

## **Theorising Social Fear in the Context of Collective Actions in Manipur**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper discusses social fear as a collective sense of fear of imminent economic, political and cultural degeneration as a consequence of politically induced demographic change. The paper is premised in the context of a numerically and a politically dominant Meetei group in Manipur that, with deeply rooted fear, endeavour for protection of the native people. Meetei people prefer to identify all the native inhabitants of Manipur and their Meetei language as Manipuri. Their claim of being the autochthons of Manipur and thus their self-ascribed identity as Manipuri is, however, challenged by another group that makes a counter-claim of being the first inhabitants of Manipur and that declares its members as Bishnupriya-Manipuri. Manipuri as a collective identity ascribed to all the native inhabitants of Manipur is also challenged by sections of tribals of Manipur who project distinct cultural and political identities. The claim of the Bishnupriya-Manipuri, demands of the tribals for separate homelands and growing influx of non-native peoples engendered a collective sense of fear among the Meetei of being likely to be dominated numerically, economically, politically and culturally. It is in the context of a gamut of shared fear and diverse strategies of collective actions based on endemic fear that social fear is theorised.*

**KEYWORDS:** Social fear, collective actions, Manipuri, Bishnupriya-Manipuri, Meetei.

### **Introduction**

A group that senses a threat of cultural and political domination from dominant or powerful group will exhibit collective or social behaviours that intend to keep the dominant group at a safe social distance. Such behaviours may include even refusal to speak in the language of the dominant's group while expecting every others to communicate in one's native language. The nature of social

intercourse with the dominant groups will be determined by the extent of perceived threat from the dominant group.

It has become a routine affair to position outsiders as threat to the native population of Manipur. Meetings are held to highlight the stagnant growth of native population. 'Eegi Khongul Liba' (*Eegi*- of blood, but here it means ancestors; *Khongul*- footprint; *Liba*- to follow or to search) was one such programme organised by Iramdam Kanba Lup (*Iramdam*- one's native land; *Kanba*- save; *Lup*-organisation) in April 2015 to sensitise the people about the 'dwindling population of the indigenous people' and to protect themselves from a situation where the indigenous people become 'minority community...in near future' (*Hueiyen Lanpao*, 13 April, 2015). Meetei language also known as Manipuri is used by the Meetei as a critical medium to construct and re-enforce a collective Manipuri identity.

When the ethnic identity of a group is perceived to be under threat from outside group, groups' affiliation to same religion may begin to be perceived as a threat to one's ethnic identity. According to M.R. Singh (2011), blaming the Hindus for weakening of Meetei traditional religion, burning of Hindu sacred books, abolition of Hindu Gods in Manipur and destruction of Hindu temples and statues were carried out under the aegis of Meetei National Front. And despite Manipuri language enjoying a status in the Eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution and Ras Leela (dance of Krishna and Radha, Hindu god and goddess) acclaimed worldwide as Manipuri dance, the Meeteis fear of being likely to be dominated by the Indian Hindu or Hindi speaking Indians, whom they identify as *mayangs*, is still popularised. Beside the Hindi speaking Indians other identified potential agents of domination are Kukis of Myanmar and illegal Bangladesh Muslim immigrants.

### **Theorising Social Fear**

Social fear means collective fear of being reduced to a relatively insignificant group in one's own native place due to gradual increase in outsiders and consequent loss of economic and

political power and loss of cultural identity. Social fear may sometime be hyped to the extent of an imagined state of extinction of one's group. There is a sustained narrative of native people likely to be dominated by outsiders. Social fear has a potential to engender collective actions and the fear is the ideology expressed through propaganda of domination and/ or extinction. It is relative in nature and requires identification of real outside group perceived to have potential to be dominant numerically. The claimed state of domination by outsiders can also be an illusion or concocted. Social fear can be produced purposively through informal processes by organisations working directly with native peoples' issues. Fear is logically constructed and empirically explained and popularised. Cultural elements become essential to mobilise the mass. Native people's culture is represented to be in a state of fragile and likely to be annihilated by the outsiders. Identity narrative is a crucial tool for spreading fear and mobilisation.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1982) argued that '...the political structure rests on the social structure' and the working system of 'political structure' can be modified or nullified by the 'social structure' (p. 169). A native group by virtue of being the earlier settler may enjoy dominant status until a numerically and economically dominant outside group pose a threat to their identity and political power. Such fear of diminution of native population and consequent loss of political power is also due to absence of credible provision for the safeguard of the cultural, economic and political interests of the native people.

