

**SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER (BODIES) IN THE LIFEWORLD OF THE MEITEI  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE LOKTAK LAKE**

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**Abstract:**

Meitei is an indigenous people living in Manipur since the time immemorial. Water occupies a core position in their religion, culture and belief system. Their main religion “Sanamahi-sm” is also closely related to the worshipping of nature especially, water. The meaning of Sanamahi is the supreme fluid, it means water. According to this religion, everything that is living in this planet originates from water. As a symbol of reverence to water, an earthen pitcher filled with pure water in the name of Ima Leimarel Sidabi in the south-western corner of the every Meitei household is kept in the south-western corner of the every Meitei household. Further, to the Meitei, Loktak Lake, the largest fresh water lake in the NE India is considered not only as a water body, but Goddess manifests herself here. They portray Loktak as calm, kind, nurturing life-giving mother. The story of Loktak Lake is closely knitted with Meitei history, myth, legends so on. So, Loktak remains as an inevitable part of Meitei culture and belief system.

**Key Words:- Meitei, Water, Sanamahi-sm, Loktak Lake, culture.**

**INTRODUCTION:**

Meitei is the major indigenous group of people living in Manipur since the time immemorial. They have their oral or written history for more than 2000 years. They are the ancestor worshippers and have maintained a tradition of pagan animism. Their main religion “Sanamahism” or “Sanamahi Laining” is also related to nature worship. Sanamahism is one of the eco-centric religions of the world that reveres the sacredness of nature. It believes that whatever man needs for living in this world is provided by nature. According to the Meitei belief system, if the man gives any harm to nature and its cycle, nature, in turn, would harm human beings. So, nature-worshipping has been a way of life for Meitei people that take the central position in its religion as well as culture. Meitei people have been living more in tune with the sacred mysteries of nature from ancient times.

Water is not only the everyday preoccupation of the Meitei, but also it occupies a central position in the Sanamahi religion and its related rituals and functions.

**Creation (Leishemlon):**

Creation is the main foundation of the Sanamahi philosophy or the ancient Meitei religion. Creation of the sky, earth, all the living and non-living objects by the Almighty is known as Leisemlon. When there was no sun, moon, star, earth, plant, animal, only God existed and He would own the universe. He is the Almighty by the name of Atiya Guru Sidaba or Sidaba Mapu. The Almighty had two sons. The Father commanded his first son, Atingkok, to create the sky

and the earth. Atingkok created the seven layers of the sky, and also the sun, moon and stars, which began to shine in the sky. After this, he created seven layers of earth. To perform tasks given by his Father to make the earth a living planet, Atingkok produced water (*Mahirel athoiba*) or the supreme fluid from his own body. Since he is the source of life-giving water, he came to be known as Sanamahi. He created bubbles from the water, mud from bubbles, moss from mud, then weeds and plants, lastly bamboos and trees. After that, Sanamahi created human beings in the form of images seen in the eyes of his Father.

Keeping of the earthen pitcher filled with pure water in the name of Ima Leimarel Sidabi in the south-western corner of the every Meitei household also indicates the significance of water in Meitei cosmology. The earthen pitcher symbolizes 'Mother Earth' and the water inside is the creator son 'Sanamahi' that means 'mahirel athoiba' or 'supreme fluid' i.e water. It simply means every living being on earth originates from water. Thus, the whole basis of Meitei cosmologic thought lies in the water.

### **Significance of water and its maintenance in Meitei Life-world:**

*Nong-Goubi! Nong-Goubi!*

*Saari Kambong*

*Tuirel Leinasse*

(Nong-Goubi! Nong-Goubi! Engrossed in house-keeping, come lets make our water- way.)  
(Debabrata Roy, 2006:77)

The above rhyme remains as a folk tale of Nong-Goubi ('rain thirsty bird' or crow pheasant) a totem bird of the Meitei nation, that is passing as an oral tradition from generation to generation. In this folk story, when all the birds, animals and people were working together to maintain and clean the ancient water-ways (*tuirel. Khong, khongbaan*) and dykes (*torbaan*) system, etc., Nong-Goubi refused to join as she was busy looking after her children. When they requested her to join the work, she responded badly and refused to join them. So, she was punished and prohibited to use/drink water from any of the water bodies that may be a lake, river, etc. So, Nong-Goubi had to wait only for rains each year. (ibid)

