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The Meitei Diaspora in Myanmar

Jiten Nongthombam

Manipur, once an independent kingdom, lies at the eastern end of a corridor linking India with other Southeast Asian countries. It has a long and glorious history of almost 2 000 years from around 33 AD, a history in which a significant role was played by the Meiteis,[1] while many other ethnic groups also made smaller contributions to the development of this civilisation. The unique characteristic of Manipur has always been its rich mosaic of cultures, which is a complex embodiment of different *ethnoses*. Over a period of many centuries, different cultures have combined through many trials and tribulations to fashion the distinctive political and cultural identity of the Manipuri people. The Manipuris first fought wars against several Burmese invasions and, then, against the forces of British imperialism. After the British left, Manipur regained its independence for a relatively brief period of two years before joining the Indian Union in 1949. It became a fully fledged state of the Indian Federation in 1972, occupies a land area of some 22 327 km² and shares a 352 km long international border with Myanmar (Burma).

The Meiteis of Myanmar is one of the Hindu minorities in a Buddhist-dominated country. Unlike other Hindu communities in Myanmar, the Meiteis are, in terms of physical features, akin to the Burmese; both come from the same 'culture area' or environment and their particular way of life display distinct similarities. Out of a total of 132 ethnic communities inside Myanmar, the Meiteis is not recognised as an ethnic community even though they have settled down for many generations, and are highly respected within Burmese society for their skills and courageous spirit. In fact, they are becoming one of several marginalised communities in Myanmar. Even though the Meiteis were brought to Burma (Myanmar) as war captives and retinue,

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they also brought along, in different forms, the core socio-cultural characteristics of their community, such as religion, language, art, values, habits, crafts, clothing (costumes), and cuisine. With time, some of these characteristics have disappeared and some have survived, while others have undergone a synthesis and, yet, others have been assimilated. As an expression of their liveliness and the advanced social development of their community, the Meiteis come together for a 'daily plebiscite'.[2] This is a 'throw back' to the successful practice of multiculturalism and social pluralism in the distant past, and a current reflection of the integrating power of the then existing socio-political system.

Genealogy of the Meitei Diaspora in Myanmar

The evolution of the Meitei diaspora in Myanmar can be traced back to the earliest times. Records have been found in the Royal Chronicles of Manipur — the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*,[3] and the *Ningthourol Lambuba*[4] — that the Meiteis has shared a long period of interaction with the Shans (the Pong)[5] and also with the Burmans. It was during the reign of Kyamba that Manipur became an internationally recognised power when he concluded a friendship treaty with the King of the Pong, Khikhomba (Lairenmayum & Ningthoukhongjam, 2005, 19); and during the reign of Garibniwaza, Khikhomba visited Manipur and played *Hiyang Tanaba*[6] (Lairenmayum & Ningthoukhongjam, 2005, 102). The Meiteis were known as *Cassay* to the Shans and as *Kathe* to the Burmese. By the fifteenth century, the boundaries of the Meitei kingdom had spread to the west of the Chindwin (Ningthi)[7] river.

The Meiteis and the Burmese had regular contact through trade and the establishment of social relations through matrimonial alliances, especially after the conquest of the Kabaw[8] valley by the Meitei (Kabui, 1991, 236); a large number of Meiteis accompanied the princesses as their retinues and as part of the marriage dowry. Nevertheless, apart from these socio-cultural relations, there were also conflict and war between the two nations. The reasons were many: the more important ones being the boundary issue, 'not ... [necessarily of people] occupying a defined territory'[9] or strategic area, but to serve as an expression of the power of the nation, as well as the economic importance of the Kabaw valley as a disputed region between Manipur and Burma.