Fear of extinction or being reduced to a minority status in one's native place due to cultural invasion by outside groups is becoming popularised. Sometime such fear is relative and it is not necessarily objective. Such relative fear may also be manipulated to carry out communal propaganda against other groups. Physical proximity between numerically larger outside group and a numerically smaller native group can engender and heighten perceived fear of cultural annihilation amongst the native group. This could happen even if the outside group is numerically smaller in the

place of the native group, but constitutes a dominant group at regional or national level.

Unlike racism in which hatred is the hallmark irrespective of the strength of the outsiders social fear depends immensely on the numerical strength of the outsiders at present or possible gradual increase to the extent of dominating the native. Social fear is free from phenotypical features of the outsiders. It provides a fulcrum to which the socially discriminated, economically disadvantaged groups are attached and share a sense of belonging with the perpetrators of institutionalised and internalised forms of discriminations.

To theorise social fear in the context of Manipur the subsequent section of the paper dwells on the people of Manipur and the various social dynamics.

### **People of Manipur**

To understand the idea of 'Manipuri' it is indispensable to know how Manipur as a territorial name came about and also know the people of Manipur. To the Meeteis, Manipur is believed to have been known as *Sanaleibak* (*sana-* gold; *leibak-* land). It was also known as *Kangleipak* (land of *Kang*) before the coming of Hindu religion. *Kang* is a traditional indoor game played using *kang* or seed of a kind of creeper. The prominence of *Kangleipak* over *Sanaleibak* in contemporary Manipur is evident from the nomenclatures of some Meetei non-state armed groups: *Kangleipak Yawol Kanba Lup* (KYKL), *Kangleipak Communist Party* (KCP), *Peoples' Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak* (PREPAK). 'Manipur' is believed to be a foreign name that came after the coming of Hindu religion (Singh, 2005a, p. 47). According to Naorem Joykumar Singh, the impacts of Hinduism were evident in the names of Meetei clans, the name of the 'first historical king of Manipur', names of rivers, lakes, hills, festivals, etc. being Hinduised under the influence of a Bengali Hindu missionary (Singh 2005a, pp. 46-7). A claim on the first Meitei king being a Hindu needs a comment. Note that the first recorded king was Nongda Lairen Pakhangba which is a Meetei name and not a Hindu name. Pakhangba was recorded in 33 A.D. and

thus being the first recorded king he was also the first historical king. However, use of Hindu names by king and adoption of Hindu names in Manipur happened only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of king Pamheiba who changed his name to Hindu name Garibniwaj. And in the context of claim of tribal past it is erroneous to claim Hindu influence from the ‘first historical king of Manipur’ who established Meetei kingdom way back in 33 A.D. after overpowering the six *salais* who are claimed to be tribals by the Meetei. It is a matter of serious concern when even a well-known historian like Naorem Joykumar Singh commits such an error in his reading of history of his own native land ascribing element of Hinduism to the ‘first historical king of Manipur’.

A Bengali word for jewel is *mani*. This can help us speculate how the name Manipur came to be used to refer to Sanaleibak. ‘Sanaleibak’ and ‘Manipur’ have reference to gold and jewel respectively. The existing name Sanaleibak provided relevance for Hinduism as Sanaleibak and Manipur were compatible in essence.

People of Manipur may be broadly categorised into Meetei, Lois, Pangal (Muslim), Naga and Kuki. Meetei being the dominant group had the privilege to name the valley they settle wilfully as ‘Meithei Leipak’ (Hodson, 1908) meaning Land of the Meiteis. Based on oral traditions, Colonel McCulloch believed that the valley of Manipur was settled by principal tribes such as ‘Koomul, Looang, Moirang, and Meithei’ and later the Meithei were believed to have dominated the other three groups and they all came to be collectively identified as Meithei (Hodson, 1908, pp. 5-6). It is interesting to note that so far there is neither oral nor written account of any period of past of Meetei settlement in the hills. And a columnist, of *Sangai Express*, Irengbam Mohendra Singh, traced the beginning of Meetei rule in 33 A.D. after Pakhangba subdued the other six *salais*. In his article ‘Old Imphal town and Meitei Yumjao’ (*Sangai Express*, 11 March, 2018) he cited the work of Shakespeare (1914) to trace the establishment of the Meetei kingdom under a single ruler, Pakhangba. The phrase ‘*Meitei* nation’ unequivocally rules out the Nagas, who were already settled in the hills of present Manipur from the B.C. period, from the conception of Meitei Leibak or land of the

Meitei as the conception of Meitei Leibak for the Meetei was confined to the valley. Thus, the sense of History among some Meetei people even to this present day is consciously or unconsciously limited to the valley. It was especially from the era of Hinduism in Manipur that it widened to erroneously read the history of Manipur alongside of Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the physical peripheries.

