

How does Religion view Women? The Presence of Goddesses in Meetei Sanamahism

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Abstract: *Religion is among the most important institutions in society. The status of women in society is closely associated with how religion looks at women, and it largely determines the well-being of women. The presence of goddesses in Meetei Sanamahism shown by sacred books known as Puyas is an indicator of the high social status Sanamahism accords to women. The existence of Meetei cosmogony reflects a healthy inquisitiveness among people trying to understand the world around them without the help of modern science and technology.*

Keywords: Cosmogony, Religion, Goddess, Meetei, Sanamahi

1. Introduction

Religion is among the most important institutions in society. It is a primary source of the most deep-seated norms and values. It has always played a significant role in society by providing a social basis for the creation of togetherness, cohesion, and moral discipline among the people. Religion is one of the great sustaining forces, pervading all areas of people's lives in society and hence naturally playing an all-embracing role in human life, thought, and deeds. It has multi-layered meanings in different sociological phenomena and is a key construct for understanding society and its institutional practices. It also serves as a tool for explaining a wide range of social attitudes and behaviour. As such, religion is a powerful source of collective identity in all human civilizations as it provides a normative basis for society. It reflects the values, norms, and cultural ethos of a society. Every religion manifests in society through its system of beliefs and practices according to which people organize their lives, individually and collectively. According to Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (Scott 2014; 889) "Religion is a set of beliefs, symbols, and practices (for example rituals), which is based on the idea of the sacred, and which unites believers into a socio-religious community. The sacred is contrasted with the profane because it involves feelings of awe. Sociologists have defined religion by reference to the sacred than to a belief in a god or gods, because it makes social comparison possible; for example, some versions of Buddhism do not involve a belief in God." Emile Durkheim in his book 'The Elementary forms of religious life' (1912) gives a classical definition from the sociological perspective. He defined religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere them'. According to E.B. Tylor (1871:396) regarded as the father of social anthropology, the minimum definition of religion should be the belief in spiritual beings. According to Dhruvarajan (1996:17), "Religion provides answers to existential questions, explanations for injustice and inequality, and is a source of inspiration. It determines personal worth. Rituals that punctuate social life and the individual life cycle help people to develop an inner conviction regarding the legitimacy of positions accorded to them in society". According to

Giddens (2009:679), "sociologists define religion as a cultural system of commonly shared beliefs and rituals that provides a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose by creating an idea of reality that is sacred, all-encompassing, and supernatural". The three key elements of religion are: 1.

Religion is a form of culture; 2. Religion involves beliefs that take the form of ritualized practices and 3. Religion provides a coherent and compelling explanation of what transcends or overshadows everyday life in ways that other aspects of culture typically cannot, thereby, adding a sense of purpose to our lives. In the sociological definitions of religion there is no explicit mention of God. (Giddens 2009:679)

Religion has been both a liberating and repressive force in women's lives. Women's status in society is a much bigger concept than the place of women in religion, even though the place in religion will have lots to say about the former. Even where women outnumber men, men are seen to exercise authority. The subordination of women is generally taken for granted. Though society has undergone considerable changes in modern times, the position accorded to women in many societies is far from the spirit of the modern perception of equality. Female foeticide, child marriage, restrictions on widow remarriage, and the exclusion of women from many social positions still continue to be prevalent in Indian society. These discriminative attitudes towards women are seen to be legitimized by religion, and hence, religious beliefs and practices are at the core of regressive ideologies in society, especially on issues pertaining to the status of women. The space available to women depends on the conception of women in that religion.

In every religion, there are different factors which have a direct or indirect bearing on the status of women. Religious texts, various socio-economic practices, religious restrictions and injunctions, laws and reforms, etc. are some of the factors that influence the status of women in a given society. Religious texts often define the nature of women's essential characteristics and their acceptable behaviour in the public and private spheres. The image of women as depicted in religious texts has a correlation with their position in society. Thus, the status of women accorded by a religion can be

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inferred from the references extracted from its scriptures (Sarma 2012:16).

