

The Brahma Sabha And Socio-Religious Governance In Manipuri Society

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Abstract:

This paper explores the historical role of the Brahma Sabha, an influential organization of Hindu Brahmins, in shaping the socio-religious landscape of Manipur. Functioning as the apex body of Brahmins, the Brahma Sabha played a significant role in regulating religious practices, resolving social disputes and upholding community norms within the Manipuri Vaishnavite society. Drawing upon historical texts, socio-religious records and community narratives, this study examines the Sabha's structure, functions and its impact on social governance and religious life. It analyzes the Sabha's involvement in the implementation of social restrictions and its influence on the Meitei society. The research further investigates the evolving dynamics between the Brahma Sabha, the state and the broader Manipuri society, considering the challenges and transformations faced by the institution over time. Examining the Sabha's historical trajectory reveals its complex relationship with the ruling monarchs and its role in mediating between religious authority and social customs. While the Brahma Sabha's powers diminished with the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950, its legacy continues to resonate within Manipuri society, highlighting the intricate interplay of religion, society and governance in the region.

Keywords: Brahma Sabha, governance, Manipur, socio-religious institutions and Vaishnavism

Introduction

Manipur, nestled in the northeastern corner of India, possesses a captivating history and a vibrant cultural tapestry shaped by the interaction of diverse ethnic groups and religious traditions (Singh, 2023). Within this intricate socio-cultural framework, socio-religious institutions have historically held a pivotal position in shaping social norms, preserving cultural heritage and mediating community life. Among these institutions, the Brahma Sabha stands out as a notable organization that has significantly influenced the socio-religious life of Manipuri Hindus (Singh, 2023) since its establishment.

The Brahma Sabha, as the name suggests, is the apex body of the Brahmins in Manipur. The Brahmins began migrating to Manipur in 1516 CE. Though initially not recognized by the rulers, they eventually came under the protection of the Meitei kings. Its origins can be traced back to the early 18th century, with formal recognition during the reign of King Charairongba. The Sabha has since served as a key institution in regulating religious practices, resolving disputes and upholding social order within the Manipuri Vaishnavite community. The Brahma Sabha also contributed to framing the rules of socio-religious and religio-cultural lifestyle of the people of Manipur. The institution continues to function as a part of Shree Shree Gobindajee Temple Board. Senior Brahmins well-versed in Sanskrit scriptures formed the Sabha, which played a strong administrative role by formulating and implementing social conventions related to the Hindu religion (Devi, 2017).

Existing literature provides valuable insights into the socio-religious landscape of Manipur and the role of various institutions. Studies on socio-religious life among the Manipuri Hindus during the 17th and 18th centuries (Singh, 2023) offer a historical backdrop for understanding the context in which the Brahma Sabha emerged and operated. The social structure of the Meiteis has experienced changes from forces coming from different directions (Singh & Devi, 2024). Research also explores the broader religious milieu in Manipur (Somorjit, 2014), examining the influences of Hinduism, Vaishnavism and indigenous beliefs on the region's cultural identity.

This article examines the historical role of the Brahma Sabha in upholding social order, preserving religious traditions and mediating socio-religious life within Manipuri society. It explores the Sabha's structure, functions and influence on social governance, religious practices and dispute resolution within the Manipuri Vaishnavite community. Drawing on historical texts, socio-religious records and community narratives, this study analyzes how the Brahma Sabha mediated between religious authority and social customs, contributing to both the preservation of tradition and the regulation of social conduct. The research further investigates the evolving dynamics between the Brahma Sabha, the state and the broader Manipuri society, considering the challenges and transformations faced by the institution over time. The analysis will also consider the Brahma Sabha's exercise of social restrictions and its role during the colonial period (Devi, 2017).

