

PART – II

**CHAPTER IV: NATURE OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE
AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

**CHAPTER V: NATURE OF SOCIAL
ORGANIZATION**

CHAPTER IV

NATURE OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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Introduction

The term social structure already appeared in the works of Herbert Spencer's (1820-1903) "Principles of Sociology" (1885, Vol.I) and Emile Durkheim's (1858-1917) "Division of Labour" (1893), but the latter sociologists gave a pointed definitions of social structure. K. Mannheim (1936) defined social structure as: "the web of interacting social forces from which have arisen the various modes of observing and thinking..." According to Maclver and C.H. Page (1950) "...all the various modes of groupings... together comprise the complex pattern of social structure...In the analysis of the social structure the role of the diverse attitudes and interests of social being is revealed" (Jha 1983: 99-100).

In the view of eminent anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown (1952), the concept of social structure refers to an arrangement of parts or components related to one another in some sort of larger unity. In social structure the ultimate components are individual human beings or persons and "structure consists of the arrangements of persons in relation to each other". Thus, in looking for the structural features of social life we look first for the existence of social groups of all kinds, and examine also the internal structural system of those groups. In addition to the arrangement of persons into groups and within those groups we also find an arrangement into social classes and categories. Social distinctions between men and women, between Brahmins and Sudras or untouchables, are important structural features. This chapter will exhaustively discuss the social structure and the stratification prevailing among the Loi and the Yaithibi community of Manipur. Studying the basic social institutions like family, marriage, kinship on one hand and caste, clan, power on the other hand throws enormous light in understanding the subject matter.

IV.1. Issues Related to Social Structure

Social structure is the total pattern of social organization produced by a cultural group's social practices. The elements of social structure include patterns of kinship, descent, and affiliation, forms of the family, residence patterns, marriage patterns, inherited rules, and other institutions. Stratification is a system of social inequality based on hierarchy orderings of groups according to their members' share in socially valued rewards. The nature of these rewards varies from society to society, but usually consists of wealth, power and status (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1974: 274-287).

The traditional pattern of social stratification in India has certain characteristics which are rather unique. The structural and cultural characteristics of the traditional pattern of stratification in India have deep roots in the past which have stemmed from certain peculiar ethnic constellation that came into being some three thousand years ago (Sharma, 1995: 13-14).

And this traditional pattern has brought about a rigid caste system based on birth of a person. The caste system was, in principle, rigid; no person belonging to a certain caste was allowed to accept memberships of the other castes. Ritual and social distances were observed strictly, through taboos on pollutary interactions, and restrictions on inter-dinning and inter marriage (Nandu Ram 1988: 1).

Like in any other state, in Manipur also Hinduism influenced the Meiteis, but it could not absorb them completely. Thus, Meitei traditional culture and religion are practiced along with the Hindu culture. Though it is a casteless society, Hinduism influenced Meitei society by attributing lower status to non-Hindus. And thus, it produced a lower caste Meitei community called the 'Lois'. The Lois though regarded as lower castes have room for entering into the higher caste level by embracing Hinduism (Devi 2002: 1).

Yaithibi in all respects of cultural pattern are the Meitei. They are a group of exiled and socially outcaste people on account of their grave offence such as marrying near relatives like sisters, step-mothers, and such other near kin (Saha 1994: 63-64).

IV.1. a. Family

Family is a set of persons related to each other by blood, marriage, or adoption who constitute a social system. Membership in a family is determined by a combination of biological and cultural criteria that may vary considerably from culture to culture. The structure of the family, which is specified by positions and roles of family members, is culturally determined (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1974: 2). Murdock (1949) defines family as a social group characterized by common residence, economic co-operation, and reproduction.

Quite similarly to any other state of India, here too, the family ties play an important factor of integration of the scheduled caste community of Manipur. The community itself becomes a big family by intermarriage among the clans which are the parts of the community. The Loi community also practiced the nuclear, extended and joint family systems with some slight differences in nature. There are no customary laws or rules for a married man to separate from his parents and establish his own family. The married son if not capable of maintaining his own family may continue to live and eat with his parents.

The joint family system of the Hindus is not very popular among the Lois. Their type of family of having a father, a mother, a married son, a daughter-in-law and other children including one or two grand children may be classed as 'Intermediate type', the type of the family in between the western nuclear and Hindu joint family system (Devi 2002: 22). And with western education and improvement in financial condition, nuclear

family is gaining its popularity irrespective of urban and rural setting among the Loi and Yaithibi communities of Manipur.

The Lois and Yaithibis of Manipur, irrespective of the districts and urban, rural settings responded that they all practiced patriarchal pattern of authority and patrilocal pattern of residence. Because of being patriarchal, the authority or the decisions in the family are vested in the hands of the eldest male member or the father. And it is the mother or the eldest son who continues with the family responsibilities after the husband's or father's death.

The joint family system is very much in practice in these two Scheduled Caste communities. Due to modern education and occupation the nuclear type of family is also gaining its popularity in these communities. In all the four districts 126 (31.5%) of them are following joint family pattern while a majority of them that is 274 (68.5%) belong to nuclear family (Table IV.1)

Table IV.1
Family Structure

| DISTRICTS | | Nuclear | Joint/Extended | Total |
|--------------------|-------|----------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Bishnupur | Urban | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Rural | 70 | 30 | 100 |
| | Total | 70 | 30 | 100 |
| Imphal East | Urban | 59 | 21 | 80 |
| | Rural | 14 | 6 | 20 |
| | Total | 73 | 27 | 100 |
| Imphal West | Urban | 22 | 8 | 30 |
| | Rural | 47 | 23 | 70 |
| | Total | 69 | 31 | 100 |
| Thoubal | Urban | 45 | 25 | 70 |
| | Rural | 17 | 13 | 30 |
| | Total | 62 | 38 | 100 |
| Total | | 274 | 126 | 400 |

IV.1.b. Marriage

Marriage is the social institution that involves the mating arrangements approved in society, specifically the relationships of husband and wife, and that sanctions the relationships of the couple in a system of rights and obligations essential to the social functioning of the family (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1974: 165).

The Lois use the term '*Lai-tin-thaba*' for marriage and they are like the rest of the Meiteis in their courtship and marriage. Selecting life partners depends on the choice of the person concerned, if it is not beyond the custom. This community permits marriage within the same caste but prohibits the marriage within the same clan. A Loi cannot marry a girl belonging to the same '*Yek*' and '*Sairuktinaba*' (same group). In the past if a Loi married outside the social custom, the couple was put to exile at '*Haojongpal*' (Devi 2002: 21).

In general, the marriage practiced by the Lois can be classified into two: (i) marriage after engagement and (ii) marriage after elopement (Table IV.2).

Table IV. 2
Types of marriage practiced by the respondents

| Types of marriage | Types of marriage practiced | | | Total |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------|-------|
| | Young age | Middle age | Old age | |
| Arranged marriage | 0 | 13 | 22 | 35 |
| Elopement | 34 | 163 | 99 | 296 |
| Total | 34 | 176 | 121 | 331 |

Arranged form of marriage is practiced by a small number of respondents that is 35 (8.75%) of them among the total sample while a majority of 296 (74%) of them have practiced elopement form of marriage.

In the case of marriage after engagement, the parents take the consent of the boy and the girl. If either of the boy or the girl refuses the proposal then the parents cannot compel them for the marriage. The second type of marriage is solemnized after elopement and this type of marriage is more usually practiced among them. The procedure and the formalities that follow marriage after elopement are short as compared to the formalities in the marriage after arrangement.

Another form of ceremony called '*Loukhatpa*', meaning acceptance is also in practice after elopement. This is performed some time later when the couple actually starts cohabiting as husband and wife. *Loukhatpa* is organized by the parents of the girl accepting and blessing them as couple which the parents of the girl earlier refused to organize marriage ceremony due to their unwillingness of their daughter's choice.

Marriage, being an institution, is the basis of social structure which involves social, mutual and individual obligations. Marriage bonds are, therefore in every society strictly disciplined by exogamous and endogamous restrictions though these restrictions differ from society to society and also from time to time.

The Loi and Yaithibi communities also follow the rules of restrictions in marriage. All the four hundred respondents irrespective of districts, sub-caste, location, gender and age differences practiced clan exogamy (sapinda exogamy), gotra exogamy and caste endogamy. But they also expressed that, to them, their Sagei (clan name) occupies a more important place than the gotra. And in all rituals their clan name is used more importantly (Photo IV.1).

The age of marriage for both boys and girls are not fixed but it wholly depends on the individual choice. It is generally observed that marriage mostly takes place at twenty two (22) years of age on an average. The type of marriage practiced among them is both by negotiation or arrangement which has an elaborate procedure and by elopement,

according to the choice of the couples involved. They preferred monogamous form of marriage. All the respondents, irrespective of the criteria, agreed that they do not pay any bride price or dowry, but have a formality of gifting jewellery, clothes, furniture, different household appliances, etc to the marrying daughter by her parents. And the gifts (Photo IV.2) vary according to the affordability of the parents.

As all marriages cannot succeed, some end in disharmony leading to divorce and some in tragedy of losing of a wife or a husband. Remarriage of divorcees and widows or widowers are permissible under the custom of the Lois and Yaithibis. But such cases are rare and even if they remarry no formal ceremonies are observed.

In case of divorce, which is rare, the approval of the couple and their parents is necessary. The village elders decide in such matters. They prohibit cross-cousin or uncle-niece marriages and considered to be punishable acts. Among the respondents one middle aged man from Sekmai explained that they have a belief that if a girl marries to the same family or clan in which her paternal aunt is married to, it is considered as good and brings prosperity to both the families. But the younger generation hardly believes in such things.

Regarding the attitude of superiority from the Meitei, 7% (28) of them expressed that the Meitei consider them as low and shows a feeling of superiority towards them. They have mentioned the cases of Meiteis breaking up relationship with their children for marrying a scheduled caste. And this is more profoundly seen in marriages between a Hindu Meitei girl and a scheduled caste boy. In some cases the situation is worse if the marriage is between a scheduled caste and a Brahmin. During earlier times, they heard, that restrictions were stronger as their food habits, brewing habits, low life style and lack of etiquette were considered as low and backward but much has been relaxed now. Many of the Scheduled Castes especially in Bishnupur and Thoubal districts



Photo IV.1 A Loi Marriage in Hindu Meitei costume



Photo IV.2 Gifts / Household appliances given to the bride by her parents

have adopted to Hindu Meitei religion and lifestyle. Some of them 2.75% (11) also admitted that there are strong restrictions from Meitei's side which lead to conflicts among the marrying families. There are even instances of breaking relations with daughter or son for marrying a Loi. And such hesitation is mostly seen among the people living in villages like Wabagai, Irengbam etc of Thoubal district. Among them a middle aged man said that he faced much restrictions from his in-laws' side, for marrying a Meitei (general) woman. His mother in-law did not eat any food cooked even by her daughter and whenever she visited them she herself cooked everything after washing the utensils. They felt that such treatment and restrictions were very strong till around 1980 and the situation after that has been quite relaxed though feelings of hesitation is still exists among orthodox people.

In two other cases, the daughters of an old man and a middle aged man who had married to Hindu Meiteis did not experience any restrictions but they still harbor an innate feeling that the Hindu Meitei's think of them as lower than themselves. In another case a middle aged man's scheduled caste friend have eloped a Brahmin girl for which the girl's parents have filed a court case. Three of them, (0.75%) expressed that in such marriages though the couple may be happy but the parents of the Hindu Meitei are not. Among them one (0.25%) of the woman supplemented that her cousin brother married a Hindu Meitei woman for which the bride's parents did not allow their daughter to enter the house for some years but eventually resumed to the relationship again.

1.25% of the respondents also expressed that there were strong restrictions due to their food habits, ways of living etc. They expressed that just as the way the Hindu Meitei do not want marriage alliance with them they also are not liking marriages with Hindu Meitei as such inter-caste marriages may result in difficulties in adjustment and compatibility.

But quite differently from the other responses, one middle aged man expressed that the Hindu Meitei's consideration of them as low and backward does not affect him or make any difference. To him, all Hindu Meitei do not think alike and such thinking wholly depends on the individual mind set and personality. And 1.75% (7) had the opinion that only the uneducated and orthodox people consider the Scheduled Castes as low. According to them both Hindu Meitei and Brahmin react and create such situations depending on the financial condition and qualification of the persons. For instance if a scheduled caste is an officer of high status then nobody creates any problems for marrying him, while most of the conflict arises when the marrying scheduled caste is poor with low status. The conflict is severe if the other partner is a Brahmin.

1% (4) of the respondents revealed that earlier there were strong restrictions from both sides. They continued saying that when a Sekmai girl marries a Hindu Meitei, purification of the girl is performed. And whenever the marriage is between a Brahmin girl and a scheduled caste boy then the marriage ceremony is performed at the groom's place. In such marriages the family members of the girl will not participate indicating that it is being held without their approval. It is because of the Brahmin parent's fear of being looked down by their caste group. And if the girl is a scheduled caste married to a Brahmin boy, she will not be allowed to the kitchen until she gives birth to a baby boy. According to 0.75% (3) of them, intermarriage with Hindu Meitei was next to impossible during earlier times. And even among themselves, those who follow Hinduism (panathokpa) restricted themselves strictly in all the matters and considered the non-Hindu followers as lower than themselves.

Among the respondents 0.75% (3) are married to Hindu Meiteis. They revealed that they are treated equally by their in-laws and do not face any difficulties so far. While 73.25% (293) of them responded that in contrast to the earlier times where

inter-marriage was strictly restricted, recently (may be since the last ten years) such concept of restriction is loosing its strong hold. Now more emphasize is given on individual's qualification and financial condition than on being a scheduled caste. But all of them did not deny that inspite of development among the Scheduled Castes, there are still some Hindu Meiteis, mostly orthodox, who are hesitant to establish marriage alliance with them as the earlier concept of Loi being low caste somehow lingers on their mind though it may not always be manifested. According to them, there have been no bad consequences from inter-marriage with Hindu Meitei but marriage with Brahmin is still rare and restrictions are still stringent.

Three middle aged and one old aged females and three old aged men i.e. 1.75% (7) of Yaithibi caste in Thoubal Khunou of Thoubal district narrated that earlier they cannot even think of marrying a Meitei Hindu girl or a boy as intermarriage was impossible when even their touch was considered defiling. Even at market places they were not allowed to touch anything while buying or paying the money. They have to restrict themselves from touching anything or else they will have to pay the price for all those things they have polluted by touching. And 1% (4) of them reported that their situation has improved to an extent after 1950 when the whole village was purified by the process of *Panathokpa* by King's men. And 7.75% (31) of them expressed that they have heard of very strong prohibitions during earlier times but they have not experienced any unwanted happenings from such inter-marriage so far.