Objective

This paper examines how a religion views women as seen through the goddesses worshipped in that religion, with special reference to Sanamahism, the pre-Hindu religion of the Meeteis in Manipur, a state in the north eastern region of India. Sacred texts known as Puyas provide a rich source of information regarding the philosophy of the Meetei civilisation. Sanamahism, the dominant religion of the Meeteis, had given way to Vaishnavism since the early 18th century, and it had re-emerged as a popular religion since the early 20th century. According to Census 2011, there are about 2.1 lakh followers of Sanamahism in Manipur.

Why do we need god(s) and goddesses?

According to Jordan(2004:10), the primary role of gods is to protect, to steer, to govern the order of life and to provide answers to conundrums which science and the modern temporal world cannot resolve. Each culture has its own creator gods, gods concerned with locally important aspects of the weather, goddesses of fertility and gods whose duty is to protect the home. This is a reflection of the fact that same mysteries have puzzled people on every continent, the same fears have beset them, and they have all attempted to explain the mysteries and allay the fears in the same way – through worship of gods.

The primitive people attribute to all of nature, everything that exists in a physical state, a spiritual identity that is ever present but unseen, conjured or appeased by the special powers placed upon certain individuals of the tribe, the shamans or wise ones. These spirits may be poorly defined, but they are endowed with human form and human habits; they walk, talk and enjoy sexual relations, exhibit anger, sorrow, joy, mischief and so on. These are characters like "cloud man" and "grass woman", "old man of the rocks" and "reindeer child" (Jordan 2004:vii). As this style of religion develops, the rather vague ethereal spirits of clouds, rocks, trees, birds, and animals take on progressively more abstract associations. As Jordan (2004: vii) notes

"Thus, we find a goddess of childbirth, a god of storms, a god of blacksmiths or sailors, even a deity associated with the proper use of pots and pans. As the scope of their responsibilities broadens, the deities become more clearly defined, more human personalities. We come to know them by their appearance, by their style of dress, by the attributes they carry...The social infrastructure of the spirit world may also closely mirror our own."

The significance of gods and goddesses may also change according to the environment and according to the stage of social and economic development.

Without the benefit of science, technology, and history, the natural world would have been a puzzling and frightening place, guided by great invisible forces. If every object has a spiritual identity which may be considered to act as its protector or guardian, it implies that mankind's activities affect the object not only in its physical state but also in its spiritual dimensions. Thus, the approval of the relevant spirit

must be obtained before the slaughter of game, the felling of a tree, the commencement of a journey, or the building of a house. The responsibility for our actions is taken away from us and placed into the hands of an all-powerful, if unseen, being. Deities do not emerge overnight and are slow to evolve, often deriving from the personality of an older god or goddess. It is difficult to pinpoint the moment in time at which a personality first becomes identifiable as a deity. Likewise, they may be highly tenacious, their worship dwindling imperceptively, sometimes over many centuries. When cultures merge, many deities are also superseded (Jordan 2004:11).

The Goddess Tradition

According to Brandi (2009:10) each culture has a list of goddesses for endless purposes. We need something to connect us to the Divine presence and the breaking down of the Goddess's powers and aspects helps us identify and connect with that presence. Brandi (2009:90-290), presents a list of attributes for which Goddesses have been honoured across religions.

- Abundance, addiction, aging, agriculture, anger, aggression, arbitration, architecture, arts & crafts, astral travel, astrology, athletics, authority
- Balance, banishing, beauty, beginnings, birth control, blessings, blood, boundaries, brewing, business success
- Calm, cemeteries, change, chaos, chastity, childbirth/birth, children, civilisation, clarity, commerce, communication, compassion, confidence, contracts, cosmos, creation/creativity, crossroads, cunning, charm, wits, wisdom
- Dance, darkness, dawn, death, deceit, decisions, destiny, destruction, diplomacy, disaster, discipline, disease, divination, divine communication, divine intervention, dreams
- Earthquakes, eclipses, eloquence, enchantments
- Merchants, mercenaries, metal working, miracles, mischief, money, moon, motherhood, mountains
- Music, mysteries
- Nature, negative habits, night, nourishment
- Oaths, obedience, obstacles, oceans, rivers, and bodies of water, opportunities, order
- Passion, Patroness of the Healer, peace, perfume, physical labour, pleasure, poetry, power, prayer, problem solving, prophecy, prosperity, protection, psychic abilities, puberty, public speaking, purification
- Healing from rape, rebirth, regeneration, reincarnation, renewing, resurrection, retributions, rituals and ceremonies
- Sacrifice, science/alchemy, seasons, secrets, seduction, self-growth, self-image, sensuality, sexuality, and sexual activities
- Shamanism, Sisterhood, Sky, Sleep, Sorceress, Spirituality, sports, storms, strength physical and mental
- Students and studying, success, sunshine
- Tarot, temperance, thievery, time, transformation, travel, treasures hidden, truth, the underworld, vegetation
- Vengeance, victory, violence
- War and battles, warrior goddesses, wealth, weapons, weather, weaving and spinning, wholeness, wine, wisdom, witchcraft, women and femininity, woodlands and forests, writing