*Salai* is understood as equivalent of clan among the Meetei. Irengbam Mohendra Singh described Manipur as ‘...an independent country, established by *Meetei* Pakhangba in 33 A.D. Pakhangba subdued the other six *salais*. He then established a powerful *Meitei* nation of seven *salais*’. Thus, Manipur is a Meetei kingdom of the seven *salais* in the valley and none of the tribals, some of which were already settled in the hills in the period of Before Christ (B.C.), were a part of any of the *salais*. *Salais* never had and has any relevance in the hills or among the hill people.

Lois are either the ‘earlier settlers’ or descendants of the Meitheis who were banished as punishment (Hodson, 1908). They were consequently outcast by the dominant Meetei Hindus. The Lois, thus belong to Scheduled Caste in Manipur. It is to be noted that, as a matter of fact, the Lois were *outcast* and not *outcaste* for they never embraced Hinduism. Consequently, the privilege of settled agriculture by virtue of fertile and rich valley and the practice of untouchability of Hinduism propelled the Meiteis with a sense of superiority over the tribal people (*EPW*, 1979, p. 17) and the Lois.

Some oral traditions believe that the Loi people were forced by Meetei king to settle in the periphery of Kangleipak to ward off tribals from the hills who used to raid in Kangleipak. This theory may also be entertained based on the pattern of settlements of Lois found at present. They are settled in the peripheries of the valley. The distinction between the Lois and the Meitheis is further recognised when Hodson (1908) claimed that the Lois were in subjection for very long to the Meitheis. However, at present, conventionally, the Meiteis and the Lois are collectively recognised as Meeteis. Some Scheduled Castes (Lois) believe that they are not Meetei. They claim themselves to be Lois. The Meeteis and the Lois both speak

Meeteilon (Meetei language). However, the accent of the Lois is different from the larger Meetei group. There are marked cultural differences between the Lois and the Meetei. Sometimes, beside the Lois, a distinction between Meetei and Brahmin is also made. ‘A separate group outside the Meetei was again formed known as “Brahmin group”’ (Singh 2005a, p. 46). Most of the Meetei Brahmin is claimed to be “originally Bengali” (Constantine 1981, p. 41, cited in Gangte, 2010, p. 30). The local name for Brahmin in Manipur is *Bamon*, which is a corrupt local term for Brahmin. They are sometimes referred to as Meetei Bamon. They also speak Meeteilon. Practice of untouchability which is ‘essentially a problem within Hinduism’ (Bajpai, 2010, p. 31) is not alien to this group.

The Pangal (Muslim) people speak Meeteilon as their mother tongue. They are settled in the valley. According to Oinam Ranjit Singh, the first settlement of Pangal in Manipur is traced to the 16<sup>th</sup> century in which three Muslims came from Sylhet (2017). Some Pangals are also believed to have been brought by the Meeteis as prisoners from Cachar (Hodson, 1908,) in Assam. However, according to N. Khelchandra and L. Ibungohal, the Pangal were believed to have entered in Manipur in 1606 A.D. from Bengal as prisoners of war (Hodson, 1908.). And according to Oinam Ranjit Singh, some Pangals were believed to have arrived from Gujarat (Hodson, 1908, p. 5767). The Pangal in Manipur describe themselves as Meitei-Pangal. The name Pangal is believed to be a corrupt term for Bangal (Sheikh, 2013). Interestingly, post-June Uprising against Indo-Naga ceasefire agreement extension in Manipur despite the arrival of the Pangal in Manipur only from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and from different parts of the world they are also called *Yelhoumee* or autochthons or sons of the soil by the Meetei people.

