

The Ritual of Saroi Khangba: An Ethnography on Saturdays of Lamta

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Abstract

The contemporary religious life of the Meiteis of Manipur manifests a beautiful syncretic fusion of the two religious traditions: the Vaishnava and their pre-Vaishnava systems. It entails rituals and festivals from both the systems. In other words, their religious life continues to have many elements of their traditional religion. In order to explore elements of their pre-Vaishnava elements in their contemporary religious life, the paper attempts to provide an ethnographic account of the ritual of Saroi Khangba. This ritual, which is performed to propitiate the evil spirits, in the Meitei localities of Manipur, particularly on the Saturday of the month of Lamta reflects the expression of the solidarity or the coming together of the collectivity. By taking part in the ritual, every family shares the bond with the collectivity. With this ritual, they make the annual offerings to the evil spirits through the four guardian deities in the last month of the ongoing year in order to have a peaceful New Year.

Introduction

The Meiteis of Manipur adopted the Chaitanya form of Vaishnavism since the 18th century. However, Vaishnavism could not completely replace their traditional religious system, thereby resulting in a syncretism of both religious systems. The annual ritual calendar of the Meiteis today reflects a beautiful fusion of the festivals and rituals belonging to the two religious traditions that form their contemporary religious system of beliefs and practices. In other words, although various Hindu rituals are being observed by the Meiteis, they also continue to perform many pre-Vaishnava rituals even today. Even though they have accepted many aspects of Vaishnava Hinduism, there also persist many more aspects of their pre-Vaishnava religious beliefs and practices. *Saroi Khangba* or the ritual for the propitiation of the evil spirits is one such ritual. In this paper, an attempt has been made to give an ethnographic account of this ritual of the Meiteis conducted mainly on the Saturdays of *Lamta* (the last month of the Meitei traditional calendar) in order to understand some aspects of the religious world-view of their pre-Vaishnav religious tradition.

The Meiteis believe in the notion of evil spirits which are locally known as the *Saroi Ngarois*. *Sarois* means the evil spirits and *Khangba* means propitiation, that is, the propitiation and appeasement of the evil spirits (L.B. Singh 1991: 95). As per their belief system, these are considered as dangerous and harmful and therefore, if they are not propitiated at appropriate times, they will definitely harm the people. The main rationale behind the performance of this ritual is to protect themselves against death and diseases. Hence, propitiation of evil spirits take place before the commencement of any auspicious event such as a day before the *Lai Haraoba* festival (L.B. Singh 1991:106); on Saturdays of *Lamba*, the last month of the Meitei calendar; at the birth ritual of a new born baby, during the *Apokpa Khurumba* ritual, on the day the Meitei New Year (L.B. Singh 1991; Parratt S.N. 2013) etc. by the Meiteis to prevent themselves from being harmed by these evil-spirits. Nevertheless, the most popular performance of *Saroi Khangba* takes place on the Saturdays of *Lamta*, the last month of the traditional Meitei calendar which falls during February/March. This is known as *Lamta Thangja Saroi Khangba*.

Saroi Khangba is a pre-Hindu ritual performed during the month of *Lamta* before the commencement of the New Year. As per the Meitei calendar, *Sajibu* is the first month and *Lamta*, the last. In other words, they perform the ritual of warding off the evil spirits in the last month of the year in order to welcome the New Year in *Sajibu*, without any hurdles and to embrace the upcoming year with positivity. The ritual is usually performed entirely by the elderly women of the localities to appease evil-spirits by making offerings to them to protect their localities from illness, diseases and misfortunes. Sometimes, *Maibis* or the female religious experts of the locality conduct the ritual along with the other women. Although the ritual is conducted on the Saturdays of *Lamta*, there are some variations from locality to locality. In some places, it is conducted only on the first two Saturdays, while in some other places, it takes place on the first and last Saturdays.

On the Saturday morning of the day of the ritual, every family of the locality makes their contribution towards the preparation. There is always an appointed venue for the women of the locality to assemble and congregate. It could be a community hall or at the shrine of a deity or simply at the big courtyard of somebody's house in the locality. In that place, at least a woman from every household of the locality representing her family would come and make the contribution to the collective ritual. Otherwise, the contribution could also be sent to a woman volunteer who would submit the contributions of few families to that collective one. In other words, contributions could be made either directly or through the representatives. It is interesting to observe that the contribution entails a range of simple but basic eatables used by them such as some uncooked rice, fresh seasonal vegetables such as pea, cauliflower, cabbage, broad beans, stink beans or petai, rice beans, *yendem* (Indian Malayan Taro), *komprek* (drop wort) etc., fermented fish, dry red chilies, ginger, potatoes, raw turmeric, cooking oil etc. along with one-rupee or two-rupee coins etc. Those families who do not have time to make such contribution can simply contribute some money to the volunteers of the ritual. The women express that there is no fixed rule in regard to the variety and the amount of the things to be contributed. They usually make their

contributions from whatever they find from their stock at home. However, every family needs to contribute as it is for the welfare of the entire locality of which it is a part.