Regarding the issue of status being elevated when married to a Hindu Meitei, 1.25% (5) respondents felt elevated status to some extent if married to a Hindu Meitei or Brahmin. While 0.5% (2) expressed that though, it was considered as elevated status during early times but not now. Further an old aged female expressed that though it is considered elevated status, she does not want her daughter to get married to either a

Hindu Meitei or Brahmin and preferred her daughter's marriage within her own caste. She reasoned the decision of hers' by saying that her daughter will face problems in adjusting to the Hindu Meitei and Brahmin family as they being higher to them. A young man (0.25%) strongly felt that elevation depends on one's achievement in socio-economic and educational level and not on being a particular caste member. Denying the attachment of status with Hindu Meitei in marriage 0.5% (2) of them expressed that instead of feeling elevated they consider Hindu Meitei and Brahmin as even lower than them. And the majority of the respondents i.e. 97.5% (390) have the feeling that it is neither elevated nor degraded but all are equal. All of them share the opinion that the children from such inter-marriage are entitled with the father's status.

The Loi and Yaithibi observed strict rules in marriage. Marriage within the same yek (clan) or gotra is not permissible. They strictly follow the norm of clan exogamy and caste endogamy. But choice of spouse is purely in the hands of the marrying couple. It is seen that they marry at an early age on an average. Cases of divorce are very rare. Inter-marriage of Lois and Hindu Meiteis was not at all common during earlier times. Some of them have faced various problems from their Hindu Meitei in-laws. It is believed that now the situation has changed and that inter-marriages between the Hindu Meiteis and Lois have increased but it is important to mention that in such marriages the Scheduled Caste partner is always a financially and occupationally sound person. Even today, though the inter-marriages with Hindu Meiteis are common, there are certain cases where the matter reached to breaking off all ties by the parents of the Hindu Meiteis. The Hindu Meitei always has a feeling of superiority over the Scheduled Caste. Majority holds the view that marriage with a Hindu Meitei neither elevates nor degrades but feels equal in status.

IV.1.c. Kinship

Kinship is one of the main organizing principles of human society. Kinship systems establish relationships between individuals and groups on the model of biological relationships between parents and children, between siblings, and between marital partners. Relationships established by marriage, which form alliances between groups of persons related by blood or consanguineous ties, are usually referred to as affinal relationships (Marshall 1998: 340). It may also be described as “a structured system of a relationship in which kin are bound to one another by complex inter-locking ties” (Murdock 1949: 93).

A large majority of respondents i.e. 62.75% (251) explained that just like the Hindu Meiteis, both the Lois and the Yaithibis belong to the seven divisions of clans. They are; *Mangnang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Chènglei Leishangthem and Khaba Nganba*. But the remaining 37.25% (149) of them had no idea of the divisions of the clans.

All the hundred percent of the respondents irrespective of the criteria of age, sex and urban, rural location responded that they all practice clan exogamy and caste endogamy and they all use descriptive kinship terminology.

Most of them who professed Hindu religion were aware of gotra system. Among the Loi respondents, 83 (41.5%) rural and 37 (23.125%) urban, 13 (65%) rural Yaithibi and 9 (45%) urban Yaithibi respondents were aware of their respective gotras and they were *Shandilla, Koushik, Kaishop, Bharadwaj, Madhurkeila, or Viyagarh*. While a majority of 117 (58.5%) rural, 76.875 (123) urban Loi; and (7) 35% rural, 55% (11) urban Yaithibi respondents had no knowledge of their *gotras*. They all added that they do not use their gotra names in their rituals as the term is also a non-Manipuri origin and thus the clan name is more important than the gotra. Many of them have no knowledge regarding gotra

or its uses but for them their clan name is more important. Except for those who follow Hindu religion, others who follow indigenous and Sanamahi cult do not consider gotra as important. But they responded that if intermarriage takes place with Hindu Meitei then they use gotra sometimes as it plays a very important role for Hindu Meiteis (Table IV.3).

Table IV. 3
Awareness of Gotras among the Lois and Yaithibis

| Name of the groups | Yes | | No | | Total |
|--------------------|--------------|--------|-------------|--------|-------|
| Lois | | | | | |
| R (200) | 83 | 41.5 | 117 | 58.5 | 200 |
| U (160) | 37 | 23.125 | 123 | 76.875 | 160 |
| Total | 120 (33.33%) | | 240 (66.67) | | 360 |
| Yaithibis | | | | | |
| R (20) | 13 | 65 | 7 | 35 | 20 |
| U (20) | 9 | 45 | 11 | 55 | 20 |
| Total | 22 (55) | | 18 (45) | | 40 |

The Hindu believers among Lois and Yaithibis are aware of their *gotras* as the rites and rituals are based on it. While the Sanamahi cult and indigenous believers are more concerned with their *yek* name as every ritual is connected to it. It is seen that almost all of them irrespective of their religious followings are aware of their *yeks* rather than their gotra name.

IV.1.d. Inheritance and Succession

Inheritance is a person’s estate or possessions, owned through descent or purchase, which can be transmitted to his heirs. Under the old common law of inheritance an heir was entitled by law to an interest in the real property of the decedent. These rules of inheritance were the outgrowth of the feudal system in which only the eldest male could

inherit real property. The right of inheritance of personal property belonged to the wife (right of dower) and to the children (specific rights) (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1974: 137).

The Lois and Yaithibis of Manipur practice patrilineal descent and thus, follow patrilineal rule of inheritance. Except for the 0.5% (2) old aged men who expressed that if, the parents are rich they also give property to their married daughters. All the 99.5% (398) have given similar response that, as their society being patrilineal, the property is transmitted among the male members of the family. Conventionally the youngest son of the family is given a major portion (house) of the property considering him to be the backbone of the old parents later but there are no hard and fast rules as such. The decision is entirely of the parents after which the children are consented. It is also the parent's choice whether to give property to their married daughters or not.

IV.1. e. Culture

The idea of culture is Anthropology's most important conceptual contribution to the social sciences. Originally a late nineteenth century idea, it developed out of two critical earlier sets of observations. The first which appeared during the Renaissance recognized that the customs, beliefs, social forms, and languages of Europe's past were different from those of the present. The second set of observations arose during the period of exploration, when it was discovered that contemporary men themselves in different regions of the world varied even more widely in the languages they spoke, the ritual they practiced, and the kinds of societies they lived in.

Edward B. Tylor wrote in his *Primitive Culture* (1871) that "culture, or civilization... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1974: 67).

Religious / Ritual Beliefs

The Lois and the Yaithibis are worshipping of traditional Meitei Gods; the *Imung Lais* (Imung= household; Lai= god) refers to the traditional deities believed to be in the household, the *Lam Lais* (Lam= wild area; Lai= god) refers to the deities believed to exist in the wild land, the *Umang Lais* (Umang=forest; Lai= god) refers to the deities believed to exist in the forest and *Apokpa* (ancestors). The *Umang Lais* and *Apokpas* are different from one clan to another clan and from one community to another. The common Gods of not only the Scheduled Castes community but also of the whole of Meiteis are ‘*Guru Sidaba*’, ‘*Sanamahi*’ (literally means molten gold) and ‘*Leimaren Sidabi*’ (Photo IV.3). The nature of worship of these Gods and Goddess are almost similar in principle (Table IV.4)

Table IV. 4
Religions followed by the Lois and the Yaithibis

| Religions followed by the groups | Lois | | | | Yaithibis | | | | Total |
|----------------------------------|---------|------|---------|--------|-----------|-----|--------|-----|-------|
| | R (200) | % | U (160) | % | R (20) | % | U (20) | % | |
| Indigenous | 53 | 26.5 | 100 | 62.5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 153 |
| Sanamahi | 39 | 19.5 | 10 | 6.25 | 6 | 30 | 10 | 50 | 65 |
| Christianity | 8 | 4 | 5 | 3.125 | 3 | 15 | 3 | 15 | 19 |
| Hinduism | 100 | 50 | 45 | 28.125 | 11 | 55 | 7 | 35 | 163 |
| Total | 200 | 100 | 160 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 400 |

Some of the supreme folk deities of the Lois in Bishnupur district are *Loyalakpa* and *Koubu*. *Panam Ningthou* and *Pureiromba* are worshipped as important folk deities by both the Lois and Yaithibi community in Imphal East district. The Lois in Imphal West district give their first salutation to *Koubu* who is believed to be the supreme of all Gods and also worship *Loyalakpa*, *Kounu Lairembi*, *Thoudu Nungtheleima*, *Echum*

Lairembi etc. And the Lois and Yaithibis in Thoubal district worship *Khamlangba*, *Nongai Ningthou* and *Ibudhou Mayang Ngamba*. There are also other folk deities worshipped by them.

Some of the cultural practices peculiar to the Lois in Bishnupur district are 'U-Yok Khuramba' which is observed at the beginning of September on an auspicious day. It is performed at a particular place which is densely covered by trees, where they believe is the abode of the folk deity *Loyalakpa* and His wife Goddess *Nungtheleima*. The ritual is officiated by the priest. The main reason for observing this ritual is for the protection of their crops, paddy, etc. from any natural calamities and to yield good crops. The woods used in Lai Haraoba ceremony and death ceremony are to be taken from this area only.

Another practice is 'Sanamahi Yurangba' which is observed mostly at the first entrance/initiation of a newly built house on an auspicious day in the month of February. It is performed at the sacred altar of Sanamahi and Leimaren (household God and Goddess), a belief that the God and Goddess are getting married and are welcomed by the husband and wife of the family. But this ritual should be performed only by the piba (eldest male of the clan) on behalf of all the other clan members so that all the clan members are guided towards good fortune and prosperity. The items to be offered are yu (wine), seven dried ngamus (a kind of fish), ginger, langthrei (a leaf used for ritual purpose), three bunches of bananas of even number, a sugar cane, yai (rice). It is the choice of the piba to hire priest for the ritual or not. The piba and his wife will taste all the items offered and will also distribute to the family members.

Similarly the Lois in Imphal East district has some practices which are not much common with other Lois. Here, every month on *thasi* (new moon day) every eight families of married men in the village in circulation has to contribute either incash to buy a

pig or a cock, vegetables for *singju* (a variety of mixed vegetables to be eaten raw), *champhut* (boiled vegetable), eggs and *wai-yu* (a specially brewed wine) or in kind. These items are for ritual purpose and to be offered to the folk deity. It is also a traditional custom of the village that every married man after the completion of six months of the marriage has to contribute one cock and a *wai-yu kharung* (a pot of specially brewed wine) to the *khángjen*, which are the unmarried male of younger age. The *khangjen* will collect the contribution from the respective houses of the married men which will be cooked and eaten by the unmarried youngsters. This custom of giving cock and *wai-yu* by the married men is a symbol of retiring themselves from the group of bachelors and joining into the married men's category. Presently due to shortage of *wai-yu* and the amount of heavy labour involved in brewing of *wai-yu* people have now started to use simple wine only.

The people of Andro in Imphal East have enormous faith and divine attachment to the sacred altar located amidst the village. In this temple (Photo IV.4) a non-stop fire (*dim*) keeps on burning for years. They believed that the fire was given by the God to their ancestors during those times when God and human beings were residing together. Since that time the fire has been properly preserved and has been continuously burning. Every elder male of each household in Andro has a duty of checking and burning the fire. They perform this duty in rotation from one household to another happily as they consider the fire in the temple to be their most precious possession.

One of the practice seen in Phayeng of Imphal West district is the ritual which they perform on the first Saturday of Kalen (May). They observe it by offering eggs to various deities, seven eggs are offered to *Thangjing*, *Marjing*, and *Wangbren* (abode of the wild land deities) and nine eggs are offered to the *Koubru*. By doing so they believe that they will be protected from any unwanted happenings.



Photo IV.3 Sanamahi and Laimaren Sidabi (Household deities)



Photo IV.4 A temple in Andro which has a sacred fire burning throughout the year

At the beginning of *Langban* (September) month all the village deities i.e. *Koubru*, *Loyalakpa*, *Kounu Lairembi*, *Thoudu Ningtheleima*, *Leimaren*, and *Soraren* are prayed and offered bee (hive) found in the forest at *Laikon* (near the temple) of the Lai Haraoba area. Offerings include flowers, hens, etc and are officiated by the priest at the altar of *Koubru Loyalakpa*. This ritual is known as '*Koubru Loyalakpa Khuramba*'. On the first Saturday of Hinyangei (November) '*Puthiba Khuramba*' is observed to prevent untimely rains, snows, wind etc. so that their fields are not destroyed. The priest made offerings of flowers, fruits, sweetmeats, hen, etc.

Somewhere in the month of February and March the youths and the elders of the village together have to catch a Sajan or Saji (wild boar) and if possible even tiger from nearby hills or jungle to be offered to their folk deity. But since fifteen/twenty years they cannot do so because of the government laws. They buy the animal from professionals who catch it.

After the ritualistic offering to the folk deity *Puthiba* at *hiyangei* (November) and until the completion of harvesting no single musical instrument should be heard in the village i.e. there should not be any ceremony of birth, marriage, death, etc. in the village. It is feared that if anyone does so will be struck by disaster and evil incidents.

The Lois of Sekmai do not practice uncle – niece or cross cousin marriage but have a strong belief that if the niece marries to the same family or the clan in which her aunty is married, will lead to well being and prosperity to the niece.

'*Khomlang laman Singba*', which means to pay back the debt that a child has on her parents in bringing her up. It is done mainly by married daughters in the month of January and February (as everyone is free at this time after harvesting). The daughter/s will bring gifts, vegetable, meat / fish, sweets, etc. to be cooked and eaten together with

the parents. According to the choice of the family it can be organized as a grand feast also by inviting relatives and friends.

In Sekmai after the completion of harvesting i.e. mostly during the month of October and November, almost all married daughters bring fish / meat and vegetables etc. which are produced from their fields for their parents. This is known as '*Chanau thinba*', a celebration in completion of harvesting by tasting the newly harvested crops. The Lois here also follow another form of '*Ashiman Khangba*' which is performed in order to pay respect and regard to Paling, Shiling, Khuling, believed to be the first three ancestors to be settled in Sekmai. It is observed in the month of May or June after Lai Haraoba (God pleasing ceremony) (Photo IV.5 a, b) and Cheiraoba (Meitei New Year) and here the officiator is the priest.

The Lois in Khurkhul observed '*Lai Chaklon Khatpa*'. It is a feast held on an auspicious day in the month of January or February. The village deity is worshipped and a feast of pork and rice is organized. The ritual is officiated by the priest along with the Phamnaibas (traditional administrators) and all the villagers above twenty three years of age should participate in it.

In Koutruk village there is a religious drum which they believe plays in different rhythm if the villagers are about to strike by any unwanted or evil incidents. And no one can pass / cross under the drum which is being hung near the loisang (temple of folk deity) and if anyone does may die or face ill fate. They fear that if anyone sing '*Sawang Eshei*' (a religious song sung in the Lai Haraoba) before the Lai Haraoba or the prescribed day of it, then disaster will strike to that person.

