thongnangs on the west. The expansion of the kingdom on the east was continued by Meidingu Mungyamba (1562-1597) who invaded and conquered Mungkhong Mungyang in the year 1565. The trend of annexation lasted till the time of Meidingu Khagemba, whose military campaign in the Trans-Irrawaddy basin extended up to the border of present Yunnan in China.

**Emergence of Plural Culture:** One may theorise that the military campaigns compelled the kingdom to increase its manpower for war and economic activities. It so happened that this era of annexation coincided with the Muslim conquest rule in the mainland India. As a result of the attack on non-Muslims, a number of Brahmins migrated to Manipur during the time of Meidingu Kiyamba (1467-1508 AD). They were employed as astrologers and engaged in religious works. The Brahmin ancestors of Adhikarimayum, Shija Gurumayum, Leihathabam, and Phurai latpam immigrated to Manipur and settled here during this period. Non-Brahman migrants such as Lairikyengbam were given the job of royal scribes. Their knowledge of foreign language and culture were useful while dealing with foreigners from the west. RK Jhaljit observes, "The arrival of Brahmins enriched the cultural life of the kingdom." Kiyamba also constructed a temple of Vishnu at present Bishnupur (Lamangdong) to place the statue of Vishnu (Pha) gifted to him by Pong king Khekomba in 1474 AD. The Brahmins were allowed to worship the idol of Vishnu and to practice their own religion and belief. Meidingu Khagemba (1597-1652

AD) permitted Muslim and Cachari invaders captured in 1606 and Shan captives of war to settle in Manipur. It is said that Muslims lived in Manipur as peaceful citizens with Meitei wives. They were provided land and allowed to practice their own religion. They could govern as per their own customs and conventions with Qazis who were well-versed in Islamic laws. In due course of time departments related to Panggals, such as Panggal Shanglein, Panggal Lingkhoh, Panggal Phundrei were established. They were given new surnames, such as Aribam, Ayekebam, K h u l l a k p a m , Korimayum, and Makakmayum.

As mentioned earlier, a need for increase in manpower was felt for boosting the socio-economy and for military purposes. The ready assimilation of the Indian migrants including Brahmins and the Panggals could be attributed to this necessity. During Khagemba's reign, there was tremendous progress in the field of agriculture and the manufacturing industry. Rivers and streams were dredged; canals like Kyangkhong and Takhelkhong were dug. Ten new markets and numerous villages were established.

Though Khagemba was a staunch follower of the Meitei religion, he allowed religious syncretism or dual worship of traditional Meitei Gods and Hindu Gods (Gangmumei). The present form of the Nata Sankirtan was developed from the Visnu Arati, which was performed during the time of Khagemba. In fact, he paved the way for the occurrence of the Golden Period in Manipur history in the first half of the eighteenth century, when Meidingu Garibniaw took over as king.

**Cultural Assimilation and Dissemination:** Garibniaw's reign marked the beginning of a new synthesized culture: he fully adopted Hinduism and converted his subjects. This is where the big question arises: how did a wise and brave king, who had invaded Burma more than ten times successfully, subdued all his enemies and introduced a strong administrative system, get so easily brainwashed by a mere preacher into conversion? It has prompted scholars to revisit the geopolitical situation of the region at that point of time.

At that point of time, Manipur was a nation surrounded by three powerful kingdoms, namely Tripura, Ahom and Burma. Out of these three, the Tripuris' hostility to Manipur consisted of occasional raids and skirmishes as their kingdom was vast and had its capital at Kholongma near present Dhaka. Furthermore, they were mostly preoccupied with checking the Muslim invaders from the west. The Ahoms and the Manipuris, on the other hand, maintained a close relationship most of the time. The Ahoms were friendly and cooperative, and the Manipuri ruling family was related to them. They concentrated their expansion on the fertile valley of Lower Assam, confronting the mighty Mughals. This was how Burma grew to be the sole adversary of Manipur and Garibniaw became the Burmese's most ferocious enemy with his domination of Upper Burma.

Thus the Burmese emerged as a power to be reckoned from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards with the rise of two powerful kingdoms—the Toungou (Toungoo) Dynasty (1510-1752 AD) and Konbaung (1752-1885). Having restricted themselves to Lower and Middle Burma for a long time, their presence in Upper Burma was felt mostly after the thirteenth century. Their presence was strongly challenged by the Manipuris and the Shans. Though the Burmese could cope with the Shans and subdue them, they remained at constant warfare with the Manipuris, whose country was well fortified by nature. Manipuris continued their fierce attacks against the Burmese from its stronghold at present day

Imphal Valley. The Burmese too devastated the kingdom of Manipur more than once. The first Khuntak Lanishi Ahnba occurred during the reign of Jai Singh (1763-1798) and the Burmese king Shinbushin (1763-1776), and the second one between 1819-1826 during the time of Meidingu Marjit (1813-1819), a descendant Garibniaw. Unlike the other two neighboring kingdoms of Ahom and Tripura, the Burmese kings were Buddhist.

At this pivotal moment, some 39 Brahmins from the court of Ahom king visited Manipur on a goodwill mission in 1715 AD, led by Gopal Das Beiragya and Santidas Mahanta (later on given the title Gosai). After Gopal Das Beiragya left Manipur in 1720, Garibniaw was initiated into Ramandi Sect of Hinduism by Shantidas the Gosai.

A few theories on why Garibniaw converted to Hinduism have been postulated. The first considers the possibility of his considering Buddhism as the religion of his traditional enemy, the Burmese kings, and the absence of alternative religions like Islam and Christianity. The second theory claims Garibniaw might have seen Hinduism as a good or friendly religion or as a necessity, as his friendly Mongoloid neighbors, the Ahoms and the Tripuris had already adopted it. Here, it is important to mention that most of the powerful kingdoms of the world at that time had chosen one of the four major religions: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism or its branches.

The third theory suggests that Garibniaw might have assumed that foreign preachers like Shantidas Goshai, much like Christian missionaries from abroad, would do no harm politically to the land and his people as he knew little about them. His country was after all surrounded by Mongoloid nations.

The fourth theory focuses on religion as a political strategy. It was an age during which the most vital role of the king was to protect his kingdom and defend his people. Clashes of religions was frequently carried out in the guise of expansion and colonisation. As such he might have considered it safe from his two powerful western neighbours if he adopted Hinduism in the face of the Burmese challenge.

Lastly, Garibniaw might have been impressed by one of the sermons of Hinduism that 'those who killed in the battlefield depart direct to the Heaven'. It could have been a very useful discourse in an era of war and turmoil, especially against the (Buddhist) Burmese.

**Cultural Dissemination:** Whatever reasons Garibniaw may have had, the impact of the conversion on the socio-cultural life of his people was tremendous. It polarized the Manipuri society. The introduction of 'Yama' system, as precursor of 'Mangba' and 'Sengba' added the sufferings of the common people. The cultural gap between the hill and valley inhabitants widened. New shift of allegiance from traditional beliefs like worship of hills and mountains, rivers and streams to alien topographical features like Ganga, Yamuna, Himalaya etc. occurred, endangering the native ecological and environmental systems and resulting in serious threat to the existence of the population. The burning of Puyas and destruction of the temples of Umang-Lais are condemned to this day, even if most of the Puyas listed to be burnt are still available. It created a psychological atmosphere of cultural humiliation and dependency. Imposition of numerous taxes related to the new religion put a heavy burden on the common man and affected the economy of the kingdom. Prohibition of the rearing of pigs and poultry, eating of meat, also reshaped the socio-cultural visage of the Manipuris. (To be contd.....)