

ARANGPHAMS, THE EVENT MANAGERS OF THE TRADITIONAL RITUALS OF MANIPUR (INDIA) : ASPECTS ON THE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF LOCAL CULTURE

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That the 'Nata Sankirtana' of Manipur had been recognized by UNESCO as an intangible performing art on 4 December, 1913 speaks volume of Manipuri culture. However, some of the indispensable functionaries who are crucial manager of the said ritual events right from the time of planning of the events (in consultation with the host family) to the end of the ritual i.e 'Arangphams' has been ignored by the scholars of cultural studies . The *Arangphams* indeed are the functionaries who planned, designed, organized and managed most of the traditional ritual events of the Meiteis of Manipur. This paper is based on structured and semi structured interviews of experts and survey of existing literature on the theme.

Since the later half of the 18th century , when Hinduism was established as a state religion by King Garib Niwas, under the overall patronage of *Brahma Sabha* and *Pundit Loishang* of the royal palace, the Hindu Meiteis began to perform religious rites and rituals particularly 'the rites – de- Passages' with *Kirtana* based on *Vaishnav Padavalis* in either *Sanskrit* or *Bengali* language in the 'Mandaps' of the temple or temporary *Mandaps* constructed impromptu by the community labor for the purpose. Every ritual is associated with a complex set of offerings based on an established norm to be made in an inviolable sequence. This in brief is the fundamental essence of the function of the traditional *Arangphams* or the event Managers. The norms of arrangements and management of the rites and rituals differ from ritual to ritual and from place to place depending on the local specificities. Even for non Hindu rituals there are established norm based on time tested and socially approved systems. Every *Arangpham* is supposed to be convergent with the established norms and they are trained under the *Guru - Shishya* tradition .

Ancient manuscripts - '*Mashillon*' referred to *Arangphams* and the leader of the group was known as '*Arangpham Purel*' (Leader of the *Arangphams*). It was during the time of King Bhagyachandra (1754-1798) when *Vaishnavism* became a very refined form of religious life that *Arangpham* became all the more important for the common populace, whereas a category of employee ie '*Duhon*' assisted by the

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Arangphams , managed the rituals functions of the royal palace particularly of the *Govindaji* temple. To become a *Duhan*, during the 19th and 20th century , the pedigrees and personal character of the concerned persons were strictly scrutinized. Only persons belonging to the families of *Wangkhei Mayum*, *Yumlembam*, *Lourembam*, *Chongtham*, *Koijam*, *Yumnam*, *Haobam*, *Ngangbam*, *Wahengbam*, *Kshetrimayum*, *Loitongbam*, *Wangkheirakpam* and *Loitam* lineages were permitted to perform the function of *Duhons*. Of late however except for the *Govindaji* temple such restrictions are relatively liberalized.

For every 2/3 locality when any occasion arises, the *Karmadhari* (host) approaches any available *Arangphams* who in turn arranges his own team of 2/3 other experienced professionals. A few days before the scheduled ritual/ceremony, the *Arangphams* shall prepare the plan either on the north, north-eastern or north western side of the *Mandap*. They eventually prepare the *Mandap* by offering 'mandali' (the centre point of the *Mandap*), 'Ghot Chaphu' (*Pujah* vessel) 'dhup' (incense), 'heiruk pana' (betel sets and fruits), 'dwip' (lamp) etc on a well designed plantain leaf. For the bigger Maha Sankirtana the four corners of the *Mandap* are also offered incense, 'barti' (lamp), *heiruk pana* etc. *Nata sankirtana* usually starts with the knowledge and consent of the *Arangphams*.

Although the *Arangphams* used 'dhoti' (white dress from waist to the ankle –fig vii) and 'ganji' (white sleeveless shirt) they invariably used embroiderless white Dhoti and 'Innaphee' (white clothe hung around the neck) at the site of the ritual events particularly in and around the *mandap*. If they have to go nearer to the image of the God in the temple or in handling *Pujah* materials they normally wear embroiderless and starchless Dhoti. The *Arangphams* cannot wear any feet gear at and around *mandaps*.