After being assembled at the venue with all the contributions, some female volunteers of the locality start arranging for the offerings of the ritual from the contributions made by the women of the locality. *Singju*, a traditional Meitei dish mainly made up of finely chopped green leafy and fresh vegetables, is an important ingredient to be offered for the ritual. When the preparation is ready, a small team of already chosen group of middle-aged married women of the locality leave the venue and proceed towards the four corners of their locality which are considered as the boundaries of their dwelling place carrying the baskets of offerings on their heads. Sometimes, one or two *Maibis* go along with the women to conduct the ritual but it is not always necessary. In the absence of the *Maibis*, the women conduct the ritual by themselves. The same ritual of making offerings to the evil spirits is conducted four times at the four corners of their locality.

A *Maibi* who usually takes part in this ritual explains that the offerings are first made to the four deities who are considered as the guardian of the four 'corners' of directions. These deities are *Marjing*, *Kouburu*, *Wangbren* and *Thangjing*—the guardian deities of the north-eastern, north-western, south-eastern and south-western directions respectively (S. Nilbir, 1991: 110). It is necessary to mention here that in every religious ceremony, these guardian deities of the corners four directions are usually invoked to protect the ritual from evil spirits. It is believed that during the *Saroi Khangba* ritual, these four guardian deities then distribute the remains of their offerings to the *Saroi Ngarois* that reside in their respective directions. The *Maibi* further explains that these deities protect the people of the locality from the evil spirits who are perpetually hungry and demand food from human beings. By making these offerings to the evil spirits through the four guardian deities, women of the locality try to appease the spirits in order to have a peaceful life. There is also a tradition of carrying back some of the leftover offerings back home and sprinkle at four corners of the homestead in the evening of the days of the ritual. It is believed that this act would ward off evil spirits from their homesteads and it would also protect their houses from insects and other unwanted things. While sprinkling the offerings, they start from the back of their homesteads, usually the western directions and ends at the gate. Here, facing the southern direction they pray to the Gods that all unwanted things be carried away towards the south and to protect their family from all evil-spirits. Sometimes, a morsel of the leftover *Singju* is eaten by family members as it is considered as auspicious. Moreover, uncooked rice is also brought back by volunteers and redistributed small portions to the families who had contributed in the morning. This small portion of uncooked rice is then put into their *Chengphu* (a container for storing uncooked rice).

Interestingly, to acknowledge their hard work, women also gather for a grand dinner on the same day or a lunch on another convenient day where they laugh together and have a sumptuous meal together. This is the much-awaited part of this event of togetherness where women express a sense of contentment after the completion of an important religious task collectively, which has been possible only by acting out as one collective social group. On the day of the meal, women congregate again at an appointed venue in the locality, usually at someone's courtyard, this time on a lighter note as they have no restrictions to follow unlike during the ritual. This is indeed a joyous celebration after the accomplishment of a significant social and religious duty.

The ritual of *Saroi Khangba* and the post-ritual meal exhibit what Durkheim (1912) has rightly claimed about religion as nothing more than the expression of society in consecrated form. In performing the ritual of *Saroi Khangba* by the locality as a whole, the collective sentiments are aroused. Every family participates in the ritual by making its own simple contribution, expressing its bond with the collectivity, indicating that it is also a part of the entire locality. This shows that the through the ritual, the locality is being transformed into what Durkheim calls as a 'moral' community. The collectivity and the solidarity of the social group is well exhibited in the ritual which signifies that collective conscience is the source of religion and it comes from the society itself. Equally intriguing is the post-ritual meal where women enjoy after their completion of their religious task. They share their take on various things ranging from personal to any form of issues. They share women related issues with both laughter and seriousness. The collective feeling of enthusiasm and excitement, which serves to strengthen the bonds between the individuals who feel proud to be members of a society, which Durkheim calls as 'collective effervescence' is well expressed in both the ritual as well as in the post-ritual meal.

Conclusion

Saroi Khangba is a very old ritual practiced by the Meiteis since the pre-Vaishnava period to exorcise the evil-spirits from their localities. It is based on their belief that if evil-spirits are not given due share of offerings then they might harm people. And in order to give their offerings, the Meiteis take the help of the guardian deities of the corners of four directions. The performance of this ritual also indicates the persistence of pre-Hindu elements in the contemporary Meitei religious life. In other words, ritual such as the *Saroi Khangba* and belief in the evil spirits survive even after their adoption of Vaishnavism. What is more intriguing is the strong sense of collectivity or solidarity being reflected in this particular ritual among the members of the localities. The essence of both the ritual and the post-ritual meal exhibits a beautiful expression of collective effervescence. This in itself reflects that religion is nothing but the worship of the society. It is the coming together of the society or the collectivity which serves as the essence of the religion, which signifies that society is the source of religion.



References

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