This folktale shows the significance of the compulsory maintenance and cleaning the water-ways (*tuirel. Khong, khongbaan*) and dykes (*torbaan*) system, etc. History tells that first settlement of Manipur was made on hills as valley remained flooded. For the time being, the valley began to dry itself out. Some groups of hilly people began to settle permanently in the valley, later on, they evolved as Meitei. The then physical environment of the valley was very hostile to human settlement and agricultural work. Thus, the settlement of this valley involved sophisticated hydraulic engineering, informed by a deep understanding of the hydro-dynamics of the valley. For decades, Meitei people worked hard to harness the water of the valley, channeling the major rivers into more permanent courses, deepening the permanent courses of water channels and constructing massive earthwork dykes. (ibid)

In an ancient Meitei text (puya) called *Tutenglon* (the science of waterways management), that was considered to be written around 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century, comprehensively deals with how Taothingmang and Naothingkhong, two brother chiefs, who together devised and engineered an extensive system of canals and dykes throughout the valley. This made intensive settlement

possible, thus achieving a civilization and culture of Meitei people. They designed the canals and dykes in a grid, running precisely from North to South across the valley and with connecting channels from east to west. Thus, Meitei architecture laid down strict norms for the planning and layout of settlements, in relationship with the ubiquitous grid of channels and canals. (ibid)

In the later part of history, during the period of kingship, there was 'lallup' system under which every able-bodied man between the age of 16 to 40 years was required to contribute 40 percent of his annual labour to the king. In times of war, this labour usually implied military service but in times of peace, the majority of adult men were required to contribute their labour for developing and maintaining the major earthworks and de-silting the main watercourses.(ibid) Apart from de-siltation, the demanding job also included the digging of new water channels and the joining of streams and rivers for human consumption and irrigation, and finally, changing the course of streams and rivers away from human habitats to avoid disasters during the rainy seasons.(Homen, Th., 2014:43) Not only the forceful work but in terms of voluntary service, youth in each locality were required by custom to volunteer their efforts annually for repairing, extending and cleaning the smaller parts of the riverine system in their own communities.(ibid)

Apart from the *diktats* of kings, Meitei people's primary association of the nature informing its culture and spirituality, also greatly contributed to preserving its surrounding environment with a kind of human touch. Thus, riverbeds had to be dredged in order to have a normal flow of water, new channels had to be dug so as to feed the living beings, and at times, river courses had to be changed so that there is a harmony of life. Water ultimately was/is an inseparable part of the Manipuri world view not only as a source of life but one that also sustains life. (ibid)

Meitei cosmologic thought of water is manifested in *Ikoukhatpa* or *Lai Loukhatpa* (welcoming a deity to its abode, the temple), that is the first ritual of *Laiharaoba* (*pleasing of God*), in which the particular deity, thus far roaming in its spirit form in the water, is "pleased" and taken to its man-made abode, so that its holy presence brings prosperity to mankind and stave-off disasters. The centrality of water in the Meitei world view is further strengthened by the spiritual attendants, including the myth of the creation of the universe as well as life created out of water/fluid, in the unfolding days of *Lai Haraoba*.(ibid)

### **Spiritual and cultural significance of the Loktak Lake:**

*Loktak is our history,*  
*Loktak is our culture,*  
*Loktak is our literature.*  
*Loktak is the cradle of Meitei civilization.*  
*Without Loktak, there will be no Kangleipak.*  
*Loktak makes us proud to the world.*

*Loktak is our face,*  
*Polluting Loktak is like*  
*Smearing dirt in our own face.*  
*No development in the state can bring,*  
*Without retaining the pristine beauty of Loktak.*

Further as a part of the study, Loktak Lake, which is the largest freshwater lake in North East India, is taken up to examine the historical and cultural significance of the lake to the Meitei people. Water is not only a sacred symbol to the Meitei as a core element in every ritual from the domestic and social to the public festivals like *Heikru Hidongba* (boat race), yet water bodies themselves are considered to be the manifestations of deities. Thus, to the Meitei, Loktak is not merely a sacred lake, but the embodiment of goddess herself.