It was in the first half of the eighteenth century, during the reign of Garibniwaza, that Manipur became a serious 'thorn in the flesh' of Upper Burma. Many battles were fought between the Meiteis and the Burmese. Garibniwaza camped at Thalunbyu west of Sagaing and burnt down every house and monastery up to the walls of Ava,[10] and stormed the stockade built to protect the Kaunghmudaw pagoda (Harvey,

1967, 208). As Scott O'Connor (1996, 118) so graphically describes: 'The tide of invasion flowed to the very gates of the Kaung-hmu-daw where, to this day, the marks of the Manipuri swordsmen are pointed out upon the lintel.' During this period, several military expeditions were conducted inside Burma as Garibniwaza crossed the Chindwin river to invade the Kingdom of Ava (Harvey, 1967, 247). 'Burma lost the Kabaw valley, located west of the Chindwin river, to the Manipuris' (Cady, 1964, 286); and, clearly, '... there was no leader in Burma strong enough to take the [terror] situation in hand' (Hall, 1981, 408). There are records of defeats of the Burmese army by the Manipuris in 1717, 1720, 1737 and 1748 (Lairenmayum & Ningthoukhongjam, 2005, 87). But, after the death of Garibniwaza, the Meiteis experienced their first exodus. Alaungpaya, the founder of the Konbaung dynasty, invaded and subdued Manipur where '... he massacred more than ... [4 000] of his Manipuri prisoners, because they stubbornly refused to march ... into captivity' (Harvey, 1967, 239). The Burmese king returned with a large number of captives, including boatmen, smiths, weavers, cavalrymen and artisans, later engaging them as domestic servants as well as menial and agricultural workers.

Even though the Manipuri were war captives, their contribution to the culture of Myanmar cannot be ignored. As Than Tun (2010, 33) has rightly pointed out, the Manipuri were skilled craftsmen and introduced the *Acheik*[11]-pattern to Myanmar; they excelled in horsemanship and served as 'Cassay cavalry' under the Myanmar kings; and they were regularly consulted as court astrologers. Indeed, the Burmese kings regarded the Manipuri horsemen as a most reliable force; out of a total of 12 regiments, the Kathe[12] Regiment topped the list of cavalrymen (Tun, 2010, 113). During the invasion of Siam[13] by the Burmese, the Meiteis were used as an elite cavalry regiment — and later, a few of them became famous polo-players (Thant, 2001, 15; Cady, 1964, 289). 'Owing to their superior skill in the management of horse[s], the Burmese cavalry was almost exclusively composed of them [the Meiteis]; and they were distinguished by the national appellation of "The Cassay Horse" '[14] (Snodgrass, 1997, 86). According to Major Snodgrass, these horsemen accounted for a complement of 700 of a total military expedition. Moreover, Bamons (also known as *Kathe-Ponna*) migrated to Burma from Manipur to conduct court rituals and other social obligations, and gradually became an integral part of Burmese society (Thant, 2001, 95). For all these reasons, the Burmese highly valued the skills of the Meiteis and allowed them to settle in the capital, Ava, and in the riverine villages of the Sagaing district, as well as at Amarapura (Harvey, 1967, 239).

By the second half of the eighteenth century, the rise of Burmese power in the east and its ambition to expand its territories coincided with a fratricidal conflict

among the Manipuri princes that continued even after the death of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (the king who introduced the *Rasa Leela*).[15] As a result of this political instability, Manipur suffered another defeat at the hands of the Burmese. Bigyidaw, the grandson of Emperor Bawdawpaya, sent his greatest general, Maha Bandula, to invade Manipur and occupied it for 7 years — a period (1819-1826) that is known as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*.[16] This led to another exodus of Manipuris; thousands were taken to Burma as war prisoners (Phayre, 1998, 233), while large numbers were scattered as they fled to neighbouring kingdoms. 'The degree of ... [Burmese] torture was so severe that it reached even to the verge of extinction of ... [the Manipuri]' (Naorem, 2002, 3). In fact, it led to the effective depopulation of the Imphal valley to around 10 000 individuals (Kabui, 1991, 289). But Gambhir Singh requested the British to come to his aid; and with the help of 500 Manipuri soldiers (known as the 'Manipur levy'),[17] he expelled the Burmese occupation forces (Brown, 2001, 63). By the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826,[18] Gambhir Singh was recognised as the Raja of Manipur (Dun, 1975, 43), while the Burmese acknowledged its 'independence' (Thant, 2007, 122). Later, the Meiteis (those who were taken as war prisoners to Burma) were given land for settlement, and over time they were able to find gainful employment.

