

Research Article

## Panthoibee: the multifaceted Goddess of Manipur

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### ABSTRACT

Manipur is an Indian state, situated in the extreme north-eastern border, bound on the east by Myanmar and is virtually the meeting point of India and South-East Asia. It is a culturally rich state. The Manipuri Society has the doctrine of polytheism from early times. It has not only dual male-female forms of Divine but also some single feminine aspects. Among them, Panthoibee is one of the most popular, powerful, unique and widely worshipped Goddess. The Manipuris have been using the accounts of Panthoibee simply as tales and also in other utterances like rites, rituals and religious worships etc. Not only this, the accounts of Panthoibee is also attributed to the written forms of 'Puyas' (the old Manipuri Scriptures)- Panthoibee Khongul, Panthoibee Naheiol, Thirel Meiram Liba etc. Thus, to recognise the religion and society of this region, it is very necessary to rediscover and honour the identity of this multifaceted Goddess. This paper is based on the data collected from the oral utterances, the Puyas-the old Manipuri Scriptures and some other related sources.

### Introduction

Many Ethnic groups setting in different parts of the world practice polytheism. Ancient Greek, Roman, Chinese Folk religion, Hinduism etc. have such a belief. Most of the mythological Goddesses of the world more or less, represent or symbolise their own particular domain. To mention some, the Greek Goddess Aphrodite is of love and beauty, Athena of war. Likewise, the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi is considered to be the Goddess of wealth and prosperity, and Saraswati symbolises the Goddess of knowledge and creative arts. The Manipuri society, from the time immemorial, has also been worshipping many Goddesses. Some of the most acquainted Goddesses of Manipur are *Ema Leimaren Shidabee*, *Panthoibee*, *Phouoibee*, *Shoubol Lairembee*, *Konthoujam Lairembee* etc. But Panthoibee is a very complex Goddess with many different facets. Besides, worshipping with a cult in order to bestow happiness, prosperity, peace, longevity etc. upon the people, she is even related to death.

### Origin of Panthoibee

Etymologically, the word Panthoibee comes from the root words:

Pan i.e. Taibangpan meaning the Universe

Thoi i.e. Thoidokpam Potlamshing meaning all objects

Bee i.e. Peenabeeribee meaning one surpasses

Thus, the word Panthoibee literally means one who surpasses all in this Universe i.e. the Supreme Being. Hence Panthoibee is depicted as a mother figure or the mother Goddess.

Different versions have been found about how Panthoibee was born or originated. In a very broad sense, the versions can be divided into two. The first is simply that her father was Taoroinai and mother was Lai Namung Namungbee and she had seven brothers. The second version is related to the creation myth. In this version, she is regarded either as generated or born without mother. In an account of such version, she was born of the Great God Sun by conceiving only a wink. In another

story, the Supreme Devine, Atiya Guru Sidaba divided himself into two Panthoibee and Nongpok, the female and male parts in order to create the world.

### **Panthoibee and her Behaviour**

It is not an easy thing to unveil the behaviour of this complex Goddess. She loved freedom and was never reluctant to express her own desires. It is found that she chose her own bridegroom. When Panthoibee was grown up, King Sapaiba sent his men asking for her hand. But Panthoibee declined his proposal considering to be undeserved for her when she found out that the bride made for her was of wood and bamboo. Thus, her acceptance of the proposal of Taram Khoiucha, who was the son of Kanglei King Chochongba and his Queen Manu Teknga, as he could build a bridge of iron and silver for her implies that she did not want to live with anyone who came to her. Rather, she wanted to marry the man with whom she could live happily and more independently. But her married life could not control her freedom. She did whatever she wanted. She went to every river to bathe, visited every neighbour and locality to gossip, an aberration to the nature of an ideal married woman. Panthoibee's freedom culminated when she had extra marital affair with Angouba Chingshomba, also known as Nongpok Ningthou, the Lord of the Nongmaijing Hill. However, her behaviour was unlike that of the Greek Goddess Aphrodite who earned her reputation for her promiscuity, as Panthoibee had her love affair only with Nongpok. As a strategy to meet her lover Nongpok, she feigned illness. And her refusal of the proposal of other Gods' names as efficient physicians by her mother and acceptance of Nongpok whose treatment of her illness suddenly made her recover clearly suggest such a stand.

Despite her strong desire for freedom, Panthoibee had a long vision and hand her own dignity. When Nongpok wooed her to elope with him to the Nongmaijing Hill, she refused telling him that the Khabas did not torture her and her parents would be discredited with shame because of her.

Being a very generous Goddess, she forgave and pardoned those who surrendered to her.

### **Panthoibee and Lai-Haraoba**

Lai-Haraoba is a rich cultural heritage of Manipur. It is a realistic ritual. To be prosperous, plenty, fertile, free from dangers and evils etc., Lai Haraoba is being performed. It is the ritual in which Panthoibee and Nongpok are being worshipped with the exultation of divinities. It is enunciated in the *Panthoibee Khongul Puya* about how Lai Haraoba was initiated.

Panthoibee was recognised as a Goddess after she lived with Nongpok in the Nongmaijing Hill. Her former mother-in-law, Manu Tenga preserved her relics- her comb, fallen hair, cloths etc safely and went to Nongmaijing Hill and begged with offering to be forgiven for what she did to her. Consequently, the Khabas worshipped the newly united lovers describing their divine attributes etc. with the dance and music. It is presumed that the concept of Lai-Haraoba was thus conceived.