Meitei have a holistic view of nature as well as the very creation of Manipur itself. They paint an organic portrait of their land. In such a portrayal, Koubru Hill is regarded as the head (Koubru is the first settled place of Manipur as valley area remains flooded), Kangla (Meitei settled first in Kangla creating its palace after water is dried out from the valley area) as the umbilicus and Loktak Lake is taken to be the pelvic zone – a very important part of human anatomy, which plays the role of removing impurities from the main body. Loktak Lake occupies a very important position in the culture and belief system of the Meitei people. Thus, in reverence Meitei worships Loktak by giving it various sacred or divine names such as “Loktak Lairembe” (Goddess Loktak) or “Loktak Ima” (Mother Loktak). This is perhaps because Loktak provides sources of livelihood for people living in and around the Lake. Loktak Lake is portrayed as calm, kind, nurturing life-giving mother.

### **The divinity of the Loktak Lake:**

People who are residing in and around the Loktak Lake, have a strong bond of connection with Loktak Lairembee (Goddess Loktak). They have a deep sense of love and respect for the Goddess. Many folktales give a rich account of Loktak Lairembee and Loktak itself. According to one myth, once a mighty king was supposed to have assigned different places to rule among his seven daughters. One daughter who had motherly qualities and forgiving nature was given the task to stay in Loktak. Since then, she has been living as Loktak Lairembee. (Manimala, A)

Haobam Pabankumar's award-winning film, "Loktak Lairembee" (Lady in the lake) portrays for a calm, forgiving nature of the Goddess. The film covers a wide range of concerns such as beliefs, superstitions, insurgency, violence, people-state conflict, hardship in day to day life of local fishing community after forced eviction from their *phumshang*. In this film, Pabankumar beautifully represents the community's perception of the presence of the Goddess in the lake. If one has to interact with few members of the fishing community, their deep sense of Lairembee's presence in the lake can be easily discerned. So, Pabankumar's portrayal is not going far from such belief.

In the climax of the film, the protagonist glides his boat in the middle of the night, deeply frightened as he is followed by a woman. In the heat of the moment, he fires two bullets at her. He saw her fall by his own eyes, then he returns to his *phumshang*. After a few minutes, he heard someone knocking his door. Although he was scared, he opened the door. There he found the woman standing who handed over to him the two bullets he fired. She is none other than the woman whom he had shot. The movie ends with her rowing back into the vastness of the lake. This particular scene represents her character being calm, forgiving and omnipresent.

Every morning, when one fisherman is about to start his day's journey on the lake, he or she chants and touches the boat followed by prostration. It indicates their respect for the boat and chants to invoke Loktak Lairembee for good luck and a fruitful day. She is often worshipped as

Ima Lairembee for her protective and giving nature. So, the community assumes the lake as a sacred site where she resides. The lake belongs to her and they are her children. It is up to her to give them bountifully or scarcely in their daily journey. After all, they believe that when they are under the bosom of Ima Lairembee, they have nothing to fear.

While they consider Ima Lairembee as a mother, they consider their boat as Ibudhou Pakhangba (the mighty Serpent God) who is taken to be ferocious and hard to please. Every boat in the lake has two holes which represent the two eyes of Ibudhou Pakhangba, without which the boat would sink in the lake. Indeed water runs through these holes, but not enough to capsize the boat. (ibid)

According to their belief, if there is any bad omen in their route, their boat gives a signal. During such times, the boat and the water do not blend the way they usually do. They would feel the environment turning eerie, or they get sudden goosebumps, and immediately they must return to their *phumshang*. The fisherfolk end their day by thanking the boat for being their savior. They express their gratitude to Loktak Lairembee and surrender their soul to her while they sleep under her bosom. Thus, the lives of the fishing community are closely knitted with their belief system towards the lake. They have been living in rhythm with their mythological god and goddess. Not only their association with Loktak Lairembee and Ibudhou Pakhangba, but there are also many restricted areas in the lake itself where god or goddess (may be good or evil spirit) often appears. Such places are not meant for human presence. That is why these places are respected and restricted altogether. According to their belief, if one mistakenly enters such an area, ill health will befall the victim. (ibid)

Though the divine character of Loktak Lake is somewhat faded from the mindset of young generations, it still occupies a central position in the belief system of the fishing community.