The origin of Kukis of Manipur is highly contentious. A noted historian, Professor N. Joykumar Singh, claimed categorically that the Kukis are not the indigenous people of Manipur (Singh, 2005b). After the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26), it is believed that, some Kukis were given shelter in Manipur by the British in early 1840s after acquiring the acquiescence of the King of Manipur, Nar Singh (Singh, 2005b). Speaking of the Kukis in Assam Prabhakar

(2010) claimed that the Kukis were not taken to be the indigenous tribe and it was merely 'by courtesy' that they are included as a 'hill tribe' in Assam (p. 272). However, Laishram Ratankumar Singh (2011) claimed that the lands of the Kukis such as 'Kabo valley' and 'Manipur Hills', beside others, were invaded by the British in 1700 A.D. (p. 136). This means the Kukis were already settled in the Kabaw Valley and the hills of present Manipur. If Kabo valley, which is claimed by the Meeteis to be once a part of Manipur but arbitrarily given to the Burmese, was the land of the Kukis, as Laishram Ratankumar Singh claimed, how can the Kukis, who already settled in the Valley and the Hills before the arrival of the colonisers, be not the indigenous people of Manipur as claimed by Professor N. Joykumar Singh? N. Joykumar Singh (2012) certainly has basis for such a claim in the statement of Priyam Goswami who talked about the '...restoration of the Kabaw Valley, a hilly tract to the east, which Gambhir Singh had occupied during the war' (p. 19) to the Burmese as per the Treaty of Yandabo of 1826. And according to *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'restore' of which 'restoration' is a derivative means to 'give (something stolen or removed) back to the original owner'. Further, Gangmumei Kamei (2015) unambiguously writes that 'Kabaw valley of Upper Burma' became 'a part of Manipur in the fifteenth century' (p. 7). Kabaw valley is described as a part of Burma until the fifteenth century and it 'became' 'a part of Manipur'. Why would something be referred to as having become a part of something if it was already a part of that something? If the Kabaw Valley was restored to the Burmese in the true sense of the term 'restore' then Joykumar Singh's claim stands on a historically valid ground. Nevertheless, Kukis still remain under vigilant watch of Meetei organisations concerned with illegal immigrants and migrants. The Chairman of Indigenous People's Association of Kangleipak (IPAK) reportedly stated that the migration of 'Kuki foreigners' into Manipur is encouraged by the 'suspension of [military] operation with Myanmar originated Kuki underground groups' (*Hueiyen Lanpao*, March, 2015) operating in the soil of Manipur.

The question of being indigenous people is central to the Meetei existence. The idea of indigenous in Manipur is that of natives being colonised by the British and now by India and needing independence from the colonial yoke. The notion of indigenous is also used to mean the first settlers of the land, Manipur. While the Nagas are not known to have been termed as outsiders the Kukis were specifically pointed out by many organisations in Manipur as immigrants. The fear of increase of Kuki immigrants is a reality which is significantly downplayed in the aftermath of the Indo-Naga ceasefire agreement extension to Manipur when a collective fear was engendered by the dream of Nagalim of the Nagas. Thus, for certain sections of Meetei, Kukis are continued to be identified as real potential threat to demographic destabilisation.

### **Conundrum of ‘Manipuri’**

‘Manipuri’ has both linguistic and political connotations. From a linguistic point of view it refers to Meeteilon (Meetei language) spoken by Meetei and Pangal as their mother tongues. And politically it is still in a state of tussle. However, historically, academically and conventionally Manipuri prominently refers to the Meetei people irrespective of their places of settlement.

### **Meetei’s Manipuri**

A view on ‘Manipuri’ from a Meetei would best guide an understanding of what ‘Manipuri’ is. According to Thokchom Ngouba, (2013) one of the ideas of Manipuri means anyone born and brought up in Manipur irrespective of caste, creed or religion. This idea is problematic in view of the series of protests against illegal immigrants and influx of Indians from other parts of India. There are many in Manipur who were born and brought up in Manipur but whose parents or ancestors are from outside Manipur. His second idea of Manipuri is ‘all residents of Manipur’, whether tribals or Meetei that includes Meetei Bamon and Meetei Pangal or wherever they are. This idea of Manipuri is not accepted by the tribals who project a distinct ethnic and political identity.

