The North-Eastern region of India, consisted of the states of Assam, Manipur, Tripura and a number of tribal pockets before 1947, assumes much importance for the study of diverse culture and traditions that prevailed in the region throughout the ages. Besides the indigenous tribal religion, as practised by various tribes in the plains and the hills, the area has witnessed flourishing of Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktism, Surya cult, Tantricism and Buddhism in early and medieval period of her history. The cult of Jagannath, a manifestation of god Vishnu, was also popular in some pockets of Assam, Tripura and Manipur, as attested by literary, archaeological and oral traditions.

The state of Manipur, in the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, 'A Jewel of India' can be divided into two geographical regions - the valley and the surrounding hills. The valley area, known as Imphal Valley is surrounded by hills, on all the sides, where various tribal groups have their settlements. The state is a landlocked one, connected with the neighbouring areas with a long border line, of which 352 kms are international borders with Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) on the east and Chin Hills of Myanmar on the southeast. At present the remaining 502 kms connect her with other neighbouring sister states of North-East India. Among the different ethnic groups of the people of Manipur, the Meities of the valley are the most dominant one and are considered to be a very advanced community. Pakhangba, the founder of the Ningthouja dynasty in 33 AD, was the first known king of the history of Manipur, and after him a series of kings ruled over the kingdom of Manipur establishing a powerful kingdom consolidating many neighbouring areas.

Though some forms of Vaisnavism seem to have flourished in the state since the 8th century AD, it became firmly established during the reign of Kiyamba in the 15th century. During the period of king Charairongba (1697-1709) Vaishnavism had its sound footing in the soil of Manipur. We are told in a traditional Meiti literature, entitled Bamon Khunthoklon that the Brahmana inhabitants of Tripura, Bengal, Mathura and Orissa migrated to Manipur during this period. The king is said to be the first Manipur king to be formally initiated into Vaisnavism. The literature further mentions that from Svetaganga Puri came a pious Brahmana named Krishna charya alias Rai Banamali with some of his companions in October 1703 AD. His wife Krisnamayi, two Sudras and a Brahmana named Balabhadra Brahmachari are mentioned as members of his party. The pilgrims were received favourably by the king. It is stated that Rai Banamali introduced king Charairongba to profess
the Vaisnavite faith. The king along with his courtiers said to have performed a fast on Wednesday about April 15, 1704 and formally initiated to Vaisnavism. Banamali's descendants are called Guru Aribam. The king said to have acknowledged his gratitude to his preceptor by assigning a place of honour to him and to his descendants in festivals and ceremonies held in the palace. The king said to have placed a village, a hill and 100 acres of rice field at the Guru's disposal. He constructed a brick temple of Radhakrisna at Brahmapur Guru Aribam Leikai. A nine-round brick house was also constructed in the honour of the Guru, which was destroyed by the Burmese in the early part of the 19th century. Thus the coming of the Guru from Puri was a turning point in the history of Vaishnavism in Manipur. In this connection, it is to be noted that cultural interaction of various states of Northeast including Manipur with Orissa was already existed from early historical period. Instances are there to show that Brahmin and Buddhist scholars from Orissa and Northeast were responsible for maintaining cultural contact between both the regions. It can be noted here that one Ganga king of Orissa Anantavarman Chodagangadeva issued a copper plate charter in 1122 AD where the name of Brahmana, Visnusomacharya from Sringatikagrahar of Kamarupa Visaya belonging to Parasara gotra and well-versed in Veda and Vedanta was mentioned, who was honoured by the king at the time of his brother's daughter marriage. It is worth mentioning that the Tripura Maharaja Kalyan Manikya performed Tulapurushadanam, in which many renowned scholars from Mathura, Benaras, Orissa and Setubandha arrived to receive awards and dakshinas from the king in or around 1600 AD. The point to be emphasized here that Orissan culture was not unknown in some areas of Northeast India, and Puri had already earned its name as the important centre of Vaishnavism in medieval period. It can be assumed that the Manipuri king would have invited the Vaisnava Guru to Manipur for propagation of Vaisnavism in early part of 18th century AD. After Charaibonga, king Chourajit had his devotion towards Lord Chaitanya and said to have sent gold targas to Puri, Nabadvip and Vrindaban to meet the expenses of the worship of Visnu. His successor, Garibniwaz was initiated into Vaisnavism and worked for its cause by patronizing Brahmins and constructing a number of Vaisnava monumets. Thus, we see, in the later part of 18th century, the root of Vaisnavism had already been strengthened in Manipur.