Historical Background and Formation of the Brahma Sabha

Early Brahmin Influence

The migration of Brahmins into the valley region of Manipur began in 1516 CE, primarily because of socio-political instability and religious persecution under Muslim rulers in northern and western India. These Brahmins, originally refugees, were not granted privileged status upon arrival. Instead, they were categorized among the lower social strata, akin to granary keepers (Kei), slaves or servants (Nai) and tributary people (Loi), during the reign of King Khagemba (1597–1652 CE) (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005: 22, 238–254; Hudson, 2003: 53). Nevertheless, the Meitei monarchy extended them protection, gradually facilitating their integration into Manipuri society and their assimilation into the socio-religious structure.

A major transformation began with King Charairongba (1697–1709 CE), who under complex political and military pressures, converted to the Shakta cult of Devi Kalika in 1704 CE, aiming to garner support from Hindu polities in opposition to the

Buddhist Burmese powers (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005: 66–68). This move initiated the formal interaction between the Brahmin community and the Manipuri state. However, it was King Garibaniwaz (alias Meidingu Pamheiba), Charairongba's successor, who played a pivotal role in altering Manipur's religious trajectory by adopting Vaishnavism in 1717 CE and officially declaring it the state religion by 1725 CE (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005: 70, 74, 85). This institutional embrace of Hindu Vaishnavism facilitated the elevation of the Brahmins' social status and consolidated their role as religious and cultural custodians in the emerging Hindu society of the valley.

Formation of the Brahma Sabha

The establishment of the Brahma Sabha, derived from the Sanskrit Sabha, meaning an assembly, was a critical step in formalizing the authority of the Brahmin community in regulating religious and socio-cultural life (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005: 238). This body emerged in the early 18th century CE, concurrent with the consolidation of Vaishnavism under Garibaniwaz. Although the roots of the Brahmin institution may lie in the earlier Bamon Loishang (Office of Brahmins), it was during this period that a formalized Brahminical council began to function as a regulatory institution. Initially aligned with the Ramanandi sect of Vaishnavism, the Sabha represented an effort to coordinate and oversee religious conformity, ritual practice and social norms within the newly restructured Hindu state (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005: 70–77).

Evolution and Institutional Authority

The Brahma Sabha evolved into a highly influential ecclesiastical and regulatory body within Manipuri Hindu society. Central to its operation was the Navaratna or Council of Nine Jewels, which served as the core decision-making group within the Sabha (Devi, 2017; Singh, 2016). These individuals exercised jurisdiction over a wide range of socio-religious matters affecting the Brahmin and wider Vaishnavite community. The Sabha assumed responsibilities for formulating religious rules, adjudicating disputes, promoting spiritual and communal welfare and safeguarding ritual orthodoxy (Singh, 2016). Importantly, the Sabha also exercised coercive powers, including excommunication, banishment and enforced relocation to Loi villages for offenders of the established religious code (Singh, 2016). Its function extended beyond theology into the sociopolitical realm, acting as a semi-judicial body concerned with conformity to religious and moral order.

By the late 18th century, Brahmins held significant cultural capital and were considered superior even to the Ganaka (astrologers or mathematicians). Royal proclamations confirmed their elevated status as Mahajan or distinguished figures in Meetei society (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005: 89). Over time, Brahmin families became embedded within the royal court and wider society through surnames like Gurumayum, Kakchingtabam and Gotimayum, denoting their Meetei social identity and dignified rank. Today, the Brahma Sabha continues to function under the umbrella of the Shree Shree Govindajee Temple Board, retaining a symbolic and ritualistic presence in the religious life of Manipuri Hindus.

Functions, Roles and Objectives of the Brahma Sabha in Manipur

The *Brahma Sabha* emerged as a pivotal religio-administrative institution within the socio-political landscape of early modern Manipur, particularly under Meetei monarchs who actively promoted *Gaudiya* Vaishnavism. Functioning under both royal patronage and community consensus, the Brahma Sabha not only institutionalized Vaishnavite orthodoxy but also embedded itself within the broader apparatus of governance, reflecting the deep entwinement of religion, polity and customary law in Manipuri society.