- youth

In her classic work 'The First Sex', Davis (1971) strongly hinted at the possibility of a goddess-based civilization until it was overthrown by patriarchy. She further argued that "women had played a dominant role. The tradition shared by early people... that it was women who had preserved the germ of the lost civilization and had brought it into its second flowering was too insistent to be ignored. The primacy of goddesses over gods, of queens over kings, of great matriarchs who had first tamed and then re-educated man, all pointed to the fact of a once gynocentric world" (Davis 1971:15-16). The paragraph from Menckken (1922) quoted by Davis (1971), an interesting comment on male superiority, so carefully cultivated in the last thousand years by the patriarchal system, argues that women have intuition, not intelligence: "All this intuition is no more than and no less than intelligence-intelligence so keen that it can penetrate to the hidden truth through the most formidable wrappings of false semblance and demeanour... Women decide the larger questions of life correctly and quickly, not because of intuition, but simply and solely because they have sense. They see at a glance what most men could not see with searchlights and telescopes; they are at grips with the essentials of a problem before men have finished debating its mere externals... It is a rare, rare man who is as steadily intelligent, as constantly sound in judgement, as little put off by appearance as the average woman" (Davis 1971:44-45). The superiority of intellect of females made men believe that women had a better understanding of the laws of nature and were also closer to the deity than men. The laws of nature baffled his perception and made him more dependent on women as the interpreter between man and man and man and deity (Davis 1971:45)

The Sanamahi Religion of the Meeteis

The Sanamahi religion is considered one of the oldest religions in South East Asia. The Meeteis regarded Sanamahi-the son of Shidaba, as their supreme deity and administrator of the universe. It is claimed that Sanamahism originated during the reign of King Kangba circa 2000 B.C. (Nilabir 2003:1) It developed through the ages under kings like NongdaLairen Pakhangba, UraKonthouba, Loyumba, Ayangba, Kiyamba, Ningthoukhomba, Mungyamba and so on. It reached its zenith during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.). Hinduism became a religion of the people in the early part of the 18th century through the proselytising work of some preachers from Bengal. The royalty had already been converted. Since the initiation of the King Garibniwaj into the Ramandireligion, a sect of Vaishnavism and its subsequent declaration as the state religion in 1717 AD, the popularity of Sanamahism had waned away. Its renaissance started in 1930 AD when Naorem Phulo, (1888- 1941) popularly known as Laininghan Naoriya Phulo, founded Apokpa Marup, an organisation committed to the revival of Sanamahism in the Cachar district of Assam. The Meetei Marup was established in 1945 in Manipur, and those who followed Sanamahism came to be known as the Meetei Marups. This led to the revival of Meetei traditional culture, customary practices, and traditional religious ceremonies in Manipur. Today, Sanamahism is recognised by the state and union governments. The Government of Manipur promulgated the

Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board Act, 1976, in order to manage the administration of the Sanamahi temple. From 1991 onwards, Sanamahism was listed as a separate religion in the censuses. The case of Sanamahism, Hinduism, and Islam is interesting because women in these religions initially belong to the Meetei Sanamahis. The early settlers among the followers of Islam were prisoners of war who were, because of their skills, resettled in Manipur with Meetei wives. It is unlike the case where immigrant women try to re-root in a new environment.