Lai-Haraoba re-enacts some of the deeds of Panthoibee. The form of folkdance performed with song, which Panthoibee with Nongpok is known as the Panthoibee dance. And the form of dance is the origin of many rhythms of the world famous Manipuri Classical dance. The sowing of cotton seeds, blooming of flower, plucking of fruits by Panthoibee with Nongpok and again, spinning and weaving etc. by Panthoibee are shown in the dance form. It can also be mentioned here about the belief of the region that the weaving of clothes was thus invented by Panthoibee.

Another essential part Lai-Haraoba is the programme of Tangkhul Nurabee. And this part of ritual is being performed during *Lairoi*, the last day of Lai-Haraoba.

Panthoibee and Nongpok went apart in different directions promising each other to meet again in their new reincarnations. Panthoibee reincarnated as a Tangkhul Nurabee, a Tangkul maiden (Tangkhul- a tribal community live in the eastern hilly part of Manipur), while Nongpok, being a man went to different regions, took many incarnations and ultimately reincarnated as Tangkhul Huitok Pakhang in search of Panthoibee. One day, while Panthoibee with her six friends was doing zoom (shifting) cultivation, she met Nongpok. However, instead of showing each other's real identity, they exchanged many verbal idiomatic words. But later, Panthoibee with a doubt in her mind that if the man with whom she was exchanging words were not Nongpok but somebody else, her promise would be broken, evaded him, Nongpok seeing Panthoibee's evasive nature, claimed the cultivating field as his, a bone of contention. Panthoibee opposed him. Eventually, Nongpok without aiming at Panthoibee shot arrows, threw javelin in the space and snatched Panthoibee's tiffin and wine. Meanwhile, the situation being worsened was intervened by the Supreme Divine and he revealed each other's identity. They then reunited with merriments and presided over reproduction, essential for the survival of the community.

Imitating this incident, the ritual of Tangkhul Nurabee is being performed. Without this very part, the Lai-Haraoba ritual cannot come to an end. This amply shows the very importance and inseparability of this powerful Goddess with the Manipuri culture and society.

### **Panthoibee and Her Powers and Her Glories**

Among the Goddesses of Manipur, Panthoibee is the Goddess who showed up and demonstrated her powers most. And this is one of the main reasons for her popularity and worshipping her with cult. She is the Goddess whom we ask for food and wealth and is often regarded as the Goddess of Plenty. When Panthoibee was escorted to the bridegroom's house after marriage with Taram Khoinucha, it was found impossible for her father-in-law Khaba to feed the huge crowd of guest gathered. But Panthoibee rescued him from shame by providing rice and wine as the pot of rice and the pitcher of wine which were her bridal dowries, replenished themselves and remained full even though she removed their contents again and again enough to feed the huge guest. For her such glory, she has been known as 'Tara chak-shoupung', 'Wanglei Yushoupung' i.e. one who replenishes rice and wine.

Panthoibee is also considered as a brave warrior Goddess. She could destroy evils. The *Leithak Leikharol Puya* has it that she killed Lai-Koting Hingchabi, a giantess. (*The Leithak Leikharol Puya*, p 52-53).

The Manipuri society designates her as the Goddess of death. When a person is dying, Panthoibee comes in disguise of the one whom the person loves most and coaxes him to go with her to the adobe of death. Not only this, it is also considered that the key to the door of death is with her and thus she segregates the dead from the living and makes judgement among them. As an indication to have possessed such amazing power, she caught the trick of her father in law feigned to be dead, by verifying his absence among deaths. Since Panthoibee's role is relating to death is many, even today the Manipuris have been worshipping her at her monumental temple at the Langol Hill.

It is also believed that if she comes out frequently at Chajing, (a hill in the southern part of Manipur ), it hints that the king will be in danger and his longevity will be affected. And the *Chingoiral Puya* serves as a testimony to the above statement.

However, Panthoibee is contemplated as a generous, magnificent Goddess and also the first Maibi (Shaman). It is clearly mentioned in the *Panthoibee Naherol Puya* that when there occurs an earthquake or when the earth is about to explode, she saves the world from destruction (*Panthoibee Naherol* , p:28).

An example of Panthoibee's persuasive power and power to save from miseries is also cited in the *Numit Kappa Puya*. When King Numit Sana Khomadon hid in fear of the arrows of Khwai Nungjengbam Piba, the region became devastated without King. The king's ten worthy nobles begged Panthoibee to intervene the situation. She then successfully persuaded the King and bought the region back to peace.

Though Panthoibee and Nongpok were simultaneously originated from Guru, the Supreme Divine at the time of the origin of the world, the power of Panthoibee was sometimes superior to that of Nongpok and she could even curb him. While Panthoibee was swimming in Thoubal River, Nongpok, changing himself into a big tiger, tried to tease her but she rode over him playfully though the tiger ran through the three layers to threaten her. Again, when Panthoibee went to fetch water, Nongpok in disguise of a large serpent with a dreadful attitude blocked her way. But Panthoibee frivolously twined the serpent to decorate her neck (*Panthoibee Khongul*, p:142-143).

### **Conclusion**

The above accounts and analysis show that Panthoibee is one of the great and multifaceted Goddess. Panthoibee's abilities are boundless. In fact, the points mentioned above are like a drop in ocean. Panthoibee could even change her appearance in many forms- from a big beam to a pegion, whenever and whatever she wanted. It has also been described in the *Panthoibee Khongul* (P: 5) that the unified power of male – female duality of Guru was embodied in this powerful Goddess.

There are more than forty different monumental temples of Panthoibee in Manipur and in some areas of Tripura where Manipuris settle. In addition to this, with the influence of the Hindu religion, Panthoibee is being worshipped during Durga Asthami for her similarity with Devi. Rediscovering the identity of this great Goddess shows that she is not only a feminist icon but also a multifaceted and complex Goddess.

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