There are some practices which are commonly followed by the Lois with slight difference in time and ritual. An offering of the newly harvested vegetables and paddy are made to the household deity, Guru Sidaba/Sanamahi and Leimaren Sidabi for



Photo IV.5.a. A temple of folk deity in Sekmai



Photo IV.5.b. A temple of folk deity where village rituals are celebrated

the goodwill and prosperity of the family. This is known as '*Lai Chanou*' in Leimaram and '*Chanau Tangba*' in Sekmai

Every year on Lamta thangja (first Saturday of March) the old ladies of the village along with priestess and the Khullakpa perform a ritual called '*Saroi Khangba*' in the morning. This is performed three times in the same month to drive away all the evils from the village. In Sekmai after the ritual the maiba (priest) will cook four hens to be offered to Koubru, Marjing, Thangjing and Wangbren (the four folk deities believed to control and protect the four directions of the village).

'*Kurak Lamtaiba*' is a ritual offered for prosperity and for protection of their fields from insects, pests, calamities and to yield good production. Though the principle reason is same but the rituals and items offered differ from village to village. In Leimaram it is called '*Inga Kurak Lamtaiba*' performed by Khullakpa and his assistant along with a Maiba (priest) and other elders of the village in the month of June. They even contribute money for the ritual and twelve male members are selected for the arrangement of this ritual. They believe that their fields will be protected and any kind of evils would not be able to encroach their village boundary.

In Phayeng it is performed at the beginning of Inga (June) month. Here God Koubru is offered with eggs, rice, yura (wine made of flour) etc. by the maiba (priest) on behalf of all the villagers.

In Sekmai it is carried out in the month of May or June. The priest along with the elders of the village offers prayer with fruits, meat (pork), etc to the three Khundahanba (the three ancestors who first settled in Sekmai) to protect them from any bad incidents and to bless all of them with peace and prosperity. On this particular day unless and until the ritual is completed no one in the village should be working in any ways as complete silence should be maintained in the village.

In Khurkhul it is observed in the month of April and May. Earlier a cock and a hen, a pig or a dog (male) were offered to Malem Prithivi (Earth) to provide them with goodwill, water, good crops and also to protect them and their animals from any calamities. Offering is made by the priest along with the village elders and now sometimes instead of a dog only a 'hui Kang' (the chain or rope used to tie the dog) is used to signify the dog in this ritual.

In Koutruk it is organized in the month of April or May. It is done in the morning at a place called Lambaiphram in the village. The priest and the Khullakpa offered prayer to the folk deities Koubru, Kounu, Loyalakpa, Nungtheleima, etc. where a cock and a hen are sacrificed and after the completion a small feast is organized by the participants.

It is observed in the month of May or June in Tairenpokpi. The priest and the Khullakpa offers prayer at the loisang (a religious place where rituals are performed), a place, which is believed to be the abode of their supreme God Koubru.

In Kakching a somewhat similar kind of ritual called '*Namungba*' is performed mostly in the month of May in a year. The Maiba (priest) offers prayer and tan (roti made by grinding the rice) on behalf of the whole village to the Khamlangba deity (a forest deity). In every household it is performed by the elder members by offering prayer to Sanamahi and Leimaren (household deity) to protect them from evil and unwanted incidents for the whole year.

And in Andro it is called '*Lamhaiba*' observed on the first Sunday in the month of langban (September). The Phamnaibas (traditional administrators) along with the village youth and others have to clean the boundary or the outer surrounding of the village. It is done with a belief of driving away the evil spirits and disasters which are bound to happen. The maiba offer prayers with fruits, pork meat, wai-yu (a kind of special rice beer brewed for ritual purpose mostly) to the village deity to protect them. The Nahapana

(youngsters) and the Ahalpana (elders) will divide into two groups and will contribute usoi (a kind of bamboo soot) for singju (a preparation of raw vegetables). They will collect rice, wai-yu, and other eatables from every household of Andro. Among them some of the youth with the help of the elders will cook the items in the Loisang (the altar of village deity where every ritual is performed). They will carry the cooked food into the area considered to be the boundary of the village and will eat there together and complete the ritual.

Another commonly shared practice among them is '*Ashiman Thaba*,' a ritual observed in every household as a way of paying obeisance to the deceased ancestors. This ritual is performed by the eldest male member of each family. In Leimaram it is observed in the month of August or September mostly at mid night after 12 o'clock. The officiating member would go out at the gate and will keep a burnt wood, by doing so he is inviting the deceased forefather for the feast / meal. Earlier all the items were cooked in a new pot but now people use their usual utensils also. The most important items to be included are boiled eggs, phabou nga and ngakha (different variety of fish), pangang (a kind of vegetable) with garlic and ginger are cooked without turmeric and chilly. Offering is made at the courtyard after which the family members can eat but the items cannot be taken inside the house. The remains are thrown in a pond or river so as not to be polluted by any animals. In Koutruk and Tairenpokpi also it is performed in the same month in almost a similar way.

The same ritual is called as '*Ashiman Khangba*' in Sekmai and is performed in the month of October or November. The offerings of cooked items like pan (a kind of vegetable), pumpkin, ngakha (a variety of fish) chicken, mostly boiled without turmeric are offered to the deceased forefathers and to Laibung thou mapan (nine male

folk deities) and Lainura taret (seven female folk deities). It is performed in the evening when there is no sunlight.

In Sangaithel it is observed by cooking a meal of fish and vegetable and mostly done in the evening or at night.

'*Lai Haraoba*' is another important religious ceremony organized in almost all the villages. The literal meaning of Lai Haraoba is pleasing the God. The Lai Haraoba of the different Loi villages do not fall in the same month. In Leimaram it is observed for the folk deity Loyalakpa in every alternate year. In Andro it is performed in Lamda (March-April) for the deity Panam Ningthou and Kalen (May-June) for deity Pureiromba. In Andro Lai Haraoba, not a single outsider of Andro and even those people of Andro who have adopted to Hinduism or Christianity are allowed to participate in the Lai Haraoba ceremony. Earlier the Phayeng Loi celebrate Lai Haraoba in the month of Mera (October or November) but due to heavy rainfall and these are harvesting months so, they now organized it in the month of Phairen (February). In Sekmai it is celebrated in the month of Phairen/ Lamda (February/March) of every year. Koubru is the main folk deity worshipped and other deities like Kounu Leima, Loyalakpa, Thoudu Nungtheleima, etc. are also prayed. In Khurkhul, Lai Haraoba is celebrated in the same month or in the following month after Sekmai Lai Haraoba for the deity 'Echum Lairembi' and other important deities like Koubru, Kounu, Thoudu Nungtheleima, etc. are also worshipped. In Koutruk Lai Haraoba is celebrated in the month of February in every alternate year. In this ceremony folk deities like Koubru and Kounu, their son Loyalakpa and daughter Nungtheleima are worshipped. In Tairenpokpi it is celebrated for deity Loyalakpa along with other deities. In Sangaithel Ibudhou Pakhangba is worshipped in Lai Haraoba.

In Lai Haraoba ceremony the prime responsibility is of the Khullakpa (village chief) and other Phamnaibas (other traditional administrators). All the religiously

required functions are to be carried out by them along with the priest and priestess. In Koutruk it is the Lai committee which organizes and looks after the Lai Haraoba ceremony and various other community rituals as they do not have Khullakpa. For the purpose members are selected after every three years according to the consent of the village elders. These selected people are responsible for the Lai Haraoba and in any village rituals regarding arrangements, expenditure, etc.

One of the important village norm followed by all the Lois is the '*Singlup*' system. It is a norm that every male member in each family after attending a specific age of fifteen in general should start involving in the village ritual and most importantly in any death ceremony in the locality. The core process is almost similar with slight difference in age and names given to the different groups. The Singlup system is active only in the death ceremony.

In Phayeng it is divided into 'soinou' consisting of unmarried youth of fifteen to twenty five years and 'thoumi' which consist of married youth of twenty five to thirty. The younger groups are allotted hard labour like collecting wood, erection of mandap (place where the ritual is to be performed), fetching water, etc. for the occasion while the senior youth are mostly involved in cooking and supervising things. A member from soinu and a member from thoumi should compulsorily involve in cooking for the feast. There are four singlups in Phayeng – Awang Singlup, Makha Singlup, Nongpok Singlup and Sabal Singlup divided according to the leikai (hamlet). Absence of any member belonging to a particular singlup is fined. They wear white dhoti and turban and have to bath before cooking and after going to toilet and also have to purify themselves by sprinkling water with tairen (a leaf). Presently heavy restrictions on such customary duty are reducing due to educational and occupational factors. Thus only the ritually required

ceremony is performed while the rest of the ceremony is done according to the choice of the family also.

In Sekmai there are two to three Singlups in every hamlet. The age group of eighteen to thirty is called 'poojari' and has the duty of cooking and serving the people in the feast. Among them the senior most few will instruct in all the activities. Those above thirty years of age will prepare and make necessary arrangement for the ceremony like making and cleaning banana leaves, preparing betel nut etc. And the senior most of the groups will decide and give consent on any confusion or conflict. If in case these three leng could not complete the work they can ask for help from the other group also.

In Khurkhul the Singlup starts from twenty three to forty years. They are young and strong thus allotted heavy tasks. Those of forty years and above will supervise and look after the services while those who belong to sixty years of age would not do any heavy activities except for some important rituals. Earlier somewhere before 1960 Maunaha (newly married women) used to prepare banana leaves while Leishabi (unmarried girls) used to collect flowers for the ceremony. They used to serve water, wine, betel nut, etc. but presently everything is done by the male members only. The same is followed in Koutruk and Tairenpokpi also but here it starts from an early age of fifteen to sixty years of age.

In Andro, man attaining the age of fifteen to twenty five years comes under the group of 'arangba' (arranger). This group will divide duties among themselves, some will be involved in inviting people while some will arrange for cooking, serving etc. The age group of twenty five to thirty five is called poojari and they will supervise and keep vigilance on everything. If required they will help the arangba in cooking and in performing the other task satisfactorily. It is a norm that while going for invitation and other related works they have to wear white kurta and white dhoti but the new generation

now wears any shirt of their choice. But on the day of the ceremony they have to compulsorily wear white kurta and dhoti. None of them are paid for the services they render as it is a strict traditional norm which every one follows voluntarily. They believe it to be reciprocity of love and help for each other.

Sangaithel, Kakching, Thoubal Khunou and Thongjao also have Singlup system but in a different way. Those who are married have to contribute a fixed amount decided by the Singlup for the death of any member of the Singlup of the area. The functions and allotment of work according to different age groups as found in any other Scheduled Caste villages are not practiced here as majority have adopted to Hindu Meitei ways.

Rites – de – Passage

The traditional customs among the Lois of different villages are somewhat similar though they have certain peculiar features with slight differences from one village to another.

IPanthaba / Yupalthaba/ Birth Ceremony

At the tenth month of pregnancy, a short ritual called *Kokthok-Chamthokpa* is performed by a Maibi (priestess/midwife) for the smooth delivery of the child. On the birth of a child the whole clan is considered to be polluted and such pollution is observed until a simple ceremony called or *Yupalthaba*. During this birth pollution no religious or social ceremonies in the clan can be celebrated. *IPanthaba* ceremony is organized on the fifth day for a male child and on the sixth day for a female child. The items required are: two basketful of paddy for male child and one for female child; some dry fish (a garland of small *nga-kha*); a Meitei salt (local made salt in a thick round shape); a cock for a male and a hen for a female; some amount of wine in a bottle, etc. The offerings are made to all the folk deities by the Maibi (priestess) after which she will

prepare *Heibimana-singju* (a salad like preparation of a particular leaf to be eaten raw) which will be distributed along with a piece of cooked meat (mostly pork) etc. to all the members present in the ceremony. All the offered items are to be presented to the Maibi.

Chaumba / Chakinba

This is a simple ceremony observed after the three months of a birth of a baby. A Maiba is approached for selecting an auspicious day for the ritual as well as for naming the child. On the auspicious day the grandfather and the parents of the child put a small quantity of cooked rice in the child's mouth announcing that he /she is a complete person like any other in the family. In Andro (Imphal East) on this same day ear piercing of the child is also carried out.

Nahutpa / Ear-Peircing

Nahutpa meaning ear-piercing is a ceremony carried out when the child either a boy or a girl attends the age of three. This is mostly conducted in the month of January. They have a tradition of organizing *Nahutpa* (Photo IV.6) commonly for the whole village, hence, the Khullakpa and his other Phamnaibas (traditional administrators) select a fine morning after consulting a Maiba. He will then make the announcement to the community to give the name, day and date of the birth of all the children to be ear-pierced. This is done because they have to pick out the eldest male and female child among them to be pierced first and second respectively and will continue with the other. The parents of the children involved will contribute accordingly. *Nahutpa* is organized in a common area where everybody can find enough space to gather and the invited village elders, friends and relatives are served with *Heibimana-singju* along with cooked meat.



Photo IV.6 Ear piercing ceremony

Luhongba/ Marriage

The Lois use the term *Lai-tin-thaba* for marriage. In general, two types of marriage can be classified: marriage after engagement and marriage after elopement. Marriage after engagement has a long procedure; firstly, three female elders from boy's side have to bring the proposal to the notice of the girl's parents. This is to be done for three times and if accepted by the girl's side, an auspicious day will be decided for *waroipot* meaning final negotiation after consulting a Maiba. On this day of *waroipot* the boy's side has to bring some items to be offered to *Lamlai* (folk deity of the wild land believed to protect the area), Umang Lai (forest deity), Imung Lai (Household deities i.e. Sanamahi and Leimaren), and Apokpa (ancestors) etc. After this *Heijingpot* and marriage ceremony are organized accordingly as decided.

Marriage after elopement is commonly practiced and the formalities are somewhat shorter here. When a boy elope a girl, the boy's parents have to inform the girl's parents the immediate morning. In the evening some elderly women from girl's side would come and ask the girl's willingness which is called *Nupi-machin hangba* and accordingly they will decide regarding the ceremony. In case of elopement there is no *waroipot* ceremony. *Heijingpot*, meaning different items of fruits, is a short ceremony organized a day or two before the marriage. On this day different items of fruits, sweetmeats, and various other items are brought from the boy's place and after performance of some short ritual by the Maiba the items will be distributed to the invitees.