Mediation Between Monarchy and Society

The Brahma Sabha's political relevance lay in its mediatory role between the Meetei monarchy and the wider society. Royal patronage legitimized the Sabha's authority, while the Sabha in turn sanctified the monarch's rule through ritual performances, scriptural endorsements and spiritual counsel. This reciprocal relationship reinforced the political theology of Manipuri kingship, where rulers assumed roles as protectors of dharma and enforcers of Vaishnavite morality.

This intersection was particularly evident during times of social tension, such as disputes over ritual propriety, conversion controversies, or communal conflicts. In such moments, the Sabha's deliberations served to stabilize society by upholding normative religious frameworks, thus substituting for or supplementing the state's coercive apparatus (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005).

Religious Authority and Scriptural Legitimacy

The Brahma Sabha served as the principal custodian of Hindu religious orthodoxy in Manipur, particularly among the Manipuri Brahmins who followed *Gaudiya* Vaishnavism. Its foundational objectives established during the reign of King Garibaniwaz (1709–1748 CE) included preserving ritual purity, standardizing Vaishnavite practices and ensuring doctrinal fidelity to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's theological vision (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005: 77). The Sabha played a regulatory role in interpreting scriptures, administering temple affairs and supervising religious ceremonies such as Mahabharata recitations and mantra initiations (Devi, 2017).

The Sabha's authority extended beyond liturgical functions. It influenced priestly appointments, supervised ritual obligations of the monarch and served as an arbiter in matters involving theological deviations. The spiritual influence it wielded reinforced its position as a gatekeeping institution for both personal piety and royal sacrality (Singh, 2016).

Socio-Judicial Governance and Customary Jurisprudence

The Brahma Sabha was not merely a religious institution but operated as an ecclesiastical court with quasi-judicial powers. It adjudicated cases related to caste infractions, marital disputes, inheritance and violations of religious norms. Importantly, the Sabha possessed the authority to impose social sanctions, such as excommunication and banishment to Loi villages settlements

for ritually degraded individuals (Singh, 2016). These punitive mechanisms underscore the Sabha's role as an instrument of normative regulation and moral enforcement within Vaishnavite society.

Moreover, the deployment of the Brahma Sabha's head, the *Bamon Hanjaba*, as a political envoy to Tripura (1716 CE) and his subsequent role in military defense (1721 CE) reveals the fluid boundary between religious authority and administrative agency (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005: 77). Such instances illuminate the multifunctional nature of the Sabha as both an ecclesiastical and state-aligned institution.

Social Regulation and Community Welfare

While steeped in religious orthodoxy, the Brahma Sabha also functioned as a custodian of social welfare and ethical order. It was tasked with maintaining communal cohesion by resolving intra-community conflicts and arbitrating disputes that could threaten the stability of the Vaishnavite social fabric. Its integration into the moral governance structure of the Meetei polity allowed it to serve as both mediator and disciplinarian (Singh, 2016).

Entrusted by the monarchy and accepted by the populace, the Sabha derived legitimacy from its perceived role in upholding *dharma*, the socio-religious law that defined both personal conduct and communal order. From its inception in the early 18th century, the Brahma Sabha became an enduring institution that combined spiritual leadership with practical governance.

The Navaratna: Institutional Hierarchy and Administrative Authority

A core structural feature of the Brahma Sabha was the *Navaratna* (Nine Jewels), a council composed of elite Brahmins entrusted with key religious, ritualistic and administrative responsibilities. This council formed the executive nucleus of the Sabha and included specialized roles such as:

Guru Byavasthakari: Adjudicator in matters of ritual pollution and purity (especially in *mangha-sengha* cases),

- ***Acharya Guru***: Officiated royal baptisms and spiritual initiations,
- ***Raj Purohit***: Responsible for chanting sacred mantras during royal ceremonies,
- ***Tantradhara***: Interpreter and custodian of Tantric scriptures (Devi, 2017; Singh, 2016).