For the Meeteis, Manipuris comprise Meeteis, Lois, Kukis, Nagas and Pangal. Other Indian groups who are born and brought up in Manipur being considered as Manipuris seem to be not politically viable in Manipur. Meetei people have conflicting views on the idea of people of Manipur or Manipuri. In Manipur, according to Naorem Joykumar Singh (2011), during the 'Anti Foreign National Movement' in the 1970s and 1980s, besides Bangladeshis, the Nepalese were particularly pointed out as foreigners in Manipur by Kuki National Assembly and All Manipur Students Union (AMSU). However, it is perplexing to note that, according to Laishram Ratankumar Singh (2011), three decades after the aforesaid movement, 'Bangalese, Marwaris, Panjabis, Nepalese' are considered as 'part and parcel of the Manipuries or people of Manipur'. The Indo-Naga ceasefire offers significant explanation to such changes.

The Meetei settled in Assam claim to be Manipuri. To protect the Meetei identity in Nagaon district of Assam, they prohibit sell of 'agricultural land, houses and other properties belonging to Meetei community under any circumstances' to other communities. They have an association that looks after the developmental issues of the Meeteis in Nagaon under a district council. It is called United Manipuri Association. It is obvious that 'Manipuri' here means the Meetei, irrespective of where they are, and not exclusively the inhabitants of Manipur.

The Meeteis face challenges even from within. It has been commonly claimed that the first recorded king of Manipur, Pakhangba, was a Meetei and his rule was claimed to have been recorded since 33 A.D. in Royal Chronicle. However, a noted Meetei writer, O. Tomba, in his writing in the year 1993, argued that 'the entire Manipur Valley was underwater 500 years ago. And he further claimed that there is no authentic archaeological finds to show that the Meeteis settled in Manipur before 14th century A.D' (*Manipur Online*, 7 October, 2010). He also stated that '[a]s Meitei kingdom did not exist in Manipur before the fourteenth century A.D. The story of Bhabrubanam, son of Mahabharata's Arjuna associated with the Meitei kingdom is fiction'. And according to Professor Gangmumei

Kamei (1991), a noted historian from Manipur who is a Naga, in his *History of Manipur*, the Naga tribes in the hills in Manipur were believed to have settled even centuries before Christ (cited in Modoli, 2010). Such historical claims that demolish the claimed, eulogised, celebrated and recorded history of Manipur dating back to 33 A.D. and the claimed indigenous status of Meetei were serious problems for the Meeteis.

### **Tribals' Manipuri**

U.A. Shimray (2001), a noted Naga scholar, averred that 'the name Manipuri is only applicable to the Hindu dweller of the plains areas' (cited in Baruah, 2010). For the tribals, Manipuri refers only to Meeteis.

A Meetei revolutionary group led by Phukhrambam Tomba Singh formed an armed group, 'Manipur State Committee', with a support from the 'Naga Underground' in 1966 (Singh, 2005a). The name of the Meetei armed group was not acceptable to the Nagas as they claim to fight for the Nagas of Manipur too. According to N. Joykumar Singh, the name of the first Meetei armed revolutionary group was, as suggested by the Naga leaders, changed to 'Meitei State Committee' in 1967 (Singh, 2005a). Thus, the Meetei armed group was confined to fighting only for the Meeteis in the valley. This shows the mutual understanding and acquiescence of the Meetei with the tribals' conception of 'Manipur'. For the Nagas, their lands in the hills were never part of Manipur and therefore they are not Manipuri and the Meetei armed group must not claim to fight for the Nagas in the hills.

According to Alexander Mackenzie (2011), the colonial authority, in order to contain the ambition of and appease Gambhir Singh 'proposed to give up to Manipur definitely all the hills between the Doyeng and Dhunsiri' and he further stated that the 'proposal did not receive any formal approval, but it came to be *supposed* [italics mine] in a general kind of way that Manipur exercised some sort of authority over the southern portion of the Naga Hills' (p. 102). Priyam Goswami (2010) observed that 'The tribal people had always been independent' (p. 133) and Gambhir Singh '...compelled the

Nagas to acknowledge his authority' (Goswami, 2010, p. 103). The influence of the Meetei king over the Nagas seemed to have been to favour the colonial interests and not for Manipur's suzerainty over the Nagas. According to Alexander Mackenzie (2011), Captain Jenkins, the Commissioner, suggested Mr. Grange that 'Manipur...should be compelled to co-operate with us [the British] in bringing the Nagas into subjection to our [the British] rule' (p. 105). Thus, the Nagas were to be subjected to the British rule through the intervention of the Meetei king and not to be under the Meetei rule. Consequently, the Nagas stand on a position that there was no foreign rule, except the British. Thus, the hill tribes did not accept the rule of the Meetei to be legitimate. 'The Nagas and the Kukis did not like to remain as state subjects of Manipur', stated SR Tohring (2010, p. 63). Thus, the Nagas stand for Nagalim ('Land of the Nagas'. *Lim* is derived from Ao term *Lima* meaning land) and the Kukis stand for Kukiland. These demands of the Nagas and the Kukis respectively have been perennial sores in the political eyes of the Meeteis.