There is another divine story of 'Paobi-lai' (a Giant Python) that occurred in Loktak Lake. At one point of time, Loktak was overexploited by three Salais namely Mangang, Luwang, and Khuman, those surrounded the lake and even converted it into the mud to catch 'ngaram chama' i.e hundred different varieties of fishes. To teach them a lesson, Ibudhou Pakhangba incarnated in the form of Paobi-lai in Loktak. He ate anybody who came to Loktak for fishing. After that, no one entered Loktak but people had to give his daily meal in the form of a man from each household turn by turn. Lastly, Kabui Salang Maiba, a priest killed Paobi-lai. He made people conscious about over-exploitation of Loktak, that must not be repeated in future otherwise Paobi-lai would come again. From the story, it can be learned that though Loktak Lairembee remains a kind, forgiving mother and gives no harm to her children, Ibudhou Pakhangba being very ferocious harms anybody who is trying to harm Loktak.

### **Importance of Loktak in Meitei culture:**

The cultural heritage of the Meitei as an indigenous fishing community is captured in oral literature, customary laws, cultural practices, spiritual rituals, songs or ballads, and performances. Some of these traditional lore has been expressed in the form of poetry. The poem given below reflects the deep-rooted lyrical and emotive nature of the cultural association between Meitei and the Loktak Lake:

*This Meitei waters before us resplendent*  
*Is what we call our Loktak.*  
*On life's new current this day,*

*a nascent tide awakens;  
a towering wave approaches,  
to drown our wildest imagination.  
This Meetei waters before us resplendent  
Is what we call our Loktak.*

*A fresh wind caressing the waters  
quickness the waves to a dance;  
on boats are our women afloat, their fishing nets exulting.  
This Meetei waters before us resplendent  
Is what we call our Loktak.*

“Loktak Mapanda” (By the Shore of Loktak) by Khwairakpam Chaoba translated by Laifungbam Debabrata Roy.

When we study the cultural relationship of Loktak with Meitei people, normally it draws from legends, folklore or mythical stories. While discussing the importance of Loktak concerning Meitei culture, the place 'Moirang' can not be kept apart. Moirang was one of the princely kingdoms since the mythological period. This land had been ruled by Lord Thangjing. From time immemorial, Moirang has been center for rich culture, it was even more developed than Kangla where the Ningthouja dynasty ruled. It is said that silk cloth was first used in Manipur in the kingdom of Moirang. So, Moirang was famous for its rich culture, tradition, and legend of the love story of many god and goddess who were incarnated in the form of human beings.

Ballad singers and poets of Manipur often describe the Loktak lake as the mirror of Manipur. It has got different connotations. It may simply mean that its calm water surface looks like a mirror. In another sense it highlights the lake's association with history of Manipur. It is a mirror reflecting the history of Manipur and the changes in the society down the ages. The lake still stands as a testimony of the bygone era when the valley was completely submerged under water. Loktak lake is a living heritage-sustaining the dynamics of intangible cultural heritage of both the hill and valley people of Manipur. This intangible cultural heritage of Loktak, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. Among them, the incarnation of seven legendary stories were created in and around the Loktak lake and the then Moirang Principality. (R.K Ranjan, 2014:1-2)

Among these legends, the most famous is the seven incarnations of Moirang Kangleirol. These are briefly discussed in the following sections.