On the day of marriage the parents, relatives and friends of the groom will go to the bride's residence with all the required items for offering to God and for the invited guests. The items are: fifteen bunches of bananas having even numbers, some flowers including *langthrei* (a particular leaf used for ritual purposes), fifteen properly prepared betel nut and leaf properly placed on the banana leaf, fifteen different items of

fruits (Photo IV.7) and an item called *Ashiman* (offerings to be made to the departed souls) which comprises of cooked food with wine etc. All these items are also prepared by the bride's family (Photo IV.8). The ritual is officiated by the Maiba (Photo IV.9 a,b) who will made the offerings to *Lainingthou* and *Leimaren*, *Jatra* at the courtyard, *Apokpa*, *Kei* (granary), *Yang*, *Soren* (evil spirits), *Soraren* (sky), *Koubru*, *Loiyalakpa*, *Thanjing*, *Marjing*, *Wangbren*, *Lamlai*. The offering of the items to these deities is made twice by the groom's family and once by the bride's family. The *Ningol-mawa* (the eldest son-in-law) of the bride's family has to lit the fire in the *Phungaleiru* (a sacred fire place in the house believed to be the abode of Goddess *Emoinu*) in the groom's house and the same will be done by the *Ningol-mawa* (eldest son-in-law) of the groom's family and thus praying for the new couple's happiness and prosperity.

The grooms of Sekmai and Andro cannot sit on the *luhong phan* (a wooden plank specially made for the groom to sit during the marriage) as they believed were cursed by the God and if anyone does so will be encompassed by misfortune. So, for the purpose the groom is made to sit on a red cloth or a red carpet. Marriages are performed in the courtyard of the bride's residence. The Maiba leads the couple in their first salutation to the folk deity *Koubru*, then to *Lainingthou* Sanamahi and *Leimaren* and to *Apokpa* etc. Then the items are distributed among the guests after which a dinner is served by the two families. The groom leaves with the bride and completes the marriage.

In Andro the whole procedure is slightly different. In *waroipot* ceremony i.e. the final negotiation *kwa* (betel nut), fruits among which *heikru* (amla) and *heining* (a kind of fruit) are a must, *kangsubi*, *kabok* (sweetmeats), sugarcane, *wai-yu* / *yai-yu* (specially brewed liquor for religious purpose), and properly cooked pieces of pork and ngamu (dry fish) are the main items of the day. The *wai-yu* / *yai-yu* should be of twelve to thirteen pots and the pieces of the pork are specially selected sixty to seventy meat pieces



Photo IV.7 Offering of fruit items to Houshold deities



Photo IV.8 Preparation of fruit items by the bride's family members



Photo IV.9. a. A maiba offering prayer to the household deities on the day of marriage



Photo IV.9.b. A maiba offering prayer to the jatra in the courtyard

called *Laipot* (items to be offered to the deities). The head, limb and different parts of the meat will be offered and later distributed to the older clan members of the family. The head is given to the grandparents of the bride and if they are not alive then it is given to the maternal uncle of the bride. Then everything will be distributed to all the members attending the ceremony.

In Andro during earlier days those couple who eloped were not allowed to get married with the elaborate rituals as they are not considered good and bring bad name to the parents. But now with change of times, those who elope are also allowed for marriage but in such marriages the *heijingpot* should be organized in the morning and in the same evening marriage ceremony is also to be organized. Otherwise the process of a marriage ceremony with the consent of the parents will be started with *Heijingpot* in which the groom's family will have to bring *kwa* (betel nut and leaf), varieties of fruits among which *heikru* (amla) and *heining* (a variety of fruit) is compulsory, *kangsubi* and *kabok* (sweetmeats) sugar cane etc. are also important. Later after offering to the various deities the items will be distributed to the relatives and invitees present in the ceremony. Earlier *heijingpot* was mostly organized early in the morning but now it is also performed in the evening according to the convenience of the couples' families. The Maiba will arrange everything and officiate the ceremony by offering the items to the various deities of the village and ancestors of the couples' families etc. The ceremony is performed at the courtyard of the bride's family. And unlike Hindu marriage the bride has to circle the groom in an anti-clockwise direction. After the marriage in the evening the parents will see off the bride and the couple will be accompanied by her friends to the groom's house where they all will hold the night in the groom's house. On the next day they all will enjoy a feast of meat or fish and will leave the groom's house.

The fifth day after the marriage is a big feast called *Mangani Chakouba* which is hosted by the bride's family in which the groom's family, relatives and friends are invited. In Andro after the *Mangani Chakouba* another feast called *daan chakchaba* is also arranged by the couple from the money they have received as daan (money given in the form of blessing by elders) in their marriage. It is being arranged in the groom's residence where all the relatives and friends are invited. It does not have a fixed day or date and so it can be organized anytime according to the couple's convenience.

Loukhatpa

This is another form of marriage meaning acceptance of the couple. This happens when the parents of the girl do not like to arrange marriage because of their unwillingness to their daughter's choice and thus discontinue their relationship with their daughter until *loukhatpa* is performed. Here, the couple, their parents and relatives of the boy have to go to the girl's residence to organize a short ritual by the Maiba. The couple has to bow down to the girl's parents until they announce their acceptance and bless them which is followed by a small feast.

Language / Dialect

Earlier the Lois have a dialect called Chakpa which is different from the common Meiteilon (common language of all the Meiteis). Presently they do not use that dialect as the youngsters are not much familiar with it. They speak the same Meiteilon but the tone and the pronunciation is remarkably distinct from the one spoken by the Hindu Meiteis. The rites and rituals are performed by the Maiba (priest) in pure Meiteilon (pure Meitei dialect). The script used for the dialect is Bengali.

Food

Regarding food habits, the Yaithibis are similar with Hindu Meiteis. The Lois are more of non-vegetarian eaters unlike Hindu Meiteis where such eating habit is

found mostly among the youth only. The Yaithibis and the Hindu Meiteis do not use meat items or wine in any religious rituals. The sanskritised Lois and the Sanamahi cult followers among them also follow this restriction in their ritual while the indigenous Lois differ remarkably in this matter as the use of meat especially pork meat and wine is a requisite in certain rituals.

Dress

The Loi and Yaithibi men wear khudei (a cloth worn by Meitei men at home) and phanek and phee (a phanek is a cloth worn from waist to feet and phee is the cloth worn in the upper portion of the body to cover the blouse) are worn by women as the standard dress for any married Meitei in Manipur while the unmarried ones do not wear phee (Photo IV.10 a, b). Like other Hindu Meitei they also wear costumes according to the ceremony. One noticeable difference from Hindu Meitei is that they wear colored dress in the funeral procession unlike the Hindu Meitei who wears only white in such occasions.

In marriage the groom's costume of white kurta, dhoti, white shawl and a white turban is common while the bride wears, a blouse with thin cotton cloth, *phanek mapannaiba* and *enaphee* (traditional formal wear of the Meitei women) and gold ornaments. But now depending on one's choice the bride also uses the '*poloi*' (marriage costume of the Hindu Meitei bride).

Nowadays, in Andro the bride wears a costume like skirt or sari, as she cannot wear *poloi*. Except for the *poloi* they can wear all the ornaments. They have a belief that *Ema Panthoibi* (Goddess Panthoibi) had worn phanek when She eloped with *Nongpok Ningthou* and had visited Andro. Thus, all the brides of the place should wear like Her only.



Photo IV.10.a. A married Loi Woman



Photo IV.10.b. An unmarried Loi girl

Superstition

It is considered that crossing under the bamboo stand made up for drying clothes brings bad fortune and illhealth. There is a common practice of burning *Khoiju Leikham* leaves when a person or a place is believed to be under the spell of evil spirits. The smoke emitted from it is believed to be powerful and useful in such situation to drive away the evil spirits.

A person suffering from migraine can be cured if his/her head is touched by a child who was born with his/her legs first.

They have a common belief that if pregnant women have to walk out at night due to unavoidable circumstances, then they have to cover their heads. Otherwise they might be exposed to evil spirits. If delivery of a child is complicated, the chapokpi (midwife) will adopt measures like opening of doors and windows of the house; removing the cover of the pots and other utensils having covers etc. Making a hole in the sacred site of Sanamahi (household deity) is also done which is known as *Sanathong Hutpa* (paving of the golden path). Another devise is that of making the pregnant women pass through two branches of Shingnang (dried woods use for cooking purpose) tied together at the top end and separated wide at the bottom.

In any funeral procession where rivers or canals are to be crossed while taking the dead body to the funeral site, two women will hold the two ends of a thread on either side of the river or cannal so that the thread serve as a bridge for the soul and thus will be easily able to cross the river.

The Dwelling House

The traditional dwelling of Loi is almost similar to a Meitei house in shape and size. But generally a Hindu Meitei house faces East while most of the houses in Phayeng face South. The traditional houses have the same materials of bamboo, wood,

mud for wall plaster and a thatched roof. Nowadays, there are houses of different types and shapes, some even concrete pucca houses.

Kitchen

The structure and the materials of the Kitchen depend on the affordability of the income in the family. Some of them are still using the traditional Chula method to cook food while some are using gas for the purpose. In every kitchen a pot containing rice called *Chengphu* is kept. It is believed that the Chengphu should be always filled with rice as it signifies Goddess of wealth. The kitchen in Loi family does not carry stringent practice of pollution and purity like the Hindu Meiteis. The Yaithibis follow the Hindu Meiteis in their practice of pollution and purity.

Death Ceremony

The Lois have their own customs for the disposal of the dead followed by a number of rites and ceremonies. The dead body is kept in a place called '*Khagembam*' in the courtyard where a hut called '*Khangpok*' is temporarily erected by the villagers. The dead body is bathed and put on with colourful clothes by their near kin. The '*ku*' (coffin) is also beautifully painted with different colors and decorated with flowers which is called '*Keiren-keijao yekpa*' by the community elders, clan members and the Singlup members. The funeral procession to the cremation area also includes a band party. The first round of fire of the cremation should be lit by the '*Ningol-mawa*' (son-in-law). Customarily the husband of the daughter of the deceased must dig for burying the remnants after cremation. The son-in-law is known as '*Khoidousaba*' and if the deceased is male, three '*Khoidousabas*' are required and two if female. The '*Khoidousaba*' who started the cremation has to bring the pot used in the funeral process and break it at the first entrance or the gate of the house of the deceased. The other '*Khoidousaba*' will be waiting at the entrance to purify those who have participated in the cremation by sprinkling water with a

particular leaf known as '*Tairen*' (toona cilitia leaves) and '*Khoiju Leikham*' (a leaf mainly used for ritual purpose) after which he will purify the whole house. He will have to light fire at '*phungaleiru*' and after this he is served food by the family members. Some old women folks will prepare '*Heibimana-singju*' and serve to all who have come for the funeral.

The shraddha or kirtan can be arranged any time in December or January as these are free months from agricultural work and from financial difficulties. Mostly at kirtan the feast is of pork meat which is prepared by the local youth of Singlup. No other ceremony is performed unlike Hindu Meiteis.

In Phayeng also the same procedure is followed but the difference is in the role played by the '*ningol-mawa*' (son-in-law). Before starting the funeral procession a peculiar dance like steps called '*Khou-Chongba*' are performed by the '*ningol-mawa*' for three times. It is believed that by doing so the soul would not be disturbed by any other creature from reaching heaven.

In the funeral procession a person of the clan will carry an arrow and a bow made of thin bamboo stick to prevent the soul from any disturbances by any animals, birds or insects. After the cremation, an old aged woman after properly purifying herself by bathing and changing washed clothes will carry a pot on her back covered by clothes on which the feature of the deceased accordingly to the gender are painted. The woman carries the pot to the cremation spot and slowly put down the pot on the banana leaf not to touch the ground. A group of five to ten men and women who had accompanied the old lady will help her in collecting the bones which should be even in number. The collected bones are wrapped in a banana leaf and are placed inside the pot and covered. This time the lady will carry the pot on her front side enacting like a pregnant woman which will give birth to a new soul. It is a belief that by doing so, the soul will be born again. The pot

is buried in a particular area called '*Luphu-Phumbam*' which is a few metres away from the cremation area. After the completion of the process tea and singju is served to the participants of the funeral procession.

The house is purified by sprinkling tairen (Toona ciliata leaves) water by the Maiba on the fifth day or even on the third day if some other ceremonies are to be performed. There is no *Aasthi* ceremony or fixed timing for *Shraddha*. For the salvation of the departed soul a feast is organized usually in the month of December or January called Kirtan. They do not restrict themselves from fish or meat during such period but the family members have to restrain themselves (mostly by elders) from one of his/her favorite food item until the kirtan is performed. This abstinence could be any dish, pan, cigarette, wine etc. which is a way of showing respect and love to the departed soul.

In Andro the whole process of the ceremony is somewhat different from the other Lois. Every sagei (clan) has their own particular clan member to perform the role of '*Ningol-matunginba*' and '*Makshaba*'. For example if anyone from Chingakham clan dies then the Yumkhaibam clan should be the one doing the role of '*Ningol-matunginba*' and '*Makshaba*.' When the corpse is taken out in the courtyard, the old ladies of the village will cook rice and chicken in the mangol (varendah) to be fed to the corpse by the '*Ningol-matunginba*' and '*Makshaba*'. It is a ritual enacting the serving of food to the dead person before he/ she leaves the house forever. The food is fed for five times if the deceased person is a man and six times for a woman. This process is called *Chakunba*. The whole process of cremation is performed by the two most important persons, *Ningol-matunginba* and *Makshaba*. In any death ritual these two entitled persons play very important role. Later when the cremation is nearly over, the elders of the family and the village will bring three items of fruits, flowers, kwa and will be offered at the cremation area. The *Ningol-matunginba* and *Makshaba* will be purified by the local elders by pouring water on their

foot. After getting purified, these two persons will repeat the process of offering food to the dead soul by keeping the cooked food near the thongan (main gate). These two persons will have to come on the third day to purify the house and family members by sprinkling tairenmana water every where in the house.

The people of Andro do not perform *Aasthi* ritual. The *Mathou Mangnam Pangthokpa* which is now called as *Shraddha* ceremony is organized on the fifth day for male and on the sixth day for female. During the mourning days before *Shraddha* the family members are not restricted on eating meat, fish etc. unlike Hindu Meiteis. From the day of cremation till the *Shraddha* ceremony a doll depicting the form of the dead person (male/female) is kept in the corner of the house. The doll is offered food everyday whatever cooked in the family along with sweetmeat and fruits. It is done with a belief that the soul does not depart the family till the *Shraddha* ceremony. On the day of the *Shraddha* ceremony a feast is organized in which the important food items are *champhut*, *uti* and *shagulhawai shok* (different preparation of traditional items) and singju. Along with it pork and chicken are served according to the financial condition of the family. On that particular morning *lairiktaba* (recitation of folk stories and legendary incidents of the ancestors) are performed by the Maiba. And the doll which has been kept in the house is taken out and is burnt on that day.

After the completion of three months from the day of the death, on one particular day of thasi (new moon) a small feast is arranged by the family for the relatives and the elders. Some items such as twelve bunches of banana, twelve plates of Meitei salt, twelve preparations of kwa and rice, meat etc. are also offered. This is known as '*Thasi chak*'. And on the turning of one year from the day of death a feast called '*Phiroi*' is arranged by the family and with the completion of this feast the soul is believed to be totally departed from the bonding of the family to be mingled in the place of God.