Even in the mythological account of the origin of the lands of the Meetei as given by Naoriya Phullo, who is credited for leading a movement for revival of Meetei traditional religion, the Meetei did not live in the hills. According to Naoriya Phullo (2011), as accounted by M.R. Singh, under the command of Soraren, God of Sky, gods levelled a mountain to create the land of the Meeteis and it was resisted by the hill tribes. Thus, the lands of the Meeteis where they settled were not the hills. Such account of resistance against the Meeteis by the hill people even in the creation narrative of the Meetei also shows the difference in the origins of the Meeteis and the hill people and exclusion of the hill people from the notion of Meetei Leibak or land of the Meeteis or Manipur and thus Manipuri.

SR Tohring (2010) noted the difference between the lands of the Nagas and the Meetei Leibak in the statement: '...the word "Naga" existed for the peoples occupying a land between and outside Assam kingdom and the Manipuri Kingdom since the first A.D.' (p. 6). Tohring (2010) also noted the sameness between Manipuri and Meetei in the statement: '...in the hills situated between the Ahom kingdom and Manipuri/ Meetei kingdom' (p. 57). The notion of

Meetei Leibak is strictly confined to the valley. Thus, according to M.R. Singh (2011), ‘The valley, which was made by the Gods, is known as “Meetei Leibak” (land of Meetei)’ (p. 175). It also affirms the claim of the tribals that their lands were never parts of the idea of Meetei Leibak or Manipur.

The tribals often recollect their past experiences of discrimination and exploitation committed by the Meetei people. Gurharpal Singh (2010) observed that ‘India is seen as an ethnic democracy where hegemonic and violent control is exercised over minorities, especially in the peripheral regions...’ (p. 99). Thus, SR Tohring (2010) recollected how ‘The Rajas of Manipur and the British rulers always exploited the antagonistic part of relationship of the Nagas and the Kukis in pre-independence era’ and how ‘it continues even in the present era’ (p. 60). Conscious of such conception of Manipuri by the Nagas, Naorem Sanajaoba (2011) desperately, in an attempt to salvage Meetei’s conception of Manipur and Manipuri, erroneously contended that all the armed struggles in Manipur are ‘Manipuri armed struggle’.

Manipur University was established in the year 1982. The University started a ‘Center for Manipuri Studies and Tribal Research’ in February 1989 under a University Grants Commission sponsored scheme (Manipur University, 2012). However, the name of the Centre was later changed to Center for Manipur Studies. Thus, even the University, until the late 1980s, fully acknowledged the difference between ‘Manipuri’ and ‘Tribal’ of Manipur and the potential consequence of retaining the name of the centre as Center for Manipuri Studies and Tribal Research in which the tribals are distinctly identified.

The tribals in Manipur demanded their right to rule themselves. The Government of Manipur has been described as ‘communal government’ (Thokchom, 2015) by the United Naga Council which has been spearheading a demand for a separate political arrangement popularly known as Alternative Arrangement. The tribals also demanded the implementation of Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution that grants immense autonomy to the tribals. The Union Minister of State for Home Affairs reportedly replied to a

question raised in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) in March 2015 that the Government of Manipur in 2001 had agreed for the Sixth Schedule with some 'local adjustments and amendments', but the Government of Manipur never sent any details (*Sangai Express*, March, 2015).

The names of students' organisations outside Manipur also reflect the contention on 'Manipuri'. No tribal students studying outside Manipur have an organisation with a name that includes either 'Manipur' or 'Manipuri'. This may be examined taking into account of the students' unions in Delhi. The whole Naga students come under Naga Students Union, Delhi (NSUD). The Zeliangrong students of Manipur associate with the Zeliangrong Students Union, Delhi (ZSUD). The Kuki students of Manipur have their Kuki Students' Organisation Delhi (KSOD). The Tangkhul have their students' union called Tangkhul Shanao Long, Delhi (TSLD). However, there is Delhi Association of Manipuri Muslim Students (DAMMS) of the Pangal group of Manipur. Manipur Students Association of Delhi (MASAD) may be said to be of the Meetei. In 2014, Meitei Students' Union was formed in New Delhi. It is only in Manipur that tribal students assume Manipur in their organisations' names. Thus, there are Zeliangrong Students Union, Manipur (ZSUM), All Naga Student Association Manipur (ANSAM) and All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM). However, no tribal organisation uses 'Manipuri' even in Manipur.