Broadly, the Manipuri culture (Meiteis) could be understood under two categories i.e 'Hinduism' and 'Sanamahi' (Pre hindu religio cultural system). While the scriptural foundation, nomenclature etc of different rituals , ceremonies etc differ between the two groups in terms of the *Pujah* materials and styles and nature of preparation of the events by the *Arangphams*, are essentially similar.

The *Vaishnavite* religio cultural system broadly covers Rites - de- passages from childhood to marriage and post-death rites and practices (*Swasthi Pujah* – six days ceremony, *Chawumba* - rice feeding ceremony, *Nama Karan* – naming ceremony, *Karna Bedha*- ear piercing ceremony, *Upanyan*-sacred thread ceremony, *Waroiptot* – pre marriage engagement ceremony, *Heijingpot* – pre marriage ceremony, *Bibaha* – marriage ceremony, *Chak kouba*- Post marriage ceremony, *Asthi Sanchaya* – six day death ritual, *Sambhatsarit* – *Saradha*- 7/13/14 day death ritual, and post *Saradha* rituals viz *Phiroi*- first death anniversary, *Utsav* – monthly death ceremony etc.). In addition to these a good number of *vaishnavite* festivals and ceremonies i.e *Saraswati Pujah* (worshipping of goddess of knowledge), *Holi* (spring festival), *Baruni* (worshipping of lord Shiva), *Cheiraoba* (traditional new year's day), *Ratha Jatra* (worshipping of lord Jagaanatha), *Janmaasthami* (birthday celebration of lord Krishna), *Radha-asthmi* (birthday celebration of Smt Radhika), *Ningol Cha- kouba* (celebration for the daughters of the family) etc

are all organized and designed in the pattern prepared by the *Arangphams* as in the various rituals although the later are not formally engaged for the purpose.

Similarly, the *Sanamahi* religio cultural system also has a parallel list of rites and rituals ie. *Ipan Thaba* – six day birth ritual, *Chawumba* – rice feeding ceremony, *Nahut Nareng tamba* – ear piercing ceremony, *Laiming loubu*- getting name of Almighty God, *Waroipt* – pre marriage engagement ceremony, *Heijingpot* – pre marriage ceremony, *Luhongba* –marriage ceremony, *Chak kouba*- first post marriage grand feeding ceremony, *Leihun* – fifth day death ritual , *Lanna Thouram* – 7/12th day death ritual , *Thawon* – monthly death rituals, *Phiroi*- first death anniversary etc. In addition to these, there are many other ceremonies and festivals of *Sanamahi* religio cultural system i.e *Kongba Leithong Phatpa* – ritual performed by the Pundits of the royal palace for prosperity of the land, *Chingoi Iruppa* - taking bathe in the *Chingoi* stream and visiting *Baruni* hill for worshipping ,*Pakhangba Cheng Heiba* – Worshipping of Lord *Pakhangba* performed by the royal Pundits at the palace, *Sanamahi Cheng Heiba* - Worshipping of Lord *Sanamai* performed by the royal Pundits at the palace, *Mera Hou Chongba* – traditional get together festivals of hills and plane people at the royal palace , *Imoinu Iratpa*- worshipping of Goddess *Imoinu* for prosperity, *Lai Haraoba*- worshipping of forest deities , *Apokpa Khurumba* – worshipping of ancestors, *Sagei Apokpa khurumba* – worshipping of clan ancestors, *Lamta Thangja Iratpa* – ritual performances for driving out evil spirits etc.

Apart from the rites – de -passages most of the above mentioned ceremonies and festivals were arranged by customary family/clan/locality members either male or female. Some of the state rituals and ceremonies like *Lai Haraoba*, *Pakhangba Cheng Heiba* etc are conducted under the supervision of the *Pundit Loishang* of the royal palace. As argued earlier there are a lot of similarities in the designs and patterns of arranging and organizing the events with those that are performed by the *Arangphams*, particularly in the ways of how the items/ingredients of the rituals and ceremonies are prepared and arranged.