Here it may be mentioned that when Vaisnavism was becoming popular in the Valley of Manipur, the Vaisnava cult of Orissa in the form of Jagannath cult became already popular in some parts of Assam and Tripura, two neighbouring states of Manipur. The Kalikapurana (9th century) and the Yogini Tantra (16th century), two celebrated texts of Assam, popularized the concept of Jagannath by linking Him with the important Vaisnava pithas of Assam. The Yogini Tantra, while mentioning the greatness of Jagannath attempts to link the Hayagriva Pitha of Kamarupa with that of Jagannath at Puri, which is reflected in an Assamese text Manikuta of 1680 AD. Interestingly enough, the Ahom ruler of medieval Assam, said to have sent one delegation to Puri for the worship of Jagannath, which is well-attested in the Buranjis, traditional court literature of the Ahoms. The biographies of Sankaradeva have dealt extensively regarding the impact of god Jagannath on the life and deeds of Sankaradeva, the Mahapurusha of Assam, who said to have visited Puri once in 1490 AD and again in 1550 AD. The writings of Sankaradeva attests to the fact. The popularity of Jagannath in the socio-
religious life of the people is known from a copper plate land grant of 1787 AD,\textsuperscript{20} remains of a number of Jagannath temples in lower Assam, oral traditions prevalent in Kamarupa, in sculptural and folk art of lower Assam.\textsuperscript{21} In the southern Assam territory of Cachar, the worship of Jagannath was not unknown, as revealed from British document of early 19th century.\textsuperscript{22} In the Jayantia Hill (now a part of Meghalaya state), there is one interesting information in the form of a land grant. The said grant mentions that one Queen Kasabati Debee, the consort of Bar Gosain, said to have made gifts of some land for the worship of Basudeva, Jagannath and Bhudhara (Subhadra) with the consent of Raja Ram Sinha in 1735 Saka (1813 AD).\textsuperscript{23} Instance from Tripura refers to donation of fifteen drones of land to Brahmmins to conduct the daily puja of Lord Jagannath in Tripura era 1186 (1766 AD) by king Maharja Krishnamani.\textsuperscript{24} Even a few Jagannath temples were constructed in or around Agartala in 18th and 19th century AD. The above discussion makes it clear that already in the 18th century; the cult of Jagannath was not unfamiliar with some people of Kamarupa, Cachar, Tripura and Jayantia Hills.

Though Vaisnava cult of Puri gained ground in Manipur in 18th century, the beginning of Ratha yatra (car festival) of Jagannath started in Manipur only in 1832 AD, the credit for which goes to Manipuri king Gambhir Singh. The regional literature narrates one incident in connection with the beginning of Ratha yatra in the state. It is told how once the king of Manipur Gambhir Singh was invited by the British Government for taking part in the expedition against the Khasis. The Manipuri work, \textit{khaki ngamba} provides a thrilling account of his exploits in war.\textsuperscript{25} On Monday, April-May 1829, Gambhir Singh left Manipur for Sylhet and could defeat the Khasis, when at Sylhet he is reported to have quelled a communal riot between the Muslims and the Hindus. It is mentioned that in the particular year, the Muharram and Ratha yatra occurred in the same day. The Nawab of Sylhet, Gonarkhan, requested the Hindus to defer the celebration of the Ratha yatra by one day. In the meantime Muslim subjects took law in their hands and assaulted the Hindus to dissuade them from observing the festival. Gambhir Singh dispersed the Muslims with the help of his troops. The grand festival in which the king and his people participated was held as scheduled. Gambhir Singh was hailed as a protector of Hinduism by the people of Sylhet. On his return to Manipur, he introduced the worship of Jagannath.\textsuperscript{26} With his initiative, a twelve wheeled car was made and the \textit{Jivanyasa} ceremony of Jagannath was performed on a grand scale. The images of Subhadra and Balabhadra were also carved. Infact, Gambhir Singh was responsible for introducing the festival of drawing the car by the people to the accompaniment of chorus song and dance.