In all these rituals related feast of death, the *Ningol-matunginba* and *Makshaba* who have played crucial role in the cremation and in all the other related rituals of death ceremony have to sit on the first row and initiate the feast and if, in any case they could not come then, no one attending the feast can start eating.

During earlier days ceremonial feast for death were organized in a row of *Shraddha* in the fifth or sixth day, *Thasi-chak* in the completion of the third month, *Shamashor* in completion of one year and *Kirtan* in the completion of third year. But now, only *Shraddha*, *Thasi-chak* and *Phiroi* are arranged to complete the whole ritual of the death ceremony.

IV.2. Issues Related to Social Stratification

Stratification is a system of social inequality based on hierarchy orderings of groups according to their members' share in socially valued rewards. The nature of these rewards varies from society to society, but usually consists of wealth, power, and status. Stratification takes three principle forms that is, class, estate, and caste. Class refers to a stratification system based on economic position. Estate refers to a legally codified feudal system found in traditionalist agrarian societies and based largely on the circumstances of birth. Caste refers to a rigid system of differential privilege that may operate independently of economic status, notably the religiously based system of India or perhaps the racially based system of South Africa. Of the three forms, class systems offer the greatest individual mobility (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1974: 287).

The fact that caste system is seen as an example par excellence of social stratification, gives an indication of the specificity of the term and the range it can include. The caste system, as it is understood widely, separates and hierarchizes Hindus. However, it is not sufficient if this separation and hierarchization are wholly internalized or intellectualized. It is only when hierarchy and differences are externalized and socially

demonstrated that we can truly talk about social stratification. Rituals, dress, tonsorial styles, marriage practices, and a host of other such phenomena too that are appropriately valorized for the purposes of hierarchical ranking. It is for this reason that when we talk of social stratification we not only mean differentiation but differentiation that is made socially visible (Gupta 1991: 2).

If the rights and perquisites of different positions in a society must be unequal, then the society must be stratified, because that is precisely what stratification means. Social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies ensure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons. Hence, every society, no matter how simple or complex, must differentiate persons in terms of both prestige and esteem, and must therefore possess a certain amount of institutionalized inequality (Davis & Moore 1945: 443-4)

IV.2.a Caste

Caste is the traditional closed system of social stratification existing in India. Status distinctions are ascriptive, based on the circumstances of birth, and sanctioned by Indian religion (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1974: 34). An institution of considerable internal complexity, which has been oversimplified by those seeking an ideal type of rigid hierarchical social stratification, based on extreme closure criteria. Caste orders the lives of Indian Hindus and has as its basis the fivefold varna division embracing Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, and Untouchable. Within each varna there exist myriad jati, which are small endogamous groups, tied to a defining occupation, based in a village or group of villages, and which provide for the element of mobility within a system where otherwise birth determines social rank (Marshall 1998: 57).

Andre Beteille (1965) describes a caste as “a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life

which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system, based on concepts of purity and pollution”. There is hierarchy in diet and occupation, though this varies somewhat from region to region (Srinivas 1991: 31).

Among the two original Scheduled Castes of Manipur, the Lois, who constitute a majority, have a higher social position. While the Yaithibis, constituting a much lesser population have lower social position. Among the Lois of different villages there is no hierarchy of higher and lower but the Yaithibis were once considered or treated as ‘untouchables’ by the Hindu Meiteis as well as by the Lois. Unlike the Lois, who are located in the fringes of different districts, the Yaithibis are found only in two interior villages called Thoubal Khunou in Thoubal district and a small portion in Andro village of Imphal East district (Table IV.5).

Table IV. 5
Caste profile

| Districts | Area | Loi | Yaithibi | Total |
|--------------|-------|-----|----------|-------|
| Bishnupur | Urban | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Rural | 100 | 0 | 100 |
| | Total | 100 | 0 | 100 |
| Imphal East | Urban | 80 | 0 | 80 |
| | Rural | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| | Total | 90 | 10 | 100 |
| Imphal West | Urban | 30 | 0 | 30 |
| | Rural | 70 | 0 | 70 |
| | Total | 100 | 0 | 100 |
| Thoubal | Urban | 50 | 20 | 70 |
| | Rural | 20 | 10 | 30 |
| | Total | 70 | 30 | 100 |
| Total | | 360 | 40 | 400 |

The Lois and the Yaithibis do not have interaction and thus, very less awareness of each other’s lifestyle. The reason they accounted for this are geographical

location, poor transport and communication, and the remains of the age old belief of pollution and purity. But now, many of the Lois have liberalized their notions against Yaithibis and instead of employing the title 'Yaithibi', which they used to do previously, today they refer them as 'Thoubal Khunou', i.e. the village in which they reside. Both the Lois and the Yaithibis have no knowledge of other Scheduled Castes namely *Dhupis*, *Patnis*, *Muchis*, *Namsudra* and *Sutradhar* as they consider them as early migrants from other nearby states and not the original Meiteis.

Almost all the hundred percent of the respondents irrespective of the criteria, expressed that, they do not have a clear cut knowledge about caste system. Though there is no structure of caste system among them but those Lois who are properly aware of the origin of the Yaithibis consider Yaithibis as lower and more degrading than themselves. Because of this reason the Lois at earlier times did not have interactions or relations with the Yaithibi even though both of the communities belong to scheduled caste. There is very rare intermarriage between them. As the Yaithibi are numerically very less and totally excluded geographically as well as in religion and lifestyle from other scheduled caste, they are not much known and interacted by Lois. And all this could be a factor of the Lois belief of themselves to be the only scheduled caste and thus, no structure of higher or lower status among them.

According to the opinion of the three hundred and sixty Loi respondents and forty Yaithibi respondents 5.28% (19) and 42.5% (17) of them respectively expressed that though there is no specific structure among the Scheduled Castes in Manipur, the Yaithibis were earlier considered as lower and polluting than the Lois. And 57.5% (23) of Yaithibis remarked that they were treated by the Hindu Meiteis as polluting than the Lois and the Lois also consider them as lower than themselves. While the majority of the

respondent i.e.94.72% (341) expressed that there is no specific structure of hierarchy among the Scheduled Castes.

All the hundred percent respondents irrespective of the variation in age, sex, districts, etc have expressed much flexibility in terms of intra-marriage and intra-dinning among the Lois. But so far not much intermixing with Yaithibis is found as there is very less interaction among them.

A middle aged and three old aged men, i.e. 1.1% of the respondents expressed that at a nearby village called Uchon in Imphal East district, they were made to eat outside and not allowed to touch anything in the kitchen when they visited their friend's place when they were young. They felt that Hindu followers in villages are more orthodox than those in Imphal but since 1980 or so such discrimination has reduced to a great extent. Supplementing the above responses 5.83% (21) recalled how they were separated from Hindu Meiteis in a social feast. An old man still remembers how a Hindu Meitei changed his place in order to avoid sitting next to him in the same row. They were considered polluted for domesticating hens, pigs, ducks, etc but now many Hindu Meiteis also domesticate animals which were earlier prohibited. And many in Leimaram are adapted to Hinduism since their ancestor's time because of which they experience somewhat less ill-treatment.

According to 8.9% (32) of the respondents, the concept of pollution was at its peak during 1940s. Among them three old aged men narrated that while they were students they used to stay at their Hindu Meitei friend's house or in a rented house but were never allowed to enter and eat in their kitchens though they can freely enter other rooms after sprinkling tulsi water. They were not invited to Hindu Meitei's functions or to their homes and were not allowed to enter mandap (a place near temple) during Rath yatra festival. There were incidents where a Hindu Meitei friend wanted to invite his Loi

(Kakching) friend for some function but was threatened by the villagers. But all these things are no more practiced and even Hindu Meitei and Brahmin settle in their village (Sekmai) solely for economic purpose though very less in number. One of the two old aged men (0.50%) accounted that he and his family was not invited for his father-in-law's shraddha / funeral only because they were Lois. And usually Hindu Meitei did not eat food cooked by them in their kitchen as there were strong beliefs of pollution on cooked food, water, utensils etc. So, whenever any Hindu Meitei friend visited them they themselves cook everything separately and eat. All such things happened even after they (Kakching) have been adapted to Hinduism and followed the Hindu ways of life. And in another case when he was small he unknowingly used a Hindu Meitei's pot for swimming in the pond for which his parents were made to pay for the pot.

A large majority of respondents i.e. 78.33% (282) could not say anything specific as according to them, they have been experiencing a normal relation with Hindu Meitei since they could remember and that inter-marriage with Hindu Meitei has been a common phenomena. They have heard of strong restrictions regarding intermingling and inter-marriage and the concept of pollution and purity towards them in earlier times. But now the distinction and restrictions which once existed have relaxed and there has been an increase in inter-marriages between the Lois and the Hindu Meitei. However, the feeling of social stigma of being a scheduled caste still continues to exist among both the groups. 1.39% (5) of the middle aged women stated that they have been looked down for their eating and brewing habits earlier but now they experience that many Hindu Meiteis are also eating meat and thus not different from them anymore. They further added that to some extent the Hindu Meiteis' hesitation towards them also differs according to their economic and occupational status. A Loi woman working in an office narrated that she was avoided by the staff who belong to Hindu Meiteis, to eat along with her. And 2.2% (8)

responded that even though orthodox Brahmin and Hindu Meiteis prohibit inter-caste marriages with Lois, in general inter-caste marriages among them have increased. According to them increase in inter-caste marriages are due to improved education, better economic condition, mixed settlement and mutual understanding and adjustments between both the communities. They also expressed that majority of scheduled caste elders prefer their children to be married into their own scheduled caste community, rather than marrying into Hindu Meitei or a Brahmin or any other community.

For majority the earlier concepts of caste, pollution, rigidity and orthodoxy have been almost non-existent. The younger generation no more believes or experiences earlier orthodoxy as they do not give much importance to such things. The modern society leaves everything on individual's choice but still marriage with a Brahmin is rare. And there are still people among Brahmins and Hindu Meiteis mostly uneducated, orthodox and narrow-minded, live with the idea of pollution and purity and consider Scheduled Castes as low, While 1.7% (6) did not comment on anything.

Among the Yaithibis, 80% (32) of them revealed that they have heard of strong restrictions and prohibitions for being Yaithibi during early times but since long time no such restrictions or prohibitions are experienced. According to 20% (8) old aged respondents of Thoubal Khunou earlier during king's rule i.e. somewhere before 1950, the idea and belief of pollution and purity were very strong and they were made to wear a sky blue colored turban, mostly by elderly people whenever they moved out of their village to places like market and main areas so that they were identified by others and to maintain distance from them. Those who did not wear were caught by king's men and threatened or even beaten them up. In the market they were to buy and pay the money without touching anything or anyone otherwise they have to pay the price of the whole item for polluting it. They were prohibited from entering palace and also prohibited from admitting in schools

but it was only after 1947 that they were allowed to admit in schools, and the other restrictions are gradually relaxed.

The idea of caste system and the various factors associated with it are not clear to them. The lack of knowledge which the Lois showed about the Yaithibis gives the notion that there is very less interaction among the Scheduled Castes themselves. The older generation has experienced some form of ill-treatment emotionally as well as practically when they were young. The Yaithibis had experienced severe discrimination than the Lois. But the younger generation is not facing such ill-treatment in any profound way. This is to an extent because of the improvement brought by some of the Scheduled Castes in the fields of education, occupation and economy. Apart from these, the flexibility in the attitudes and orthodoxy of the Hindu Meiteis is also significant factor for these changes.

The '*Lois*' of Manipur were mainly classified on the basis of religion. When Hinduism was rising high and spreading fast in the state, the king ordered all Meiteis to accept and profess this religion. Those who denied the King's order were bestowed with harsh punishment. The title '*Loi*' is a punishment meted out to those communities who offended the king in various ways. Because of this new religion the prior ways of eating habits, religious practices, profession and the life style as a whole have changed resulting to differences between the old traditional followers and the new religion followers. As majority of the population had adapted to Hinduism, it was considered a higher and pure religion to the previous indigenous religion. As a result those who failed to accept Hindu ways were looked down upon and treated lowly. They were isolated from the mainstream as they were considered polluting and degrading.

Another group of scheduled caste called the '*Yaithibis*' were even more ill-fated than the Lois as this group was considered even lower than the Lois. The Yaithibi

were in all cultural patterns like Meitei Hindu only. However, others do not call them Meitei because they consist of an exiled and socially outcaste people on account of their grave offence such as marrying near relatives like sisters, and such other near kin. The Yaithibi concede that they are the outcastes but they do not accept the Meitei's version of the reasons of their ex-communication. According to them due to injustice by the king and some of his favorites, they were compelled to accept their low position (Saha 1994: 64)

Regarding the existence of caste stratification in their villages, 12.5% (50) of the respondents from all the four districts expressed that though no strict caste stratification exist but Brahmins and Hindu Meitei consider themselves as higher than the others. The Brahmins are regarded pure for which they perform rites and rituals. Inter-marriage with them and other caste is still restricted. They also revealed that the Scheduled Castes in Thoubal Khunou and some portion of Scheduled Castes in Andro were considered as Yaithibi for which they were positioned even lower than the Lois. According to the opinion of 87.5% (350) respondents, there was no strict and specific caste stratification as such though they were aware that the Hindu Meitei somewhat look down upon them for being a scheduled caste. According to them such classifications are all man made and any discrimination on any basis is wrong as all are born equal.

In matters of believing in caste system 2% (8) of the Bishnupur district had given a similar opinion that in their point of view caste system is an inevitable way of society which had been in practice since early times though may not be in a profound way. But all the remaining majority of the respondents i.e. 98% (392) from all the four districts responded that believing in the existence of caste system is wrong and that such concept is irrelevant to the modern time as all human beings are equal.

Regarding the issue of the basis of stratification of the Scheduled Castes in Manipur, the Yaithibis explanation for their stratification is quite different from that of the

Lois. 50% (20) of the Yaithibis of Thoubal Khunou urban of Thoubal district stated that they are the victims of an unfortunate incident of a girl called Laishram Thambalnambi. They narrated that the king wanted to marry this girl and the refusal of the girl to the king's order was the turning point of their fate. The whole family of the girl was deported to a far away foothill, the present area of Thoubal Khunou and was totally excommunicated. Their clan was announced polluted and anyone helping them were threatened to excommunicate and thus, later on they were titled as scheduled caste. And according to 7.5% (3) Yaithibis of Imphal East rural, they were stratified as lower than the Lois because of their practice of incest within the same clan by their ancestors which they believe is not wholly true. But 17.5% (7) of them from Thoubal and Imphal East rural referred to their traditional occupations, other unhygienic occupations like poultry, piggery, their backwardness in education, economy as well as their geographical location as the reasons for their basis of stratification while 25% (10) of Thoubal urban and Imphal East rural have no knowledge of the reasons for their scheduled caste status.