The planning, arrangement of materials for the rituals/ceremonies and the process of preparation to be made by *Arangphams* are very complex and differ from ritual to ritual. The most complex is believed to be that of rituals performing *Sankirtana* as it is some kind ‘*Yagna*’ (rituals based on strict adherence of scriptures) to that of ceremonies like ‘*Swasthi pujah*’ or ‘*Dura Pujah*’ etc not involving *Sankirtana*. For *Sankirtana*, on the day of the event, the artistes before the start would offer ‘*Pana Tanga*’ (betel sets) to the *Arangphams* thereby implying that with this surely the *Sankirtana* may go smoothly. As indicated earlier some of them are less intricate. But broadly the following are some of the required materials which are commonly used in all forms of rituals/ceremonies either among the Hindus or sanamahi followers.

1. Plantain leaves (*Laa*) figure - 1
2. Betel nuts and Betel leaves (*Kwa and Mana*) figure-2
3. Pujah vessel (*Ghot Chapphu* made either of metal or clay) figure-3
4. Pujah Plate (*Purna Patra* made either of metal or clay) figure-4

5. Puspa Patra (a small flower basket)
6. Basil (*Tulashi*)
7. A lamp of Ghee (*dwip*)
8. Chandan (Sandal wood *Chandan*)
9. Pancha Amrita (Fresh milk, curd, Ghee/Butter, Honey and sugar)
10. *Lukmai* (Big bamboos trays), *Polang* (a kind of basket made of bamboo strips), *Senga* (metal tray), Phingai-rook (covered cane hammock) *figure-5*
11. *Dhup* (incense) etc.

Some of the indispensable items to be prepared by the *Arangphams* either for ritual/ceremony/*Pujah* are -

- i. *Heiruk -Pana*– Betel set and fruits consisting of betel nuts and leaves along with fruits to be offered on banana leaves cut in a circular pattern. These items are indispensable for offering to the deities/sankirtana performers as well as to the guests and invitees.
- ii. The *Pujah* vessel - made either of metal or clay is first of all prepared by tying five mango leaves . A whole betel nut and a whole betel leave along with a coin should be put inside the vessel.
- iii. The *Purna Patra* – made either of metal of clay filled with some rice, a full betel nut with a full betel leaf and a bunch of Banana (*Laphang*) having odd number in counting of twos/pair and a full coconut. It is used for invocation of God and Goddess
- iv. Sufficient quantity of “*Donas*’ (cups made of banana leaves), *tanga* (plates), Kurshi (spoon), *sarei* and *bedi* (funnel like banana leave made material), *tunga* etc which can be used either for *Pujah* purposes i.e for putting flowers, *dhup*, *chandan*, *dwipa* for distribution of refreshment to the invitees – fig. vi.

The conventional norms for conducting ritual functions, ceremonies etc have of late been codified under the banner of the **All Manipur Arangpham Association** which has its main office at *Khagempalli Pankha, Ningom Leirak* with *I. Ibobi Singh* as the General Secretary. The association which was originally formed on 8th February 2002 consisted of about 200 professional *Arangphams* representing different parts of the state. Some of the main objectives of the association was to preserve and disseminate the knowledge of management of ritual events which they have inherited from the ancestors. The Association organized a 5 days workshop on the Arangphams and the proceedings was published in August 2011 as “*Arangpham Amasung Chatnarol*”



Figure- 1 : Plantain leaf (*Laa*)



Figure- 2 : Betel nuts and Betel leaves (*Kwa and Mana*)



Figure- 3 : Pujah vessel (*Ghot Chaphu* made either of metal or clay)



Figure- 4 : Pujah Plate (*Purna Patra* made either of metal or clay)



Figure-5 *Lukmai* (Big bamboos trays), *Polang* (a kind of basket made of bamboo strips), *Senga* (metal tray), *Phingai-rook* (covered cane hammock)



Figure- 6 Sufficient quantity of “Donas’ (cups made of banana leaves), tanga (plates), Kurshi (spoon), sarei and bedi (funnel like banana leave made material), tunga etc which can be used either for Pujah purposes i.e for putting flowers, dhup, chandan, dwipa for distribution of refreshment to the invitees



Figure-7

‘dhoti ‘ (white dress of Arangphams from waist to the ankle)



Figure- 8 : Ritual meal

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