Additional members, such as *Brahma*, *Dhamandi Guri Bidya Ratna*, *Hanjaba* and *Hidang*, further diversified the council's competencies. By the reign of Maharaja Churachand (1891–1941 CE), the Sabha had grown to encompass nearly 100 members, although decision-making remained concentrated within the Navaratna (Singh, 2016). This structure ensured a streamlined chain of command and consolidated both spiritual and social authority within a Brahmin elite.

Preceding Structure: The Pancha Ratna and Legal Codification

The Brahma Sabha evolved from an earlier council known as the *Pancha Ratna* (Five Gems), instituted under King Bhagyachandra in the late 18th century. This precursor body consisted of eminent Brahmin scholars designated with titles such as *Vidyalankar*, *Vidyanidhi*, *Vidyasundar*, *Vachaspati* and *Vyavasthakari*, each symbolizing mastery over distinct domains of learning and jurisprudence (Ibochouba, Chitreshwar & Kulachandra, 1995: 6).

The Pancha Ratna played a significant role in the codification of Hindu customary law, including landmark regulations like the *Sambandha Niraya* (Verdict of Relationship) issued in 1790 CE (Kulachandra, 1998: 122). Court records from 1797 CE reveal their engagement in adjudicating caste-related and slavery cases, highlighting the extent of their influence over social and legal life (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 2005: 169–170).

The Bamon Loishang: Bureaucratic Integration

The broader institutional framework within which the Brahma Sabha operated was the *Bamon Loishang*, a hierarchical administrative body reflective of state structures. This included:

- *Bamon Hanjaba* (chief religious administrator),
- *Bamon Hidang* (deputy),
- *Bamon Shellungha* (treasurer),
- *Bamon Keirung* (storekeeper),
- *Bamon Panditas* (scholars),
- *Bamon Loishangloi* (messengers) (Kulachandra, 2012: 232–235).

This bureaucratized structure enabled the Brahma Sabha to function as a quasi-governmental institution embedded within the broader apparatus of Meetei governance. It exemplified the fusion of ritual authority and administrative rationality in early modern Manipur.

Challenges and Transformations of the Brahma Sabha in Manipur

The Brahma Sabha of Manipur has undergone significant transformations in response to shifting socio-political, religious and cultural landscapes over the centuries. Initially established in the early 18th century under the patronage of the Meetei monarchy, the institution emerged as a central authority in regulating and safeguarding the Hindu Vaishnavite order in Manipur. Originating from the efforts of Brahmin immigrants who arrived in Manipur through Bengal and gradually gained influence, the Sabha evolved from early councils such as the *Pancharatana* to the more institutionalized *Navaratna* during the reign of Chourajit Singh.

Although the Brahma Sabha began as a powerful ecclesiastical and administrative organ within the Vaishnavite polity, its institutional prominence began to wane with the decline of monarchic authority and the rise of modern state structures. During periods of upheaval such as the Seven Years' Devastation (1819–1826), the institution temporarily lost its operational capacity. However, it was revived under Raja Gambhir Singh and formally reorganized during the regency of Raja Chandrakirti

Singh in the form of a consolidated *Brahma Sabha*, which was empowered to govern the religious affairs of the Hindu Vaishnavite community in Manipur.

Historically, the Brahma Sabha wielded considerable influence, with royal endorsement enabling it to dictate religious rules, conduct essential life-cycle rituals (e.g., *upanayana*, *vivaha*, *mriti*) and maintain orthodoxy in ritual practices. Nevertheless, its authority often intersected with political interests. Scholarly observations suggest that the Sabha, under royal directive, was at times misused as a tool for political repression and social control. Devi (2017) points out instances where monarchs allegedly employed the Brahma Sabha to target political adversaries and extract illegitimate levies from commoners, underscoring the politicization of religion in pre-modern Manipur.