However, both independent kingdoms then came under the shadow of British colonialism, which made its indelible mark on their respective political identities. Quite instructive is the opinion of J S Furnivall (1948, 5) that '[c]olonial policy is framed with reference to the interests, real or imagined, of the colonial power ... [and] modern colonisation is an affair of capital and not of men, and capital knows no country'. New social and cultural forms are imposed by the colonial power and, in the process, traditional social life and cultural values are marginalised. Because '... of colonialism, a [particular] social role is suppressed, abandoned, or allowed to fall into disuse' (Spiro, 1973, 266). Of the colonial period in Burma, Furnivall (1948, 304) wrote that Burmese society:

> ... is in the strictest sense a medley, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different segments of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit.

As a result, 'British rule made Burma [Myanmar] vulnerable economically, as well as politically' (Maureen & Thant, 1992, 68). Arunkumar Moirangthem Cha (2009) states that due to the impact of British colonial rule and the loss of sovereignty, as well as

the subsequent formation of the modern states of Burma and India upon independence, the relationship between the two nations was adversely affected. As a consequence, the *Kathe* (Meitei) lost their dignity, and the respect with which they were regarded in Burma (Myanmar).

Burma (Myanmar) regained its independence after the end of the Second World War. However, its 'policy of neutralism'[19] has led to a process of Burmanisation which, finally, forced Indian nationals (who enjoyed a privileged status, as they controlled the Burmese economy during colonialism) and a good number of Chinese and Pakistanis to leave the country (Holmes, 1967, 188). Descendants of captives and immigrants from neighbouring states, including Manipur, were now all lumped together as 'Burman-Buddhists' (Thant, 2001, 222). As a result, it also affected minority ethnic communities like the Meitei; although, despite their linguistic and racial similarities, the negative attitude of Burmans to Indians does not extend to the Meiteis. Since then, though, there has been a steady decrease in the population numbers of the Meitei because of voluntary Burmanisation and a low birth rate (Moirangthem, 2005, 97).

By the mid-nineteenth century, of the total population of the Burmese kingdom, perhaps as much as 25 000 were Manipuris — those who were brought to Burma as war captives or were their immediate descendants (Thant, 2001, 55). However, by the early twentieth century, the Meitei population had increased to about 400 000 (Ayekpam, 2005, 89). Jacques Leider (2005, 162) writes about the descendants of the Meitei Brahmins (Punna) of the Mandalay Court, who continue to live today in Mandalay, Sagaing and Yangon, and says that despite 'their endogamous tradition ... [ensuring] their survival as a socially distinctive group through their contemporary socio-professional diversity, [nevertheless, it] points to their full integration into ... Burmese society'. Moreover, they earn a living as astrologers, while some have become doctors, engineers, businessmen, salespeople, or government employees. On the other hand, Renaud Egreteau (2011, 42) feels that the Burmese have a negative opinion of the Meiteis:

> The Meitei inhabiting area in Mandalay [is] derogatorily labelled by Burmese locals [as] *ponna-go*; they are regarded as ... smugglers with which one should not directly mingle .... [and they are suspected of having] developed ... linkages with anti-India Meithei [sic] armed groups operating along the India-Burma border.

According to an interview with an Indian Embassy official based in Myanmar, there is an estimated 40 000 people of Meitei origin in the country, concentrated around

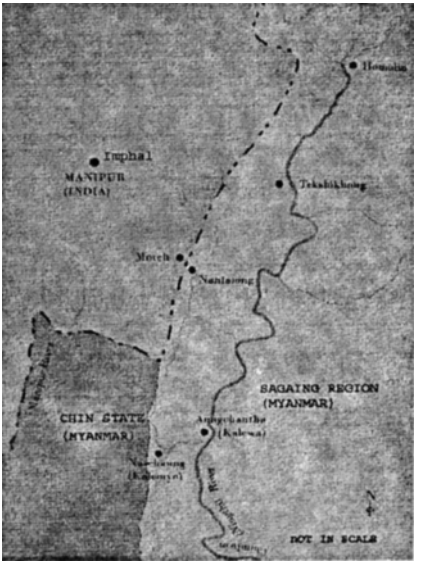
Mandalay; of these, only about 3 000 have remained as fully-fledged Meitei, speaking Manipuri, refusing to marry outside the community, refusing to give up their Hindu faith, refusing to eat meat, and retaining their Hindu names (Phanjoubam, 2008).