Among the Lois, 2.5% (9) of Thoubal urban respondents felt that as being the descendents of their ancestors who were Lois during king's time, they were later regarded as scheduled caste. And 1.1% (4) of Imphal West urban attributed all the factors like poor/backward economy, caste, occupation, religion etc as their basis of stratification. 31.7% (114) of Thoubal, Bishnupur and Imphal East districts believed that their traditional occupations of iron smelting, brewing, piggery, pottery, their backwardness in economy, education, their location in the periphery and at foothills, etc. are the most important reasons for being stratified as scheduled caste. A young man (0.27%) from Imphal East urban area supplemented by saying that it was in 1958 when a commission came and categorized them as backward on the basis of their socio-economic condition they were classified as scheduled caste. The practice of indigenous religion and the resulting

religious differences were emphasized as the main reasons by 41.38% (149) of them from Imphal East, Imphal West and Bishnupur districts. They further stated that earlier all of them that is, Meiteis, Tribals, were equal and shared a much close-knit relationship but the relationship started becoming sour during the rule of King Charairongba. The feelings of high and low started to show and they were fully bloomed during the reign of King Pamheiba, when a Bengali called Shanti Das Gosai started influencing and spreading Hinduism with the strong consent of the king. They further stated that their ancestors (Lois) did not obey to the king's order to adopt Hinduism and were rebellious for which they were driven away to the foothills with an imposed task of protecting the boundary. Above that their occupations of brewing liquor, piggery, poultry, living style and other habits which are accompanied with their indigenous religion further created distance from Hinduism and as a result they are treated as degrading group of people.

Some elderly men of Andro Imphal East urban narrated that a wise man called *Khongnangthaba* who was a very close advisor to the King *Pamheiba* insisted on the followings of the indigenous religion for which he was deported to a far away place and was announced as polluting. According to their belief the people of Andro are his descendents and are the oldest Meitei (Meitei Ariba) in Manipur. They believed that Andro is originated from '*Atiya Guru Sidaba*' (The Sun God) and later on settled at *Nongmaijing Ching* (a hill) and are the first human race created by the God. They all expressed that "Scheduled caste" was a title awarded at around 1956 only because of the struggle led out by the late ex-minister Kh. Chaoba of Sekmai to draw some benefits for them. But 23.05% (83) respondents of all the four districts had no knowledge on what basis they were stratified as scheduled caste.

Regarding the earlier consideration of Yaithibi as untouchable, 20.83% (75) of the respondents from Thoubal urban, Bishnupur, and Imphal West had no knowledge of

Yaithibis or its title of being an 'untouchable'. While 51.11% (184) of the Loi respondents and 27.5% (11) of the Yaithibi respondent have heard of the 'untouchability' title given to Yaithibis but they could not bring out any reason for getting the title Yaithibi. But 27.22% (98) respondents from all the four districts expressed that, Yaithibis were group of people who breached social norms mainly by practicing incest, involving in severe crimes like killing, conspiring against the king etc. for which they were excommunicated. While 0.83% (3) of them from Thoubal urban mentioned that it is because of their degrading occupations of latrine cleaning and sweeping that made them untouchable.

But quite contrastingly to the above mentioned reasons 72.5% (29) of the Yaithibis of Thoubal district had presented their own version for being treated low. They relate to their status of Yaithibi to a story of a girl called *Thambalnambi* of *Laishram* clan, daughter of L.Heiyutomba of Phubala. From that incident onwards they were entitled as 'Yaithibi' which actually is a mispronunciation of the word 'Jatthibi' meaning rebellious, stubborn etc. Eventually, those who are married to a man of Laishram clan or vice versa became a Yaithibi. This restriction on making marriage alliance with other caste made them to practice incest for sometime though sooner they restricted themselves from it. But the Hindu Meitei and Lois have preconceived notion that they continue to practice incest for long even though they themselves render harsh punishment to those who did so.

According to 1.94% (7) respondents from Imphal East urban and Imphal West rural, they still consider the Yaithibis as somewhat lower in status because of their habits. They remember that earlier they used to run from them (Yaithibi) because of the fear of being polluted if touched by them. While 98.05% (353) of the respondents from all the four districts have no longer consider them as lower or polluting. Among them two old aged men of Thoubal urban stated that they initiated in purifying the Yaithibi by going to their village (Thoubal Khunou) along with some Congress leaders of that time around

1955-56 and taught them to lead a hygienic and good life. All the (40) Yaithibis themselves felt that they were no more considered as untouchable and after getting the title of Scheduled Caste even the use of the word '*Yaithibi*' is prohibited by the government and those whoever use the title to address them are fined an amount of five hundred rupees.

According to the 10% (4) of the Yaithibis from Thoubal district and Imphal East rural their lifestyle and behavior are totally different from other Scheduled Caste in the sense that they are staunch followers of Hinduism and Sanamahi cult. Similarly 20.5% (82) Loi respondents of all four districts irrespective of the variation in age, sex and location responded that the Yaithibis have a different lifestyle from other Scheduled Caste as they are strict followers of Hinduism and Sanamahi cult. Their way of life resembles the Hindu Meitei ways. While 0.75% (3) of them from Thoubal rural felt that the lifestyle of Yaithibis is inferior to Hindu Meiteis as they do not take bath before having food or use *chandan / tilak* etc. And a majority of 68.75% (275) of the respondents from all the four districts has no knowledge of Yaithibis, their lifestyle or behavior. And their unawareness is supported by reasons like absence of interaction with them and distance factor due to improper transport and communication facilities.

Regarding the notion of pollution, 6.75% (27) have a feeling of hesitancy towards Muslims and Tribals. But such hesitancy is not on the basis of one's caste but differences in lifestyle and culture. To them, the Muslims and Tribals are impure and unhygienic as they do not bath before entering into kitchen or having food and they do not change clothes after going to toilet. Among them 4 old aged men from urban area of Imphal West still do not allow Muslims and Tribals to enter their homes. Respondents from Thoubal urban and Bishnupur expressed that Muslims' and Tribals' habit of eating meat is another reason. But 92.25% (369) of them from all the four districts responded that

they do not believe in the concept of pollution on the basis of caste or for any other reason but rather consider cleanliness and hygienic ways of life as more important.

All the hundred percent respondents irrespective of the different criteria responded that they have not experienced any caste conflict in their respective areas.

The structure of caste system is very unclear and vague in this society. They do not have a proper knowledge of the nature of caste system. The main basis of stratification of the Lois is because of their insistence on indigenous religion and its associated practices while Yaithibis' case is associated with a different reason. The Lois express that they do not consider the Yaithibi as untouchable now but there is still much distance between the two Scheduled Caste communities. The concept of purity and pollution on the basis of caste is slowly fading among the younger generations.

IV.2.b. Class

Class in its simplest usage is merely a category of people who have been grouped together on the basis of one or more common characteristics. The characteristics can usually be viewed as hierarchical. Basically, then, a class is a stratum in a hierarchically stratified social structure (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1974: 44).

It is a social distinction and division resulting from the unequal distribution of rewards and resources such as wealth, power, and prestige. Sociologists define social class primarily on the basis of how these divisions are identified. Karl Marx argued that class divisions are based on differences in people's relationships to the process of production. While Max Weber identified class according to three dimensions of inequality that is class, power and prestige. He used the term "class" to refer to life chances, or the ability of the people to get what they want and need etc (Johnson 1995: 256). Caste refers to inequality in theory as well as in practice (Sharma 2006: 79-80). Dumont (1970) considers inequality based on the caste system as a special type of inequality.

Like in any other society the Loi and the Yaithibi community of Manipur is not untouched by the consciousness of high and low class. In these scheduled caste communities the feeling of differences in social class in accordance with one's economic prosperity and educational qualification is inevitable. Economic disparity leads to different living standards and status but this does not result in strict dichotomy of high or low class. According to the norms of these societies the younger generation has to respect and serve the older generation in different occasions and ceremonies irrespective of one's educational or economic status.

All the four hundred respondents of all the four districts viewed that specific class stratification is almost non-existent among them, though the undeniable fact of different living standards and a psychological feeling of superiority and inferiority due to variation in sources of income always exist. They further stated that they respect and regard one another on the basis of seniority regardless of one's economic and social position. In any gathering or village functions it is the tradition that the younger people however high in status have to serve the elders of the village.

Neither do they all face any form of class conflict nor stringent occupational hierarchy. They all share the view that it becomes very natural in any society that a person receives honor and recognition in accordance to his educational qualification and occupational position in the society as compared to a person with none of these. A middle aged man of Imphal West (urban) expressed that in the modern society power is more important as for instance even if an under graduate becomes a minister he is revered but an M.A or however qualified a person but without a proper service/job is a nobody in the society.

In both the Loi and Yaithibi communities there are no strict dichotomy of class system. But the feeling of superiority and higher status by more advanced individual

over the inferior ones exists. It is also seen that a good post in the government sector and a sound financial condition always brings recognition in the society. But this does not stop them from following the age old norm of serving the elders of the village by the younger generations in any occasion.

IV.3. Various Forms of Disabilities

After independence, the practice of untouchability was declared unconstitutional, but the fact is that it still exists. The sufferings of the untouchables have not come to an end. According to Majumdar (1961) “the untouchable castes are those who suffer from various social and political disabilities, many of which are traditionally prescribed and socially enforced by the higher castes. Thus if the whole bases of untouchability are not destroyed, a simple provision for its legal status will bear scanty fruits”. For centuries, they were denied political representation, legal rights, civic facilities, educational privileges and economic opportunities. During the British rule also, no proper attention was paid to uplift the untouchables to relieve them from their bondages. Even today they are not completely free from the problem which made them to suffer for centuries (Rao 2004: 268-9).

IV.3.a. Economic Disabilities

Among the total four hundred sample of the four districts 274 (68.5%) of the respondents come under the lower income group (LIG), 124 (31%) of them belong to middle income group (MIG) and 2 (0.5%) of them enjoy the status of the higher income group (HIG) (Table IV.6). In the district of Thoubal urban area and Imphal West 9.75% (39) respondents had been able to manage from their income while 16.5% (66) of them face financial problems in educating their children, in meeting the expenditure towards marriage, etc. But a large percentage of respondents i.e. 73.75% (295) from all the

four districts face financial problems in every sphere of their life. Among them one female of Thoubal rural area expressed that sometimes it becomes too difficult even to get a day's meal. They also mentioned that due to lack of income they cannot do anything and this has led to their lower standard of living.

All the hundred percent of the respondents of all the four districts strongly asserted that, neither does caste interfere in their choice of economic activities nor are they considered as bonded labour.

Table IV. 6
Economic Profile

| Districts | | Less than 50,000(LIG) | 50000 to 2,00,000(MIG) | 2,00,000 & above(HIG) | Total |
|--------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| Bishnupur | Rural | 99 | 1 | 0 | 100 |
| | Urban | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Total | 99 | 1 | 0 | 100 |
| Imphal East | Rural | 20 | 0 | 0 | 20 |
| | Urban | 71 | 9 | 0 | 80 |
| | Total | 91 | 9 | 0 | 100 |
| Imphal West | Rural | 36 | 34 | 0 | 70 |
| | Urban | 4 | 25 | 1 | 30 |
| | Total | 40 | 59 | 1 | 100 |
| Thoubal | Rural | 18 | 12 | 0 | 30 |
| | Urban | 26 | 43 | 1 | 70 |
| | Total | 44 | 55 | 1 | 100 |
| Total | | 274 | 124 | 2 | 400 |

Many of them suffered from financial problems in different spheres of life. They have to struggle so much starting from livelihood to educating their children. Due to poor economic condition they are not able to invest properly in their petty business like brewing, silk rearing, animal husbandry etc., leading to slow rate of production and thus, resulting to more deteriorating condition. But they have free choice of economic activities and are not bonded labour.

IV.3.b. Occupational Disabilities

The Scheduled Castes of Manipur, that is the Lois and the Yaithibis do not have a specific traditional occupation on the basis of their caste. But, one cannot ignore that they used to perform or work according to the King's orders. These orders were rendered depending on the skill and the suitability of the particular place. Since time immemorial, cultivation has been one of the main occupations for all. Along with agriculture, occupations like brewing, poultry, piggery, silk rearing, pottery etc which were considered as degrading by Hindu Meitei have been practiced by the Scheduled Caste community. But in Thoubal district brewing is not practiced and piggery is rarely seen. In all the districts anyone can profess any kind of occupation according to his or her convenience.

In Thoubal district (urban) and Imphal West 2.5% (10) of them have changed their traditional occupation to other activities. The various reasons given are; some of them have given their fields on lease due to their job or old age, while an old female has switched from her occupation of silk-rearing and weaving to brewing as the earlier profession was not much benefiting. And few have stopped brewing and cultivation since they got government services and they could not manage both simultaneously. While 97.5% (390) of respondents from all the four districts have not changed their traditional occupation of cultivation, brewing, weaving etc and even if they themselves could not involve directly due to their office jobs or services their family members continue it with the cooperation of each other.

All the respondents of all the four districts irrespective of the criteria have strongly agreed of education being one of the most important reasons for better occupation.

Regarding the ill-treatment experienced by them, a middle aged female (0.25%) of Imphal West urban area stated that the ill- treatment meted out to her in the office was not due to authority but to show that they belong to higher status group than her. And 12.75% (51) of them from all the four districts expressed that though they have not experienced ill-treatment directly but they feel that they are being discriminated to some extent by hindering or delaying a promotion in job though the reason may or may not be because of being a scheduled caste. They feel that they are looked down upon by the general category and especially by the orthodox ones for being recruited on reservation and consideration basis. Such feelings of discrimination either in payment or in treatment or any form of prejudice by the authority or employer were not encountered by 85.25% (341) of them. And 1.75% (7) from Bishnupur and Thoubal urban area had not commented anything as they have no knowledge of such discrimination.

0.5% (2) respondents of Imphal West (urban) felt that the Hindu Meitei can perform better than them in any given job as they are more intelligent. But the large majority of the respondents that is 99.5% (398) from all the four districts irrespective of the differences responded that the performance wholly depends on one's skill, potential and qualification and not on the mere reason of being a Hindu Meitei or a Scheduled Caste.

Out of four hundred sample only seventy eight respondents are working in government sector. Out of these, only twenty five of them i.e. 12 (5.45%) from rural and 13 (7.22%) from urban got jobs through reservation. The rest that is fifty three of them have got in general quota (Table IV.7).