The Sanamahi Cosmogony

Cosmogony is the theory of the creation of the universe. In most myths, the first creator of all is a goddess. Davis (1971:33) writes, "In all myth throughout the world, from the sun's rising beyond the farthest shores of Asia to its setting west of the farthest islands of the vast Pacific, the first creator of all is a goddess. Her names are as many and as varied as the peoples whom she created and who worshiped her as the first principle."

In the earliest Greek mythology, the creative principle was Metis-female intelligence. In Greek mythology, too, there was chaos in the beginning. Out of the chaos came Gaea (earth), Dark Tartarus (the lowermost depths of the underworld) and Eros (love). Gaea mothered, among others, the twelve Titans. From the union of titans Cronos and Rhea, the first generation of Olympians were born. There are three Olympian Gods-Zeus, Poseidon and Hades. A gem and her husband, Kadaklan, conceived the universe and are the creators of the sun, the moon, the stars, and the earth. She is the creator goddess of the Philippines. Metis, Tanit, Tiamat and Gaia are all creators without a male partner. Parthenogenesis refers to asexual reproduction. In latter myths, the goddess is replaced by a god by an arbitrary change of sex and by a gradual metamorphosis from female to male (Davis, 1971:33).

The pre-Hindu world of the Meeteis starts with Yaibirel Shidaba (the immortal Yaibirel) when the world was empty, and it was through Him that creation started. He created his consort, Leimarel Shidabi, (the immortal queen). Their union gave birth to the three primal gods, namely, Atingkok Shidaba, Atiya Shidaba, and Konjil Tukhaba. The incestuous relationships so abundant in Greek mythology are not found in Sanamahism. The eldest son, Atingkok Shidada, who would be worshipped as Sanamahi, was entrusted with the creation of the universe. He created seven layers of the sky; namely, leiyikon, awangkon, langbakon, nungnangkon, koroukon, ashikon, and tambakon. He created the sun, the moon, stars, and other heavenly bodies. He also created water from his own body. He created the seven layers of the earth; namely, malangkon, maleikon, pongleikon, leinungkon, leikhakon, khamleikon, and khamnungkon. To level the earth, he created nine gods and seven goddesses. He then created the flora, starting with water and the sky. His unsuccessful attempts at creating human beings led to the creation of the earthworm, the *ngamu* fish, the frog, the owl, the tekpioklen (pig), and the monkey. Finally, he, as advised by his father Shidaba himself, created a man in the image of his father Shidaba. He was, however, outmanoeuvred by his youngest brother, Konjil Tingthokpa, through the connivance of their mother, to succeed his

father, Shidaba. As a compromise, he became the lord of the universe—both heaven and sky. He became the god of every household. His brother would be the king of human beings only.

From the beginning, goddesses appeared in the Sanamahi cosmogony, and each of them played a crucial role in establishing the universe. That women were not considered inferior to men is clear from the role of women in various events of the Sanamahi cosmogony, where numerous goddesses were also agents of change. Without their participation, the story of creation in Sanamahism would have remained incomplete. The Maibis, the priestesses, are the bridge between the Meeteis and the unknown. They play an important role in the biggest Meetei ritual worship of sylvan deities known as umanglaiharaobas, besides maibas, the priests. It is said that maibis contribute four times more than maibas during such rituals. It reflects what Davis (1971:44) said about the recognition of the intelligence of women.

The Sanamahi Goddesses

The Sanamahi religion has a number of goddesses, some of which are :AyangLeima, ChaningLeima, ChingaLeima, Heibok Leima, Heinou PokLeima, Iccham Lairembi, Ireima, Kaojeng Leima, Khulleima, Khongdraibi, Laikhurembi, Lainaotabi, Laisna, Lamdengleima, LemthongLeima, LoklaoLeima, Menu LeimaNongthangLeima, Nungkhong Nunglaobi Nungthel LeimaPanthoibi, Phouoibi, Pishumleima, Pithraibi, PukshriLeima, SharikLeima, Tampha Lairembi TanthongLeima, Sana Khongnang Leima, Soubon Lairembi, Thareima, ToibiLeimaYaoreibi, Yumjao Lairembi, etc (Ashokkumar2016:162).