Table

Areas of Meitei Settlement in Myanmar

Sagaing Region	Moza, Kate zu, Swebo, and Katha villages; there are also Manipuri villages along the riverine areas of the Ningthi (Chinwin) — that is, Homalin, Kenta, Tekshikhong, Sayachan, Tanal, Miyudik, Maksha, Kondong, Tamu Samjak, Kaliwa, and Kalemyo
Mandalay Region	Nandawsae, Myinde-e-kin, Aheneitaw, Kha-kshetri, Awang Kshetri, Bamon Khunjao (Paonasu), Kshetri Khul, Ningthem Purohit Khul, Lairikyengbam Leikai and Myint Mo Geve, Dale and Latthamar villages, Amarapura and Shrigram village, Shwekyet and Mogok village
Rangoon Region	Ma-oo-Gone, Yae-myae, Kama Yut, Pannazo, and Pogodong villages
Shan State	Katejuwa village

Source: Mutua, Bahadur. 2009 *Art of Textile*, Imphal: Mutua Museum.

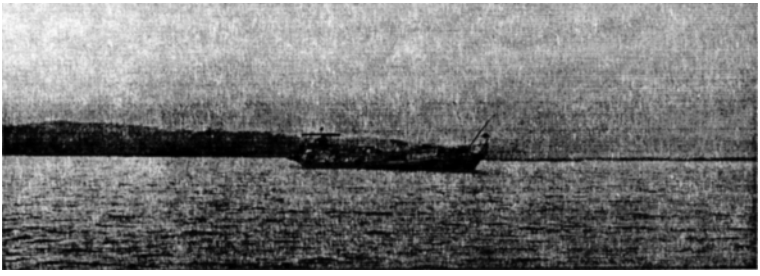


Map of the border region between the Indian State of Manipur and the Sagaing Region of Myanmar

The Meitei of Tekshikhong

Many scholars from 'within' and 'outside' the state of Manipur have written about the Meiteis who were or are concentrated mainly in the Mandalay Region of Myanmar. But there is not a single piece written on the lives of the Meiteis, who settled in the riverine area of the Chindwin, even though they are the descendants of war captives. Indeed, they have now truly become 'a forgotten people in a forgotten land'; and, clearly, their lived experience is different from that of the Meiteis of the Mandalay Region. Consequently, in January 2011, brief exploratory fieldwork was conducted at Tekshikhong, a riverine village in the Sagaing Region of Myanmar. Being an Indian and entering a protected area, where foreigners are not normally allowed, was a challenging experience indeed. However, this gave the author the opportunity to interact with the fourth generation of Meitei descendants, people born and bred in this particular area, and to record their encounters with some of the majority communities.

Tekshikhong is a village situated on the bank of the Ningthi (Chindwin) river. From Imphal it took three days by steam boat passing through Kalay, a town in the Sagaing Region, and two days by road traversing thick jungle, finally crossing the *Ango-ching* hill on two-wheelers. Nature's gift to the people of this area is the fertile soil for cultivation, while the Chindwin (Ningthi) river makes for good fishing and gold-panning which are the main occupations of the inhabitants. But every year, they have to suffer the natural calamity of flooding; and because of this, mud-and-wood houses are logical building structures. On the other side of the river, there is a hill known as *Alangtoung* which means 'flag hill' — during the Second World War, the Japanese hoisted their flag on top of this hill. Near the village there is a marketplace called 'Taungdut'; to the Meiteis, it is known as *Konung*, meaning 'palace', because in times gone by the place was the seat of power of the Shan King Samjok, who allowed them to settle in Tekshikhong. The Meiteis are hardworking people; for their livelihood they sell vegetables, other agricultural products, and dried fish, although nowadays the authorities has placed restrictions on fishing in the Chindwin river.



The Ningthi (Chindwin) river, Myanmar

Tekshikhong village lies between Myaingthaya village (inhabited by the Shans) and Nantainint village (inhabited by the Burmans). Of these, the Shans are more closely related to the Meiteis, and a cordial relationship has been maintained since times immemorial. The Meiteis strictly uphold their religious beliefs; they are orthodox Vaisnavites, they worship the gods Jagnath, Radha Krishna, and Sanamahi,[20] and the Durkheimian concept of 'secret and sacred' is enmeshed in their socio-religious practices. There is a temple in the village which is under the care of the *Goura Marup*;[21] and a Bamon (Brahmin) from Mandalay performs religious rites and rituals, since there is not a single Bamon in Tekshikhong. Also, the author has observed that, because of economic problems and the restrictive exclusivity of Meitei society, half of the Meitei population has converted to Buddhism. And it was told that Buddhist monks sometimes violate the sanctity of Hindu shrines by entering temples and touching the Gods and Goddesses, which is not the custom in Hindu society.