The Rathayatra locally known as \textit{Kangchingba} was thus introduced in 1832 AD in Manipur. The Manipuri Vaisnavites observe the Rathayatra of the Lord on the model of the Puri festival, which is revealed from a passage of the Meiti work \textit{Kumbaba}.\textsuperscript{27} It is a famous festival of nine day duration in the bright fortnight in the month of Ingen (June-July) with elaborate paraphernalia. Before fifteen days of the yatra, the images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are bathed on the day of Snanayatra. As per the tradition, on the day of the Rathayatra (2nd day of Ingen) at the main gate of the palace of the king at Imphal, thousands of people including the royalty, considered it auspicious to pull the ropes of the ratha. Every Krishna temple in the state observes the Ratha festival with the active support of the people, who contributes their mite to its success. The \textit{Darbar} of Manipuri
Maharajas used to make special allotment of funds for the celebration of the chariot festival which every year starts from Sri Gobindaji temple near the royal palace at Imphal.

On the day of the yatra, the images are carried out on the Ratha to the accompaniment of music, offering of fruits by individual householders. Sometimes persons stand behind the image and fan it with a yak tail fan, while in procession. The structure of the Ratha is like Kairen Kajo and its ambari (head portion) takes the shape of Burmese pagoda. The daily recitation of Jayadeva's Dasavatara in the evening is an essential ingredient of the festival. In every village temple, Dasavatara Stotra is sung before Jagannath by old and young alike to the accompaniment of dances. The rite also sanctions the offering of rice and dal cooked in oil (Khichri) and the priests distribute the Prasad among the Vaisnavas. The Meiti including the royalty considered it auspicious to pull the ropes of the Ratha. The nine day programme of devotional music and dance is followed by the preparation of khichri and mangalutti on lotus leaves. Two kinds of dances i.e., the Jayadeva dance and Khubak Isei dance are the gift of Rathayatra to Manipur culture. The Khubak Isei is the dance performed to the accompaniment of musical sounds made by the clapping of hands. It became popular in Manipur after the Manipuri accepted the Gaudiya form of Vaisnavism. In the Jagannath temple, Puri, when Chaitanya resided for the latter part of his life, the sight of the chariot of Jagannath threw the Gauranga into rapturous mood of Radha, feeling the pang of separation when Krisna was invited to participate in the function. In another instance, Radha fainted while Krishna left for Mathura in the chariot of Kamsa. The sentiment of separation is beautifully expressed in Khubak Isei. The dance is in two forms i.e., the tandava and the lasya form. If a villager is unable to worship Jagannath with Khubak Isei, he is expected to invoke god by reciting the verse of Gitagovinda.

A few other rituals are performed by the Vaisnavite Meiti in the Jagannath temple. On the eleventh day of the bright fortnight in the month of Ingen, the people observe Harisayana. In this festival, the idol of the Jagannath from asleep. The ritual consists in the awakening of god Jagannath from asleep. The sentiment of separation is beautifully expressed in Khubak Isei. The dance is in two forms i.e., the tandava and the lasya form. If a villager is unable to

A number of Krisna temples are noticed in Manipur Valley of 18th - 19th century. The images worshipped in the village temples are those of Radha, Krisna, Jagannath, Subhadra, Balaram, Gopaladeva, Saligram, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Icons of wood of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra have been noticed in various parts of Manipur. A fine icon of Jagannath located at Bijoygovinda temple at Imphal is represented with arms but no hands and the body is without legs and head is almost flat. He is painted in black colour. Balabhadra and Subhadra are also of the same form though different in size and white in colour. These icons are dated to early part of 19th century.

The traditional Meiti literature do mention regarding the visit of Manipuri Vaisnavites to Puri in the British period, which is well-supported by archival documents. It is told that the Vaisnavite Manipuri kings were kind to the mendicants coming from Puri, Sylhet and Nabadvipa. No doubt, Puri being the abode of Jagannath and
considered as a holy place for Vaisnavite Hindus, used to attract pilgrims from nook and corner of India including Manipur. Till today, Jagannath is worshipped by the Manipuri Vaisnavites with love and devotion.

Notes & References
6. Kingh, Kirti M., Religious Developments in Manipur in the 18th and 19th centuries, Imphal, 1980, p.120.
7. Singh Ibungohal, L., & N. Khelchandra Singh (ed), op. cit., p.56.
8. Ibid., p.120.

Also one can see, Hemachandra Goswami (ed), Purani Asam Buranji, Gauhati, 1922, p.166.
26. Ibid., p.229.
27. Singh Kirti, M., op. cit., p.166.
32. Archival Documents such as Charles Grome Report of 1803 (preserved in Orissa State Archive Bhubaneswar) mentions the flow of Pilgrimage from various parts of Nepal and North East India to Puri, the Jagannath Ksetra in early 19th century.

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