1. *Akongjamba and Phouoibi:*

Akongjamba was Moirang nobleman while Phouoibi was a beautiful woman having divine quality. They fall in love and promised to be married. On an appointed day, Phouoibi came to the residence of Akoijamba in disguise of a tribal woman. Akoijamba went out for hunting, so she could not meet him. Akoijamba's mother scolded her badly, even chased out as she was not matched for her noble son. She was allowed to take that night's shelter at a pigsty. The next morning, she showed her own identity as a beautiful woman as well as her divinity. She asked Akoijamba's mother to take out some handful of paddy. Akoijamba's mother remained speechless by knowing her mistake. Phouoibee turned that handful of paddy into a heap of paddy and the residence of her beloved forever. After some time, Akongjamba arrived home and knew that Phouoibi came at his place. Akongjamba ordered his servant to stop Phouoibi but she

denied. Lastly, Akongjamba himself chased her but she turned down all his requests and left in her divine form by telling that they would meet in another incarnation in the name of Khamba and Thoibi.

**2. Henjunaha and Thongnang Lairoulembi:**

Henjunaha was a poor boy and fatherless child, while Lairoulembi was a beautiful daughter of Moirang Ningol-lakpa (officer in-charge of maidens). One evening, Henjunaha and Lairoulembi happened to meet in the bank of the Loktak Lake and felt the love at first sight. They promised to be oneness in life. As a token of love, she asked him to visit her residence at the dead of night on a particular day, without having any knowledge of the day. Unfortunately, that day was Lamta-thangja on which saroi- khangba (propitiation of evil spirit) took place. Normally, no one was allowed to go out at night on that day. Going out of Henjunaha was also strongly forbidden by her mother. But, to fulfill his promise to his beloved, he silently went out at the death of night. In the way, he was chased by evil spirits and took his life at the courtyard of Lairoulembi. She felt it in her dream and came out at the last moment of her lover. Lairoulembi also killed herself by using a knife as they promised to be one.

**3. Shamba Naha Langmaba and Khamnung Yaithingkonu:**

Shamba Naha Langmaba was a poor fatherless boy while Khamnung Yaithingkonu was the daughter of a Moirang nobleman. They loved each other and promised to live or die together. After some time, Yaithingkonu was dead, hit by the pole when she tried to dry her clothes. The boy felt shocked in hearing the news, so he came to her residence and urged to bury him with her dead body as they promised to live or die together. His wish was fulfilled by the then Moirang king. Afterward, Khamnung Ningthou (Yamraja) pitied for them and blessed to regain their lives. It is said that a dog heard their conversation in the grave, leading to digging them out of the grave. So, they lived together again.

**4. Khuyel Haoba and Yaithingkonu:**

Khuyel Haoba was an orphan and his stay in the Khuyel Ngoubi ghat of Loktak Lake was felt in the dream of Yaithingkonu, daughter of a Moirang nobleman. The next day, she along with her friends came to Loktak for fishing. Surprisingly, she met Haoba in the same place she felt in her dream. They fall deeply in love. She somehow arranged for him to come to her place and kept secretly in her room. But his father, under some circumstances, had to marry her daughter to Khuman Kaoba without her consent. In Kaoba's place, she spent her painful days in tears. This led to throwing out of her from Khuman's place after knowing her intimate relationship with Haoba. So, she returned to Moirang and united with Haoba.

**5. Kadeng Thangjahanba and Tonu Laijinglembi:**

Tonu Laijinglembi was a beautiful woman while Kadeng Thangjahanba was a nobleman of Moirang holding the post of Sharunghaba (officer-in-charge of animals). In one incident, when Tonu Laijinglembi was about to be eaten by a tiger, Kadeng saved her. From that day onwards, they fall deeply in love. Kadeng left proper Moirang for some days as he had to catch a hundred varieties of animals for offering in Thangjing Lai-Haraoba. Meanwhile, Tonu Laijinglembi was married to the king without her consent. When Kadeng returned from an expedition and he was about to hand over a hundred varieties of animals to the king, he saw his Tonu sitting as a queen. He was heartbroken and remained ill. When the king knew the cause for Kadeng's suffering, he returned his queen to Kadeng. So, they were united lastly.