Men folk in a festive mood (Tekshikhong)

Unlike the Meiteis of Mandalay, the Meiteis of Tekshikhong speak Manipuri fluently; however, their attire is heavily influenced by Burmese clothing (costumes). They have to have one Burmese name, which is compulsory, even though they can use a Meitei name at home. There is hardly any schooling and, as a result, the literacy rate is very low — one of the Meitei women claimed that this is because of a deliberate policy pursued by the Myanmar government. The Meitei population of Tekshikhong is very small: there are only 30 houses in the village, while the inhabitants total some 300 to 400. The exclusiveness of Meitei society is one of

the main reasons for a decreasing population: they do not allow marriage with anybody outside their community, expelling anyone who does not obey this rule. Anybody socialising with anyone from another community is immediately ostracised from the Meitei community. Consequently, due to constant inter-marriage, almost all villagers are blood relatives. Unlike other communities in Tekshikhong, the Meiteis respect their women; consequently, Meitei women are admired and sought after as marriage partners.

A dwelling place (Tekshikhong)

Encounter-1

Yumnam Ibohal, a resident of Tekshikhong, told the author that after the Second World War the attitude of the Burman towards them changed. The new Burmese authorities became obsessed with the issue of citizenship. Although the Meiteis at Tekshikhong unanimously declared their willingness to become Burmese citizens, because they had been living in that area since their birth and had inherited the land from their forefathers, the Burmese authorities ignored their request and started to charge them resident taxes. Also, because of their Hindu religion, the Meiteis were treated as Indians, and the authorities issued them with foreign registration certificates. These certificates were restrictive in the sense that, although they allowed them to remain, they could not move from one place to another without prior permission from the authorities. One option open to the Meiteis was to convert to Buddhism, as it would allow them to obtain Burmese citizenship cards. Moreover, as a Premjit told this author, in the last Myanmar elections the Meiteis had no option but to vote for the governing Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). For

many Meiteis their only vehicle to bridge the gap between themselves and 'their roots' is the old Philips radio of Shri Ibohal: at least, in this environment they 'become alive' through access to the news, to entertainment and other programmes, which are regularly broadcast by the *All India Radio* at Imphal.

Encounter-II

It was a childhood dream for a 17-year old girl, Phajabi from Tekshikhong village, to visit Moreh, a border town in Manipur where some of her relatives were settled. During her brief stay of several months, she met a young Brahmin, Ibochouba. They shared time together in love and with affection, which soon brought them together in marriage. However, Ibochouba's family did not treat her well, as she was not a Bamon (Brahmin). The endogamous tradition of the Bamon cult treated Phajabi as an outcast, and because of the caste difference she was not accepted into the family. However, her husband loved her very much, and the unfortunate situation forced them to live separate from the rest of the family. They went through many frustrations, pains and sufferings, which were too much for the young couple to bear. Unable to face all these challenges, Ibochouba began to indulge in liquor and gradually became addicted. He soon died of heartache and addiction, leaving behind a young and beautiful wife with nowhere to go. The feeling of 'otherness' that her husband's family imposed on her, and the rejection by the local community persuaded her to return 'home' — that is, to her native village, Tekshikhong. Because of all these complexities and the hardships Phajabi had experienced in Manipuri society, she was compelled to leave Manipur permanently.

Conclusion

From these two narratives, one can deduce that there seems to be some ambiguity in the mind of the Meiteis of Tekshikhong. There are strong sentimental feelings locked up in a multi-pronged quest: to understand the socio-political identity of their own way of live, and to distinguish it from those of 'host' and 'home' nations; to come to grips with a sense of isolation and exclusiveness; to deal with the melancholy of being a marginalised community, and to express its hopes and fears; and to engender a cultural pride, based on distant memories and belongings. On the other hand, due to the influences of historical realities and the practicalities of life, some of them are more inclined to remain in the 'host nation' rather than return to the 'homeland'. Consequently, their 'exile' in Myanmar is more permanent, and they entertain no false hopes of a return to Manipur.