They are worshipped as sylvan deities in different parts of the state and outside the state where the Meeteis live. They appeared at different ages, and their contribution to skill development, essential for survival and administration, is being celebrated in Umang Lai Haraoba rituals. (Pleasing of the sylvan deities).

The Goddess Panthoibi

Panthoibi is an incarnation of Nongthangleima, whom the Goddess YaibirelShidaba created to distract her son KonjilTujenga from disturbing the creation of the universe. She is the daughter of the God ChinguTubiLairelTaoroinai and the Goddess NamungNamungbi. She is a model of independence and defiance. Her epithets show how powerful and versatile she was. She married KhabaNganba, the son of KhabaShokchamba, the king of Kangleis. Her divinity is also revealed by the items that she took with her after her marriage. She took two cooking pots, one containing cooked rice and the other containing cooked meat curry, and a pitcher filled with wine. However, these magical items produced an unlimited amount of rice, meat curry, and wine for all the guests. At the same time, Nongpok Ningthou Kainou Chingshomba, the incarnation of God Sanamahi, was reminded of the purpose of his incarnation and he began to look for Panthoibi, the incarnation of Nongthangleima. At first, she refused to go with him, even after realising their divinity, as she, as a human being, was bound by social norms. She would wait for the day when KhabaNganba, her husband, started mistreating her. In the meantime, her

behaviour began to tax the patience of her in-law family. One day, her mother-in-law faked the death of her son and Panthoibi's husband, KhabaNganba, to test her and charged her with having left her sick husband unattended. Panthoibi, being a goddess, saw everything through, and she left angrily the household in the form of a firefly, despite repeated requests from her in-laws. She ultimately reached the abode of Nongpok, her lover. Their union was blessed by her parents. Her former husband's clan also realised their divinity and started worshipping both of them. They are worshipped as sylvan deities in innumerable places in Manipur, Assam, and Tripura for the prosperity and welfare of the people in those places. She is generally worshipped riding a tiger. The tiger was her lover, Nongpok, who wanted to test her (Nilabir 2017:37-47)

The Goddess Konthoujam

TamphaHaurokLeishangShaphabi, popularly known as the KonthoujamGoddess, was the daughter of HaurokAremba and ShanthongHuimuLeima. She was an incarnation of TubiChinglaiLeima, the daughter of YaibirelShidaba and LeimarolShidabi. Sorarel, the sky god, married her, and blessed her clan with prosperity and immortality. She became the queen of rain.They were blessed with a son.When a dog died in her clan, the clan members on earth observed the rituals of death, which made Shaphabi suspicious of the blessings of her husband. She persuaded her husband to allow her to pay a brief visit to her family under the condition that she would neither eat nor drink anything on earth. Sorarel thought she had failed to keep her words and thus was not allowed to return to the sky. Thus, she became separated from her son, the God KhoiriPhaba, who also came down on the earth in search of his mother. She was stranded in a layer of the universe. Later, when he came to know that she had not failed to keep her words, the sky god relented and took both the mother and son to their home. She is worshipped as the Goddess Konthoujam in Konthoujam and Kadompokpi for development and prosperity (Nilabir 2017:48-56)

The Goddess Phouoibi

Phouoibi was the incarnation of the goddess Nongthang Leima, the daughter of Shidaba and Leimarel Shidabi, for the prosperity of human beings. First, she was incarnated as the daughter of Sorarel, the sky God. He directed his daughter to incarnate as a human being and bestow prosperity on them. She became the daughter of Chakpa Teloi Hanjaba in Chakpa village. Her birth brought all-round prosperity to the village. She committed suicide after a love affair with Khangsunaha Shaphaba Wanglen Pungdingba. He also followed her, and they grew as plants together. When the souls of these two lovers went back to the land of the dead, they were again sent back to the earth to continue their celebration of life. On top of Lai Matol Mountain, she persuaded her lover to be born as Akongjamba, a nobleman in the service of PuLiklai, the king of Moirang. When there is a shortage of foodgrains, he should call her. She went back to her original Chakpa village. Akongjamba's village faced a drought. However, he forgot his earlier birth. When he did not call him, Phouoibi decided to visit him herself. Her visit brought prosperity to Moirang. When she visited the house of Akongjamba, who was away hunting, seeing her unkempt dress, his mother turned her away, despite her

several requests. She then revealed her identity by filling the entire courtyard with paddy and, feeling insulted, she flew away as a bird. When Akongjamba returned from the hunt, he came to know everything and remembered their exchanges at the Lai Matol Peak. He set out immediately to find her. Though they met, she refused to return and again told him that they would be united in their next incarnation as Khamba of Moirang and Princess Thoibi. Phouoibi continued her travels across the land as a human being in the daytime and as a divine power in the night, where she brought prosperity everywhere. She is worshipped as a deity in Manipur and Assam (Nilabir 2017:65-73)