**6. Khubomba and Pidonnu:**

The legend of Khubomba and Pidonnu is the continuation of the above story. Kadeng Thangjahanba died at an early age, so Tony Laijinglembi raised fatherless poor boy Khubomba while Pidonnu was the daughter of a Moirang nobleman. In one incident of kang sannaba, they met each other and fall in love. When the king of Moirang dead, he left no heir to reign the kingdom. So, Moirang noblemen searched for Tonu Laijinglembi as she was pregnant when she was returned to Kadeng. Further, Khubomba was brought to the palace and made him king and Pidonnu became the queen.

#### 7. Khamba and Thoibi:

Khamba and Thoibi, is the last incarnation and most famous story of Moirang Kangleirol. Khamba was an orphan and raised by his sister Khamnu while Thoibi was the princess of Moirang. They loved each other and went through various difficulties. Thoibi's father wanted to marry her to a rich Moirang nobleman, Nongban. But, she denied strongly. Though she was a princess, she was even deported to Kabo as she was against the will of her father. Thoibi's father and Nongban conspired many times to murder Khamba. But, he was always saved with the blessing of Ibudhou Thangjing. The moral of the story is "Truth triumphs at last". Finally, Khamba and Thoibi got married.

Moirang Kangleirol is not the only legend of Moirang but for the whole Manipur. The love story of seven incarnations of Moirang Kangleirol happened in and around Loktak Lake especially their first meeting. Many lovely and important incidences happened in Loktak. For example in the legend of Khamba-Thoibi, when Khamba was a small child, he wailed due to starvation of mother's milk. His sister Khamnu was helpless to soothe him, so she brought him by the shore of Loktak and fed him the water of Loktak (from her scarf wet by water). Khamba remained silent by sucking the water thinking it was his mother's milk. So, Khamba was raised by her poor sister Khamnu by feeding him *heikak*, *yelli*, fish and other edible foods from Loktak. In brief, it can be said that the life of Khamba is nurtured by Mother Loktak.

Another significant historical event related to Loktak Lake is the story of *Ishamchaiba*. During the reign of Garibniwaz Maharaj, four men such as the king, Santidas Goshai, Khongnangthaba, and a boatman were traveling in a boat called *Ishamchaiba* on Loktak. The boat was reluctant to sail, began to eat *charang* (water hyacinth) was about to sink. Santidas Goshai ordered the king to cut the wooden boat by his sword. When struck, the boat bled. Fearful and distraught, the king requested Khongnangthaba to bring the situation under control. Khongnangthaba chanted and touched the bleeding wound and healed it. The bleeding not only stopped but also even the scar was removed. He ordered for returning to the shore. As soon as they alighted from *Ishamchaiba*, it roared and sunk to the bottom of Loktak. Heeding the words of *Maichou*, Meitei still believes that *Ishamchaiba* will one day emerge from Loktak.

There are many such incidences in Meitei history that is clearly written in "*Cheitharol Kumbaba*", that had occurred in Loktak. Therefore, Loktak is an inevitable part of the Meitei culture and belief system.

#### CONCLUSION:

Meitei, as an indigenous community, has been living in tune with the sacred mysteries of nature from ancient times. The land of Meitei owns their divine origin. Under their belief system, every river, mountain, forest, the lake has its own protector, worshipping in the name of God and Goddess. Water occupies a central position in their main religion, culture and belief system. Loktak Lake, the largest freshwater lake in the entire North-Eastern region has been worshipping in the name of Goddess Loktak. The importance of Loktak Lake is closely knitted with Meitei



history, myth, legends so on. Thus, Loktak is not considered a simple water body but, it is an inevitable part of Meitei lifestyle, culture, and religion. Without Loktak there will be no Meitei land, it is our history, literature, and civilization. Earlier, people inhabiting in and around the lake sooths by the rhythm of the lake's water but such sensitivity with this lake is not felt by the young generation due to continuously losing the divine character of the lake. These young educated generation neglect myths associated with the lake in the sense that such stories are all superstitions. So, they lack respect and unable to maintain a relationship of trust with Loktak. Such feelings are also responsible to degrade the condition of Loktak Lake.

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