Colonial writings also bear proof of the difference between the Manipuri and the tribals. This is seen in the observation of T.C. Hodson (1908), on the paucity of historical materials that establish 'the real nature of the connection between the Manipuris and the hill tribes' (p. 12). Thus, the concept 'Manipuris' is used distinctly to refer to the settlers of the valley, the Meeteis. In a Statistical Account of Sibsagar, according to the 1871 Census, 'Manipuri' was returned as '30' and 'Naga' was returned as '225'. Same categorisation was done in Lakhimpur District of Assam (Hunter, 1879). Sibsagar and Lakhimpur Districts were in Assam and not in Manipur. It is clear that 'Manipuri' in Assam was used not to refer to the inhabitants of Manipur, but to the Meeteis in Assam.

## **Bishnupriya-Manipuri**

There is a contentious claim that Manipuri comprise Bishnupriya and Meetei. The Bishnupriya prefer to identify themselves as Bishnupriya-Manipuri. Bishnupriya-Manipuris are concentrated mostly in Assam, Tripura, Sylhet region of Bangladesh and in Myanmar. Use of ‘Manipuri’ as a suffix to their group name Bishnupriya is identity essentialism as it enables them to continue their emotional and historical attachment to Manipur. According to Ashim Kumar Singha (2002), the Meeteis came into Manipur from the east and linguistically belonged to the Tibeto-Burman group. The Bishnupriyas came from the west and they belonged to the Indo-Aryan group, he stated. He further asserted that Bishnupriya-Manipuris were the original inhabitants of Manipur who were overpowered by the Meetei people and reduced disgracefully to minority status. The claim of the Bishnupriya-Manipuri thus challenges the autochthonous status as claimed by the Meeteis. The All Manipur Students’ Union (AMSU) expressed strong resentment against the recognition of Bishnupriyas as Manipuris by the government of Tripura in 1987 and by Assam government in 1999 (*Sangai Express*, 2006) and viewed such attempts as ‘malicious campaign’ to wipe out ‘the Manipuri people’ (*The Telegraph*, 2006).

Referring to the Bishnupriya-Manipuri, Syed Zainul Akmal Al-Mahmood stated:

These people had Indo-Aryan features and called themselves Bishnupriyas. Long before their exodus they had lost control of Manipur to the rival clan of Meiteis. In their adopted land their lives and limbs were safe; but their language and culture began to lose ground against those of the majorette. Meanwhile, the Meiteis in Manipur became vindictive and imposed a de facto ban on Bishnupriya language and custom. The Bishnupriya Manipuris were caught between a rock and a hard place. Today, young Manipuris are no

longer sure of their cultural identity (*The Telegraph*, 2006).

### **Building the Fear**

It demands intellectual rigour with verifiable facts to engender fear to be shared by significant size of population and result in a collective action. The process of building up fear in Manipur is not in want of these factors. They are complex and sometimes intertwined. For more clarity they need to be distinctly identified and analysed. Indigenous narrative is the foundational strategy. Then come the glorifying and victimising narratives. Then there is the referential justification.

### **Indigenous narrative**

In Manipur, the idea of indigenous mean nothing but the first settlers colonised by the British and then by India and thus needing liberation from India. This is evident from the series of talks on Indigenous Day organised by different organisations and the series of meetings held to sensitise the people about the need for plebiscite. The supposedly worsening social, cultural, economic and political situations in Manipur are attributed to the merging of Manipur with India. The stand of the non-state armed groups fighting against the Indian Government is resonated every year on the International Indigenous Day. The Indian Government is perceived to be an agent engineering demographic destabilisation in Manipur.

Another conceptualisation of indigenous is being created and nurtured by the motherland Manipur. This narrative of indigenous come with diverse oral traditions of creation rooted in different ethnic groups. They all seem to be still accepted politically. While being proud of being indigenous fear is found in the presence of other groups. A clear distinction is made between indigenous people and the outsiders. The outsiders are invariably perceived and depicted as real threat.