The Goddess Eموinu

She was the goddess of prosperity. She is Lalleima (the Goddess of wealth), Phouoibi (the Goddess of paddy), Nagareima (the Goddess of fish), Thumleima (the Goddess of salt), Shileima (the Goddess of skill), Ereima (the Goddess of water) and LalLeima (the Goddess of war). When God YaibirelShidaba decided to bless well-behaved housewives, he created a goddess from the left part of His body. She was the embodiment of all the virtues of a housewife and became the Goddess Eموinu. Her exchanges with her creator dealt with the desirable virtues of a housewife. She was sent to the earth to bless the ideal households. She chose the land of the Luwangs, as she considered the house of the Luwangs the most suitable place. She appeared as an old lady hard of hearing, always seated in the hearth and few were aware of her identity. She was then brought to the land of the Khumans by SenbaMimaba, whose mother knew her. On the advice of his mother, King Challamba of Kanglei brought Goddess Eموinu from the land of Khumans and worshipped her at the hearth, bringing all-round prosperity. Though she has places of worship in Wangoi, Chengeiching, and Koubru, she is worshipped in every household. Now her worship has emerged as the festival of light in every nook and corner of the Meitei inhabited areas of Manipur (Nilabir 2017:92-97)

The Goddess Ereima

She is the incarnation of the Goddess Panthoibi. She was born as LuiralaShaphabi, the daughter of the king of Chingdai. She fell in love with the Prince Tabungba, son of the King Telheiba of Kanglei, who took refuge in her village after the death of Telheiba. Tabungba promised that Luirala would be made the queen of Kanglei if he could reclaim his father's lost kingdom. With the help of her father, he regained his kingdom. However, he forgot his promise and married another lady his queen at his coronation. One day, while hunting Luirala's father, the king of Chingdai, transgressed into the territory of the king of Chingshong and was captured. Luirala was compelled to marry the king of Chingshong for the release of her father. By this time, Tabungba, the former lover of Luirala, remembered his promise and set out for Chingdai village to bring Luirala back. He attacked the king of Chingshong to save her, but unfortunately he was captured and beheaded. Luirala managed to escape with the head of her beloved while the Chingshongs were celebrating their victory. With great difficulty, she reached the land of Kanglei and handed over the head to the queen after introducing herself duly so that he could be given the proper burial. Heart broken, she committed suicide by drowning herself in the ErilRiver and

became Ereima, the Goddess of Eril. When King Tabungba's son ascended the throne, his mother narrated the contribution of Luirala and her sacrifices. He then ordered that the Goddess Ereima should be worshipped in his kingdom (Nilabir 2017:86-94)

The Goddess Pitangnga

She is the incarnation of LeimarelShidabi. She was born as the daughter of WaheiLanthaba, the king of ShelloyLangmai. She fell in love with HongnemYoiKhunjao, the third son of Urakonhouba, the king of Kanglei, who took refuge in the village due to some misunderstanding with his father, and they married. One day, the Langmais were ambushed by the Kangleis, and the former suffered heavy casualties. The Langmais decided to avenge their deaths by killing the Kanglei prince, who was the husband of PitangNga. She begged her people to allow her to have a bite of boiled arum with her husband and, instead, put a stone in the boiling pot. Khunjao escaped with the promise that he would make Pitang-nga queen when he became king. He ultimately reached his kingdom and ascended the throne as King Naothingkhong with another queen. When Pitang-nga came and confronted him, he offered her a seat on his right side, giving her the place of a mother. So disappointed was Pitang-nga that she entered the house and merged into the Goddess Yumjao. Since then, she has been worshipped as a goddess. In the shrine of the God Naothingkhong, who is an incarnation of ShidabaKonjilTingthokpa, the third son of YaibirelShidaba and the creator, the Goddess Pitang-nga is seated on his left side. (Nilabir 2017:107-114)