The opinion of 1.75% (7) respondents of Imphal West (urban), regarding the issue of quota system is that, the quota system in promotion of position is poorly done with. They experienced that sometimes their Hindu Meitei seniors delay the required

procedure for promotion and have a feeling of jealousy towards them for being selected on reservation criteria. Likewise 3.25% (13) of them from Thoubal urban area complain for poor implementation and suggest that the highly qualified ones among scheduled caste should be listed among general category while the less efficient one be given more opportunity for reservation. while 8.5% (34) of them are of the opinion that the quota system must be implemented properly. And 29% (116) respondents regardless of criteria from all the four districts responded that the reservation quota system was not implemented properly. While 37% (148) felt that the quota system is implemented to some extent though the more privileged among them get more chances. And 20.5% (82) had no knowledge of the quota system.

Table IV. 7
Respondents who acquired Government jobs on reservation

| Acquired Government jobs on reservation | Rural (n=220) | % | Urban (n=180) | % | Total |
|--|--------------------------|------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Yes | 12 | 5.45 | 13 | 7.22 | 25 |
| No | 208 | 94.54 | 167 | 92.78 | 375 |
| Total | 220 | 100 | 180 | 100 | 400 |

According to 99 (45%) rural and 99 (55%) urban respondents the government is filling the vacancies meant for them. While 48 (26.67%) rural and 81 (36.81%) urban respondents felt that the vacancies are not properly filled with and the promotion system is not properly implemented. And 33 (18.33%) urban, 40 (18.19%) rural respondents did not give any comment as they have no knowledge of it (Table IV.8).

Getting employed do not stop them from continuining their traditional occupation of agriculture, brewing, silk rearing, weaving etc. They feel that the Hindu Meiteis do not respect them for being recruited on the basis of reservation and many a times leads to emotional conflict between the two. They also feel that the Hindu Meitei

senior delay their promotion sometimes. Not many among them have got the opportunity of getting a government job on reservation. And those few who are befitted by such government provisions are many a times the privileged ones among them.

Table IV. 8
Respondents' opinion regarding the Reserved Vacancy posts being recruited by the Government

| Respondents' opinion on recruitment on reserved posts | Rural (n=220) | % | Urban (n=180) | % | Total |
|--|--------------------------|------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Yes | 99 | 45 | 99 | 55 | 198 |
| No | 81 | 36.81 | 48 | 26.67 | 129 |
| No Idea | 40 | 18.19 | 33 | 18.33 | 73 |
| Total | 220 | 100 | 180 | 100 | 400 |

IV.3.c. Educational Disabilities

There is lack of proper schools in these scheduled caste villages except for some government schools (Photo IV.11 a,b). The private English medium schools cannot be afforded by many even though they want to provide their wards with such education. One of the important factors is the inadequate source of income among the Scheduled Castes which make them unable to admit their children in good schools outside the village. Above this the location of the village, improper transport and communication and hard labour in the fields are also attributive factors.

All the four hundred respondents of all the four districts opined that those who are well off among them are fortunate enough to send their children to good institutions but the majority of the poor economic stricken families are unable to send their children for higher education and even in primary level due to high expenses thus, resulting in their low educational achievements. Among them three old aged men from Thoubal Khunou (Yaithibis) revealed that earlier they were not even allowed to enter the school premises for being low caste which is no more in vogue since long time.



Photo IV.11.a. A private school in Khurkhul



Photo IV.11.b. Students taking tuition after classes

They all experienced a change of attitude and outlook among Hindu Meiteis towards them as compared to the past which may be a resulting impact of modernization and educational development in both the communities. According to them, selection of a course wholly is an individual choice but mostly students prefer technical and professional courses because of the job oriented value associated with such courses.

The 21.5% of Government employed respondents revealed that they have got their jobs depending on their educational qualifications. And their preference for the job was both availability of the job and need for financial aid. Those respondents with an educational qualification of M.A and M.Sc were satisfied with their acquired position as compared to those who have not achieved such qualification and agreed that with better qualification they could have achieved higher position.

IV.3.d. Political Disabilities

Regarding the issue of right representation by the elected political representatives from scheduled caste, 79 (35.90%) rural and 101 (56.11%) urban respondents from all the four districts felt that to some extent they are represented. But denying it, 109 (49.55%) rural and 49 (27.22%) urban respondents expressed that they are not properly represented and the elected representatives give more emphasis to their own constituency while 16.67% (30) and 14.55% (32) urban and rural respondents respectively have expressed that they have no idea at all (Table IV.9).

Table IV. 9
Respondents' opinions regarding the right representation by the S. C. politicians

| The right representation by the S. C. politicians | Rural (n=220) | % | Urban (n=180) | % | Total |
|--|----------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|--------------|
| Yes | 79 | 35.90 | 101 | 56.11 | 180 |
| No | 109 | 49.55 | 49 | 27.22 | 158 |
| No Idea | 32 | 14.55 | 30 | 16.67 | 62 |
| Total | 220 | 100 | 180 | 100 | 400 |

Among the total sample, one hundred (25%) respondents of Thoubal district have responded that, as their area does not come under the reserved constituency so there is no question of competition for reserved seat. And all the other three hundred (75%) respondents of Imphal East, Imphal West and Bishnupur districts had a similar opinion that competition for political seat among them for political reservation is natural but the competition does not lead to any disturbance in the functioning of the elected member.

The Scheduled Caste being the suppressed caste lacks political awareness. Due to lack of exposure and proper education they are not able to properly enjoy the benefits given to them. Majority of them feel that the scheduled caste representative does not represent or struggle for the benefits of all Scheduled Castes as a whole but is confined to his/her respective constituency only. They also feel that one single reserved seat for Scheduled Caste is too less a number to represent all scheduled caste of Manipur. And, being the only one elected member he can hardly voice for all or is barely heard.

IV.3.e. Infrastructure Disabilities

Except for the 0.25% of them in Imphal East (urban) who have no access to light, all the other 99.75% (399) of them from all the four districts irrespective of urban and rural location have access to electricity.

12.5% (5) of Yaithibis of Thoubal Khunou in Thoubal district revealed that they experienced many difficulties in availing even school facility. They were not allowed to enter even the school premises and other public areas. As they were considered as polluting they were made to sit separately or outside the classroom. While 87.5% (35) of the Yaithibis have no longer experience such ill-treatments except for the problems of improper schools, roads, transport and economic problems etc. Among the Lois 0.56% (2) of them from Kakching (Thoubal urban) narrated that during the earlier times they had to go for schools and colleges to a far distant place like Imphal due to lack of proper facility

in their area. And thus, they experienced much restrictions and ill-treatments for being a Loi. While 13.33% (48) of Thoubal urban has not experienced much difficulty in availing the facilities as schools and even a college is available in their place now. And in Thoubal rural 5.56% (20) of them face problems due to lack of proper schools, transport and poor financial conditions. Regarding the difficulties encountered in availing the school facility 5% (18) from Imphal West (rural) expressed that they have no problems in availing school facility while 75.55% (272) of them from Bishnupur, Imphal East and Imphal West districts revealed enormous hurdles caused by improper transport and communication (Photo IV.13 a,b), absence of adequate education facility and limited income etc in attaining school and further studies.

In Bishnupur district almost all the respondents dwell in kaccha houses made of mud and wood in which some are properly maintained while some are not. Only fourteen (14) of them have the facility of tap water which is also not regular while other eighty six (86) of them rely on pond and river water. Overall their standard of living and sanitation is very far from perfect.

In Imphal East district also all the hundred (100) respondents have kaccha houses in which majority are poorly done with. Tap water is available only in few areas which is again not on daily basis and thus, have to depend heavily on pond water for everything.

In Imphal West district twenty one (21) of the houses are concrete pucca ones while seventy nine (79) are kaccha houses. Tap water is available only in few areas and so the majority of them are dependent on well water for household requirements.

In Thoubal district twenty five (25) of the houses are concrete buildings and seventy five (75) are kaccha houses made up of mud and wood of which some are well-maintained. Forty seven (47) of them have access to tap water, hand pump and depend on

river water also for daily purpose. While fifty three (53) of them rely wholly on hand pump and river water.

Except a few places like Sekmai and Kakching through which the National highway No. 39 runs and which are better compared to all other Scheduled Caste areas, all the other Scheduled Castes areas are in deteriorating condition. They are deprived of the basic requirements like tap water even for drinking purpose and most of their housing and sanitation are in poor condition. Basic infrastructure like roads, transport and communication, proper schools, health centre etc. is not available properly. The impoverished condition of roads and transport connecting the Scheduled Caste villages to the other villages and town further aggravate the gap and the communication among the people. Due to the lack of proper health centre or a hospital nearby they have to reach Imphal in order to avail hospital services which cost them a heavy sum of amount and even their lives sometimes.

IV.3.f. Cultural Disabilities

The Lois consider themselves to be the protectors of the original tradition of the Meiteis. Their professing of indigenous culture or practices is one of the main reasons for being looked down upon. During native rule they have endured the punishment of residing at the periphery of the villages for being rebellious to the king's order. Eventually, criminals and taboo breakers were also deported to the Loi villages and thus, leading to expansion of their population. People of these places were despised and ill-treated as they were considered as offenders of the society at large.

All the four hundred (400) respondents of all the four districts do not find their language / dialect a barrier in dealing with Hindu Meiteis.

Relating to the issue of the habits of meat eating and brewing of the Lois being responsible for being looked down upon, 3% (3) of Thoubal district (urban) denied

the habits like meat eating and brewing liquor as the reasons for being looked down upon. According to them their earlier profession of iron smelting, piggery, poultry etc were the main reasons. While 91% (91) of both urban and rural areas of the same district agreed that meat eating and brewing liquor may be the reasons. If traced back to the periods of King's Rule, all the people were hunters and brewers and it was only after the spreading of Hinduism that such practices were restricted. Slowly such habits of hunting, meat eating, drinking, animal rearing especially pigs, hens and ducks were considered polluting. In spite of such restrictions those who continued with the forbidden habits were classified as low caste.

Ironically, the Lois of Kakching and Thongjao and Yaithibis of Thoubal khunou consider the above reasons for being looked down upon them as quite inappropriate as they do not practice such habits. According to their opinion the basic reasons for being regarded lowly are their settlement in foothills and periphery of the villages, their way of speaking, mannerism, backwardness and most importantly the Hindu Meitei's prejudiced notion towards them. Yaithibis of Thoubal Khunou supplemented that the Thambalnambi's incident is the most relevant reason for their ill-treatment while 6% had no knowledge of it.

Among the three hundred respondents from Bishnupur, Imphal East and Imphal West districts, 3% (9) of them did not agree of brewing being the reason as they revealed that even Hindu Meitei also brews liquor for economic gains. They feel that it is basically the Hindu Meitei's attitude and the lingering notion of Lois being backward in economy, education, living ways etc. are the reason. And 22% (66) of the respondents from Bishnupur, Imphal East and Imphal West had a parallel opinion that their practice of indigenous religion and rejection of Hinduism were the main reasons. While 75% (225) accepted that their habits of eating and brewing as well as defect in their pronunciation,

practice of indigenous tradition and backwardness etc are the reasons for being looked down upon by Hindu Meitei.

In Thoubal district 70% of the respondents responded that they neither brew nor practice indigenous customs but only because they belong to the Loi community they face restrictions in intermingling and intermarriage and are considered polluting. But according to them, they are firm followers of Hinduism and have similar lifestyle with that of Hindu Meitei though slight differences are inevitable due to different settlements. Similar responses were given by 23% of them who followed Sanamahi cult while 7% of the Christian followers had a different lifestyle and practices according to Christianity.

According to 3.5% (7) of them from Imphal East and Imphal West who felt that their status is not affected by their habits as many among the Hindu Meitei have the similar habits, while 96.5% (193) of them from both the districts agreed that, their difference in behavior has affected to the extent of being restricted in entering Hindu Meitei's house, in inter-dinning and in inter-marriage earlier. Some of them added that inspite of their change of religion to Hinduism they are still somewhat looked down upon by the Hindu Meitei because of their earlier notion of scheduled caste. Still, they all feel that the difference in their lifestyle resulting from different practices and settlements do not interfere in their daily life.

And in Bishnupur district all the hundred respondents expressed that, inspite of the fact that they are predominantly Hindu followers the Hindu Meitei still consider them as somewhat low. Though the Hindu Meitei may not manifest but they can feel that they are considered as backward culturally for their earlier habits of eating, brewing, indigenous practices etc which are still continued by some. According to them, except for the differences due to the different religious followings and slight variation due to urban and rural setting, the lifestyle is almost similar.

In the case of the Lois of Thoubal district and the Yaithibis neither their religion nor their habits can be a reason for being looked down upon but it can be because of the dialect they use. Their past practices or settlement in the fringes of the villages can also be some of the reasons. The majority of indigenous believers feel, that due to their certain cultural practices, which some of them have also discontinued after adapting to Hinduism have affected their status. And it is always this reason for the Hindu Meiteis' hesitation to intermingle with them.

IV.3.g. Social Disabilities

The Scheduled Castes of Manipur still feel that they are being looked down upon and are considered polluting by some with an orthodox mind. Their way of living, eating habits and usage of meat and wine in ritual matters are something which offends the Hindu Meitei and Brahmin. Because of which the orthodox Hindu Meitei and Brahmin in particular, try to maintain strict restriction when it comes to marriage. The Lois and Yaithibis experience that though they are not ill-treated now but somehow the Hindu Meitei still consider themselves as superior to them and manifestation of such feelings are more intense from Brahmins.

In all the four districts, 30.75% (123) of the respondents expressed that though the younger generation has changed their attitude towards Scheduled Castes but there are still some people mostly elderly orthodox, educated or uneducated continue to believe and live with the concept of pollution and purity. Such notion is common among Brahmins. Among these respondents a middle aged man from Thoubal (rural) added that Lois of Phayeng and Sekmai are still regarded as polluting by Hindu Meitei and Brahmin for their habits of drinking, brewing, eating etc. Some of them further stated that their nearby villages like Wabagai, Irengbam near (Kakching) and Elangkhangpokpi (near Thongjao) consider them backward, and their way of speaking as defective. There is a

common threat used by the young Hindu Meitei to their parents saying that if their wishes are not fulfilled they will degrade his clan name by marrying a Kakching girl or a Loi. Though nothing has been said to them but they feel the lingering social stigma of being a Loi which becomes more prominent among those who are financially low in status or economically poor. Those from Leimaram further supplemented that although they have adopted Hinduism some Hindu Meitei continue to relate them with their earlier habits. While 69.25% (277) felt that it depends on the individual attitude and that they are no more considered as low.

According to 67% of the respondents from Thoubal district the existence of caste system, continuation of traditional practices and occupation of iron smelting, piggery, poultry, being a descendent of Loi community and being rebellious to the king etc. led to their low status. But 18% of them asserted that their main cause for being a low status is distinctly different from other scheduled caste. They are followers of staunch Hinduism but unfortunately have been degraded to low status only after the Thambalnambi incident and its resulting impact which led to their early practice of incest while 15% of them could not give any reasons for it.