In modern times, the Brahma Sabha has seen a marked shift from a semi-political religious council to a more ceremonial and socio-cultural institution. The advent of colonial administration, the spread of modern education, democratization and the rise of egalitarian values diluted its traditional authority. The Sabha lost its former political stature and gradually evolved into a religious body primarily tasked with preserving rituals and guiding the Vaishnavite community on socio-religious matters. As noted by Rudrababu (2016), it ceased to function as a political entity and now primarily serves socio-religious functions within a regulated framework.

Presently, the Brahma Sabha operates under the aegis of the *Shree Shree Govindajee Temple Board*, which is managed by the Government of Manipur. The institutional structure remains hierarchical, comprising the *Navaratana* (Nine Gems), *Pancharatana* (Five Gems) and a larger council of *Ratanas* (Forty-Three Gems), alongside a *Dharma Guru* who presides over spiritual matters (Rajendra and Kumar, n.d: 10-11). Despite the formal institutional continuity, its influence is now largely symbolic, confined to ritual preservation, religious consultation and community welfare efforts.

Yet, like many traditional religious institutions, the Brahma Sabha has not remained free from critique. Allegations of rigidity in its interpretations, exclusivity in decision-making and a general resistance to social reforms have been raised by sections of society. The growing disconnect between the institution and the evolving aspirations of younger generations particularly in the context of gender inclusion, caste mobility and inter-religious dialogue poses critical challenges to its continued relevance. Nevertheless, the adaptability of the Brahma Sabha is evident in its survival and redefinition over three centuries of tumultuous political and social change. The shift from a monarchically endorsed religious council to a modern statutory religious division under state management signifies a broader transformation in the relationship between religion and governance in Manipur. The institution's historical trajectory highlights the complex interplay between sacred authority, political power and social evolution within Manipuri society.

Transformations under Colonial and Post-Colonial Rule

The advent of British rule introduced new administrative and legal systems in Manipur, yet the Brahma Sabha continued to exert moral and religious influence, albeit with reduced judicial powers. The colonial administration did not formally abolish the Sabha, but the imposition of codified law and civil courts gradually curtailed its jurisdiction over public life. Nonetheless, the Sabha retained its prestige and symbolic authority within the Brahmin and Vaishnavite community.

Post-1947, with the adoption of the Indian Constitution and the legal framework of a secular state, the Sabha's formal coercive authority was effectively nullified. Article 17 (abolishing untouchability), Article 25 (freedom of religion) and the introduction of uniform civil codes conflicted with the Sabha's earlier practices of caste-based excommunication and ritual sanctions. However, the Brahma Sabha has survived as a cultural-religious institution, currently functioning under the Shree Shree Govindajee Temple Board, preserving scriptural interpretation, ritual performance and customary traditions within the Manipuri Hindu fold (Devi, 2017).

Conclusion

The Brahma Sabha stands as a compelling illustration of the intricate entanglement between religion, society and governance in the historical evolution of Manipur. Established under royal patronage and deeply rooted in the socio-political transformations accompanying the Vaishnavization of the state, the Sabha functioned as a pivotal institution regulating both religious and moral life. It played a foundational role in formulating socio-religious norms and adjudicating matters of ritual and conduct, thereby exercising both theological and juridical authority. Though its formal influence has receded in the context of modern constitutional secularism, the Sabha's imprint endures in the ritual practices, normative frameworks and collective memory of Manipuri Hindu society. It exemplifies a model of indigenous socio-religious governance that once bridged sacred authority with mechanisms of social regulation. The historical trajectory of the Brahma Sabha, marked by its emergence through Brahmin migration, institutional consolidation under monarchic rule and gradual marginalization in the postcolonial era, offers critical insights into the evolution of civil society, religious hegemony and the role of faith-based institutions in shaping public life in Northeast India.

Future research may fruitfully explore the Sabha's role in initiating or resisting social reforms, its engagement (or lack thereof) with inter-religious dynamics and its contemporary strategies for relevance amidst shifting socio-political landscapes. Such inquiries could contribute to broader comparative analyses of how traditional religious institutions adapt to modernity while retaining their cultural and moral authority within pluralistic societies.

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