Bolen (2004) classifies Greek Goddesses into three categories-the virgin Goddesses, the vulnerable Goddesses and the alchemical (or transformative) Goddesses. The virgin goddesses are Artemis (the Goddess of the Hunt and Moon, competitor and sister), Athena (the Goddess of wisdom and crafts, strategist and father's daughter), and Hestia (Goddess of hearth and temple, wise woman). They represent the independence and self-sufficiency of women. They actively seek their own goals. The vulnerable Goddesses are Hera (the Goddess of marriage, commitment maker and wife), Demeter (the Goddess of Grain, Nurturer and Mother) and Persephone (the Maiden and Queen of the Underworld, receptive woman and mother). They represent the traditional roles of a wife, mother, and daughter. They are relationship-oriented. However, they suffered from rapes, abductions, and humiliation at the hands of male gods. Aphrodite (the Goddess of love and beauty) belonged to the third category. She had many affairs and many children. She generated love and beauty, erotic attraction, sensuality, sexuality, and a new life. She was never victimised, maintaining her autonomy like the virgin goddesses. The Sanamahi goddesses may also be classified broadly into two categories. The first category has goddesses passing through the cycles of birth and death, over incarnations celebrating life. The second category is timeless. The first can be further divided into the following two sub-categories;

Virgin: This category has the Goddess Eموinu, who is Timeless. Eموinu descended on the earth with the mission of blessing ideal households and still continues to do so. Every Meitei household worships her. Nongthangleima can

also be included in this category. She is like the emergence of Tilottama at a time when gods and demons were fighting for amrit, the immortality-giving drink in Hindu mythology.

Vulnerable: Goddesses such as Phouoibi, Konthoujam, Ereima, and Petangnga belong to this sub-category. Phouoibi incarnated on the earth as a human being for the prosperity of the people. She kept on blessing the people through many incarnations marked by tragedy. The Konthoujam goddess, on the other hand, quietly bore the injustices on her, sacrificing her family. When her husband, Sorarel, the sky god, expelled her from the sky, she did not protest, and when Sorarel, after realising his mistake, descended on the earth to take back her and her son, KhoiriPhaba, a god in his own right, she quietly followed. She was thus an ideal wife. Both Ereima and Petangnga suffered greatly, despite their divinity.

The Alchemical (or transformative): Panthoibi was an independent and rational goddess. She agreed to marry KhabaNganba at the persuasion of her parents and brothers. When NongpokNingthou told her about their divinity and shared destiny, she refused to leave her husband. Her wayward behaviour aroused the suspicion of her family. This culminated in her flight from there to the abode of NongpokNingthou. Surprisingly, she had the same support from her parents as in her first marriage. The exploits of Panthoibi recorded in old texts do not show a woman as someone without any decision-making power.

The Sanamahi cosmogony is full of incarnations. According to Indramani (2015), the Goddess LeimarembiShidabi has 16 incarnations, the Goddess Nongthangleima has 29 incarnations, and Laikhurembi has nine incarnations. Each of these incarnations is worshipped as a goddess. TubiChinglaileima incarnated as the Goddess Konthoujam. LeimarolShidabi, the seniormost in the goddess pantheon, incarnated as Petangnga. Nongthangleima was incarnated as Panthoibi and then Ereima.

The Hinduisation of the Meeteis since the early part of the 18th century led to attempts to incorporate the Sanamahi gods and goddesses into the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses. The Goddess Panthoibi was considered an incarnation of the Goddess Durga. However, the two centuries of Hinduism under royal patronage were not enough to achieve that goal.

2. Conclusion

Women have a respectable place in the Sanamahicosmogony. It is quite different from Christian cosmogony, where women appeared as the weaker sex to be subordinated to men. This is amply shown by the presence of many goddesses who have been assigned to various activities for making a thriving society. These goddesses are worshipped by various clans in more than one locality. The centuries of Hinduisation of the Meeteis failed to give new identities to the Sanamahi goddesses.

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