In this way, the impact of colonialism on the peoples of Myanmar, on the one hand, and the Myanmarese government's long-standing policy of Burmanisation of

minority ethnic nationalities, on the other, have resulted in dampening down the shared collective sentiment of the Meiteis of Myanmar and, thereby, eroded the latter's socio-political will to reconsolidate their national identity. The hoped-for democratisation process in Myanmar needs to address the acute problems experienced by minority ethnic nationalities, which are partly of a social and partly of a political nature. Moreover, there is a need for a rethink of India's foreign policy towards neglected diasporic communities in Myanmar, also with a view to enhance current diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Notes

[1] The Meiteis is the majority community in Manipur.

[2] This is the term used by the French theorist Ernest Renan in his essay, 'What is a Nation?' He used this term while defining the meaning of a nation as a 'spiritual principle', based on shared memories and the cult of a glorious past, as well as the ability to forget certain shameful events and, above all, a 'daily plebiscite': the collective affirmation of a nation's 'will' by the (members of a community) or citizens of a country.

[3] This is the Royal Court Chronicle of Manipur, in which all important events are recorded chronologically.

[4] This is another Royal Chronicle, detailing accounts of the military expeditions of the Kings of Manipur.

[5] The Shans was known as Pong to the Meiteis, and they always enjoyed good relations in the past. The Shans is one of the major communities of Myanmar, and in pre-colonial times they constituted a nation-state.

[6] This is a kind of boat race engaged in by the royal families of Manipur in full traditional dress (attire).

[7] The Chindwin river is known as Ningthi by the Manipuri.

[8] This is the name of the valley between the present-day Indo-Burmese border and the Chindwin river.

[9] Robert H Taylor (2009: 10) explains the notion of boundaries in the context of pre-colonial, mainland Southeast Asian states. He states that these states did not have a population occupying a defined territory in the sense of a territory demarcated by externally, as well as internally, recognised and reasonably precise borders. Southeast Asian rulers knew what territory they were able to control and tax, and their subjects knew to whom they owed taxes and services, if not always allegiance.

[10] Ava was the then capital city of Burma. In Burmese it is known as *Ratanapura* or the city of gems. It was during the reign of Myaydu Min (Sinbyshinpaya) that Ava became the capital (1765-1785), and it was again elevated to that status by Sagaing Min (Bagyidaw) from 1823 to 1857.

[11] This is a kind of sarong worn by the royal families of Burma (see Mutua, 2009).

[12] The Meiteis were known as Kathe to the Burmans.

[13] Previously, Thailand was known as Siam.

[14] The Meitei cavalries were known as 'Cassay Horse' by the Burmans. Owing to their skill in war they were used by Alaungpaya to invade Thailand.

[15] This is a form of dance introduced by the then King of Manipur, Rajarshi Bhagyachandra. This dance was believed to have been performed by *Lord Krishna* and *Radha*, along with their *Gopis*, on a full-moon night. The dance represents a unique blending of Meitei and Hindu culture and it is, today, one of the classical dances of India.

[16] This second defeat of Manipur by the Burmans led to an occupation, referred to by Manipuris as the 'Seven Years of Devastation'.

[17] This was the first standing army of Manipur headed by Maharaj Gambhir Singh and his brother, Nara Singh. It was born out of the Manipur national struggle against Burmese rule during the 'Seven Years of Devastation'.

[18] This was a treaty signed between the British and the Burmese after the latter's defeat in the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1826. With the help of Gambhir Singh, the Burmese were ousted from Cachar and Manipur. One of the important points to be noted here is that through this treaty, both the British and the Burmese recognised the nation of Manipur, with Gambhir Singh as its ruler.

[19] With a policy of neutrality or non-alignment in international affairs, Burma successfully avoided being dominated by the West or absorbed into either the Chinese or Soviet blocs. A carefully conceived and rigidly applied policy of neutralism was diligently followed.

[20] This was the only religion of the pre-Hindu period of the Meiteis and the Kabuis; it encapsulates the notion of the 'trinity of God' of the Meiteis, and is one of the oldest sects in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

[21] This is a kind of association formed by the local community to look after the welfare of their socio-religious affairs.

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