And in the three districts of Bishnupur, Imphal East and Imphal West 16.3% (49) of them have pointed out that their backwardness in the field of education, economy, culture, lifestyle etc are responsible for their low status. Again the existence of caste system and its principle of purity and pollution is considered as an important reason by 3.3% (10) of the respondents of Bishnupur district. While the large majority of respondents that is 67.7% (203) from all the three districts consider their different religious beliefs, their eating and brewing habits, defect in speaking, and most importantly Hindu Meitei's earlier concept of them being descendents of Lois are responsible for their low status. And 12.7% (38) cannot give any reason to it.

Regarding the issue of being treated lowly by the Hindu Meiteis, 22.22% (40) urban and 6.82% (15) rural respondents from all the four districts felt that they have been treated lowly either directly or indirectly by the Hindu Meitei while 77.78% (140) urban and 93.18% (205) rural respondents have not experienced any such treatment personally (Table IV. 10).

All the hundred percent respondents expressed similarly that though the Yaithibis are somewhat considered lower than the Lois but they do not find a specific hierarchy of low and high among them.

Among all the four hundred respondents of all the four districts, 122 (55.46%) rural and 44 (24.44%) urban respondents believed that the concept of pollution was still practiced mostly by some old orthodox uneducated and Brahmins particularly at religious matters. Among them a middle aged man from Imphal West revealed that they do practice pollution towards tribals and Muslims because of their totally different living style and cultural practices. And respondents numbering 98 (44.54%) rural and 135 (75%) urban expressed that the pollution notion was no more prevalent in Manipur (Table IV.11).

Table IV. 10

Respondents’ opinions regarding being treated lowly

| Being treated lowly by the Hindu Meitei | Rural (n=220) | % | Urban (n=180) | % | Total |
|---|---------------|-------|---------------|-------|-------|
| Yes | 15 | 6.82 | 40 | 22.22 | 55 |
| No | 205 | 93.18 | 140 | 77.78 | 345 |
| Total | 220 | 100 | 180 | 100 | 400 |

Table IV. 11

Respondents’ opinion regarding the prevalence of pollution & purity

| Prevalence of pollution & purity | Rural (n=220) | % | Urban (n=180) | % | Total |
|----------------------------------|---------------|-------|---------------|-------|-------|
| Yes | 122 | 55.46 | 44 | 24.44 | 166 |
| No | 98 | 44.54 | 135 | 75 | 233 |
| No Idea | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.56 | 1 |
| Total | 220 | 100 | 180 | 100 | 400 |

From the whole sample 6.5% (26) of the respondents narrated their experiences of the ill-treatment meted out to them. A woman from Bishnupur expressed that her boyfriend had left her for a Hindu Meitei girl as his parents did not want a scheduled caste daughter-in-law. Yet in another case, a woman's Hindu Meitei friend showed hesitation even to take tea in her place. In Imphal East, 2.75% (11) of them revealed that they were made to eat outside the kitchen and even slept outside sometimes. They were not allowed to touch things inside the kitchen etc only because they were from Andro, a Loi village. Similarly, an old aged woman of Imphal West regretted for not able to participate at her uncle's last rites as she was restricted from attending only because she did not adopt to Hindu ways of life like her other family members. Two old aged men felt ill-treated and narrated that they were not allowed to enter mandap (a place near temple) or to eat along with the Hindu Meitei at kang (Rathyatra) festival. Another old man expressed that he was hurt when his Hindu Meitei friend who used to eat and drink in his place made him sit outside the house in the courtyard when he visited him. A middle aged man narrated that he was not invited purposely to the marriage feast of his close Hindu Meitei friend as his parents did not want a scheduled caste to attend the ceremony. Further he mentioned that his friend's mother personally told him that he would not be invited as all the invitees would be Hindu Meitei. Three old aged men of Thoubal experienced ill-treatment when they were young. They had to go to Imphal for higher studies and for giving exams. During such times they were not allowed to enter Hindu Meitei's house or dine together in the kitchen or in any social feast. Despite being the followers of Hinduism they faced such treatment only because they belong to a Loi community. And a middle aged female and four old aged men of Yaithibi community in Thoubal Khunou were restricted even from entering the school premises. As a result they had to hire a teacher separately to teach them in their place. Even in Thoubal also they were prohibited in many

ways. Among them an old man recalled the incident in which his mother was made to buy a whole basket of sweetmeat which was considered polluted because of his accidental touch while 93.5% (374) of all the four districts have never experienced such incidents.

All the four hundred respondents stated that they face no restriction on wearing any type of dress generally wore by Hindu Meitei or Brahmin.

CASE STUDY - 1

Phanjaobam Chaobi Devi
Female, Age- 60, Widow
Illiterate, Housewife
Andro
Imphal East District

Chaobi eloped at the age of twenty-four and became widow at an early age of thirty six. She has five children, among which three had married and one son stays with her brother-in-law. She is now with her daughter Jamini (18) who brews and fetches income for livelihood of both of them. Chaobi also helps in contributing by making pots and selling vegetables. She can earn a sum of rupees two hundred to three hundred monthly from pottery, vegetable selling and agricultural work etc.

Tears filled her eyes when she narrated her past life. She was three years of age when she lost her father and in her seventh year her mother married another man from Andro Khunman, a section of Andro where Hinduized Andro families reside. She was brought up by her maternal grandparents who despite her much insistence did not allow her to study. It was a big step taken by her when she visited her mother's new home as she was not purified. And even being a Hindu following family her step- father never restricted her from coming to his house. Though her mother was purified after marrying him but she was not. Her step-father did not bother and insisted her mother not to be scared and to eat even in the same plate with her.

One day when Chaobi was fetching water from the pond, seeing which some Hinduized women enquired, to which she answered, that the water was for cooking purpose. All the neighbors have been noticing everything and felt angry for being polluted. So, they told her step-father to purify her if she was frequenting his home. But her step-father did not even care to listen to them which made his neighbors furious and started spreading that his family is polluted for allowing the non-panathokpa (non-purified) step daughter in the house and kitchen as well. And that they would not eat anything from his family and neither will they invite nor will they attend any functions of the family. But her step-father was strong enough to tell them that he will be happy if he could stay in Khunou (the main parts of Andro where indigenous followers reside) where at least people are simple and he can even eat meat openly unlike the Hinduized ones who pretend to be very religious and pious outside but do everything in closed doors. His words silenced everyone and from that day she frequently visited her mother's home and even stayed there also. Nobody enquired anything or interfered in their life from that day onwards.

She is the first woman in Andro to have presented the Andro folk song at All India Radio and was paid rupees hundred (100) for that. She is proud that RajKumar Sanayaima, brother of late King Buddha Chandra had eaten food cooked by her when they once visited the museum in Andro. And today, she says this with dignity to everyone who tries to look down upon her.

CASE STUDY - 2

Laishram Sangairen Meitei

Male, Age – 79, Married

Cultivator

Literate but can read and write only the original Meitei script,

Thoubal Khunou, Yaithibi.

Thoubal District

Sangairen is a Hinduized Yaithibi but later after 1980 he started practicing Meitei cult (Sanamahiesm) as he realized that it is the original Meitei religion. Now, he is taken care of by his sons as he is too old to work. He narrated that his village, Thoubal Khunou was totally secluded and it was only after 1950, when the whole village was purified by the process of panathokpa (a purification ritual performed by a Brahman by chanting mantras and sprinkling tulsi water) that they have started to have contacts with other villages slowly. Before the purification they were considered untouchable and were termed as 'Yaithibi' meaning unlucky. It all happened just because a girl of Laishram sagei (clan) did not obey to the king Pamheiba's whim of accepting to be his wife. This incident led to the excommunication of the clan to a remote area at a foothill (the present area). His sagei (clan) Laishram was considered so low that even seeing them was polluting and thus, was not allowed to enter freely to the palace area.

He was prohibited from admission in a nearby school at Thoubal by the king's men though the headmaster was willing to admit him. Many parents complained that his admission will pollute the other children and thus, the king's men pressurize the headmaster even to suspend him and to the extent of closing down the school, if he allows him. He still remembers the headmaster's tears when he said sorry to him for not allowing him in the school. And this is how, he does not know the current Manipuri script and became an illiterate.

When he was seven (7) years old he went to Thoubal bazaar with his mother and unknowingly he touched a basket of sweetmeat while telling his mother to buy for him. He did not have the slightest of sense that his touch would be so heavy a price for his mother. As his mother was forced to pay for the whole basket as no one will buy it after being touched by them. He feels terrible thinking about it as his mother being very poor was a heavy amount at that time. He experienced Hindu Meitei people running away from him in the fear of getting polluted. During his youthful time when he had quarrels with Hindu Meitei he used to threaten them by running after and trying to touch them.

The residents of Thoubal Khunou were instructed and he himself, have worn blue coloured turban to identify themselves as 'Yaithibi' when ever they goes out of the village. Despite the fact that they were Hindu followers with the similar living style, food habits and cultural practices etc, they were treated very low. And this is why, he

reconfirmed, that the King of the time was so powerful that he can make one's life succeed up to the top and degrade ones' life down to the bottom.

IV.4. Conclusions

Class distinction is universal. But a more rigid form of social distinction is found in Indian society in the form of caste system. In Indian society under the Hindu fold every human being has an ascribed status which plays a more superior role than the achieved status of the individual.

Like in any part of society family ties plays an important factor of integration of the Lois and Yaithibis in Manipur. These communities follow the joint, extended and nuclear pattern of family systems. The traditional joint family is losing its strong hold due to economic and occupational reasons. Patriarchal pattern of the authority and patrilocal residence makes the male head of the family but the women in the family is also equally respected and shoulders the family responsibility when required. In matters of marriage the choice is wholly of the marrying couple but they follow strict rules of caste endogamy and clan exogamy. Just like the Hindu Meitei, the Lois and Yaithibis also belong to the seven yeks (clans). Their yeks plays a very important role in the matter of marriage and in any form of religious affair than their gotras. The age old belief of bringing prosperity if married to the family where one's aunty is married has become an outdated belief among the younger generation. Marriage takes place at an early age. Inter-caste marriage between a Loi and a Hindu Meitei is not uncommon but the cases of such marriages are quite less whereas marriage between a Loi and a Brahman or a Yaithibi is almost absent. The Hindu Meitei still maintain distance from the Lois and Yaithibis when it comes to closer relation like marriage alliance and religious rituals. Similarly the Lois also have a feeling of insecurity in marrying a Hindu Meitei as they have to make certain adjustments with them. There are people who still consider the Lois and Yaithibis as

backward but the present modern generation emphasizes more on the individual qualification, occupational and financial status rather than on the caste status.

The Yaithibis are numerically very less and due to their isolation during the earlier times they lack interaction with the other Loi villages. It is believed that the structure of the caste system and the resulting hierarchy due to it is non-existent. But it is very much in existence in the minds of the people which many a times is manifested in their behavior also. Some of them have personally faced the ill-treatments of being a Scheduled Caste during earlier times. Due to modern education, better economic condition and improvement among the Scheduled Castes there has been frequent intermingling with the Hindu Meiteis. The concept of pollution and rigidity has been almost non-existing. However, the feeling of social stigma of being a Scheduled Caste always persists in the minds of both the Scheduled Castes and the Hindu Meiteis. Though the Yaithibis are considered to be even lower and polluting than the Lois, they are distinctively different from the Lois. They are Hindu Meitei in all matters and aspects of life. The cultural practices among the Lois of different villages are almost similar in principle only with slight variation in the activities or days involved. The Lois have retained the primitive Meitei culture for which they consider themselves to be the pure Meitei.

These Scheduled Caste communities are not untouched by the consciousness of high and low class. Here, also the feeling of differences in social status in accordance to one's financial prosperity and occupational status is inevitable. But the differences in the social status have not stopped the younger generation to serve the elders of the society irrespective of their status in any village or social functions.

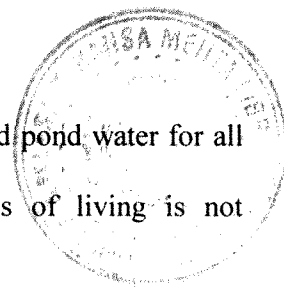
In spite of the free choice of economic activities they suffer from severe economic problems. Majority of them are literate but due to lack of required qualification they fail to get a job resulting to their involvement in agriculture and other unskilled

activities. Their inability to invest properly on their business leads to low production and poverty. They can profess any kind of occupation but since time immemorial agriculture has been the main source of survival for all of them. Activities like pottery is mainly done in Thongjao of Thoubal district and in Andro of Imphal East district, silk rearing is practiced in Khurkhul of Imphal West district, other activities like fishing, animal husbandry etc are commonly found in all these Scheduled Caste areas. And rearing of animals like cows or oxen is a matter of pride while piggery, rearing ducks and hens are polluting.

In the offices the Hindu Meiteis have a feeling of superiority over the Scheduled Castes for being selected on the basis of reservation. But so far no discrimination or ill-treatment in any form has been encountered. The quota system is implemented but the more mobile ones among them have a greater chance of obtaining the facilities. Majority of them feels that past Scheduled Caste representative like the late. Kh. Chaoba had struggled much for them but now the representatives do not strive for the Scheduled Castes as a whole and are interested in their constituencies only.

Everyone considers good education as an impetus to move ahead in life but all of them cannot afford to admit their children in good schools and above that lack of proper schools in the nearby area becomes a hurdle to acquire quality education. Except in few places like Sekmai, Kakching and Phayeng, even the basic infrastructure like roads, transport and communication, proper schools, health centers are not adequately available. This creates disparity among the Scheduled Caste economically and socially. Due to impoverished condition of roads and transport connecting the Scheduled Caste villages to the other villages and to the main center like Imphal, where business transactions are conducted, the gap in economic as well as social relationships have intensified. In their villages as well as in the municipal area they do not avail the facility of pure drinking

water or tap water regularly. Majority have to rely totally on river and pond water for all purposes. Overall the housing condition, sanitation and the ways of living is not appropriate except in some families.



Because of their Loi and Yaithibi status they are looked down upon by the dominant Hindu Meitei and Brahman. Many still consider them as backward culturally and socially due to their practice of indigenous religion. Some of them have altered their lives by adjusting into the Hindu ways and some even have totally adopted to the Hindu Meitei lifestyle. But their earlier habits and practices are some of the rationalization put forward by the Hindu Meitei for their distance from the Lois and Yaithibis. The Hindu Meitei residing at the village or in the nearby villages of the Lois and Yaithibis maintain a rigid notion of purity and pollution as compared to the Hindu Meiteis belonging to the Imphal (capital) area. Even though the Lois and Yaithibis are not experiencing any kind of ill-treatment now but the feeling of superiority by the Hindu Meitei culturally and socially is very much manifold and is even more pronounced by the Brahman in all matters.

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