### **Glorifying and Victimising narratives**

The Meeteis are the descendants of Arjun of Mahabharata. The Meeteis had glorious past with self-sufficient economy. The suzerainty of the ruler of Kangleipak spread far and wide. The hill and valley were under the same ruler of the valley. The Meeteis were also tribal people. They descended from a same ancestor. Past was marked by communal harmony. These are glorifying narratives in Manipur irrespective of occasions.

The Hindu religion intruded into the harmonious indigenous cultural fabric of the kingdom and destabilised the social harmony. The Christians arrived and aggravated the social tension. The corrupt elected politicians further widened the chasm between the people especially between the hill people and the valley people. And the outsiders are gradually increasing in numbers and influence in every aspects of life of the indigenous people. These are popularised victimising narratives that construct an endemic fear psychosis. Thus, according to the narratives, the indigenous people are invaded culturally and politically, and their glorious past is victimised.

### **Referential Justification**

For this constructed fear the mass has to be given facts to be convinced. This is easily fetched from Tripura. A case of Tripura is often cited to rationalise and strengthen the fear. The percentage of tribal in Tripura's population of 173 thousands in 1901 was 52.89 (Directorate of Information Technology, Government of Tripura, 2015). It scaled down to 50.09 per cent in less than half-a-century in 1941 when Tripura's population was 513 thousands. However, in 1981 it steeply climbed down to mere 28.44 per cent when the total population was 2.05 million. This supposedly catastrophic descent of the indigenous people is explained by 'resettlement of non-tribals in the state, particularly in the aftermath of the partition of the country in 1947'. According to 2011 Census, the indigenous Scheduled Tribe population in Tripura is 31.8 per cent. The Meetei in Manipur fear that Tripura like situation will be replicated in Manipur and forfeit glorious past and power.

## **The Collective Actions**

### **The VIIIth Schedule of the Constitution**

Here Manipuri means Meeteilon with Bengali script. Manipuri along with Konkani and Nepali were added in the VIIIth Schedule of the Constitution in 1992 (Mohan, 2012). August 20 is celebrated as *Manipuri Lol gi Numit* (Manipuri Language Day) by the Meetei people to commemorate the inclusion of Manipuri in the VIIIth Schedule. By virtue of inclusion of Manipuri in the VIIIth Schedule, the Meetei people who aspire to become the elite civil servants through the competitive exam conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) were privileged to opt for a paper in Manipuri. The exam is written in Manipuri language (Meeteilon) using Bengali script. In Manipur, candidates aspiring to appear in state civil services exam conducted by the Manipur Public Service Commission (MPSC) can choose any of the three languages: Manipuri (in Bengali script), English and Hindi. Replacement of Bengali script with Meetei mayek at present will certainly remove many Meetei civil services aspirants from the race. This may induce one to question the effort of the collective actions for Meetei mayek. Because '[i]n their initial and developing stages, language movements everywhere are vehicles for the pursuit of economic advancement, social status, and political power by specific elites' (Brass, 2010, p. 77). Paul R. Brass (2010), observing the 'attachment, passion, and commitment' in language movements in India, claimed that '...they are often a mask behind which lie other interests, and...the passionate attachment is not to the language but to the self' (p. 81).

To have a glimpse of an answer to this position on Bengali script one has to understand the scheme of exams for X and XII standards in Manipur with particular reference to language papers. First let us examine at High School Leaving Certificate Exam (HSLCE) or Xth exam. In language section, HSLCE has two papers: (i) First Language and (ii) Subjects in lieu of First Language. First Language includes Manipuri (Meetei Mayek), Manipuri (Bengali script), Bengali, Mizo, Paite, Zou, Hmar, Tangkhul, Nepali, Thadou Kuki, Maola, Vaiphei, Kom and Ruangmei (Rongmei). Subjects in

lieu of First Language include Additional English, Elementary Manipuri (Bengali script) and Elementary Hindi. It may be noted that it was only from 2015 that the Board of Secondary Education, Manipur (BOSEM) included Manipuri (Meetei mayek) in HSSLCE. Earlier exams on Manipuri papers under the subject categories of First Language and Subjects in lieu of First Language were written only in Bengali script.

Now let us examine the subject scheme on languages in Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate Exam (HSSLCE) or XIIth exam conducted by the Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur (COHSEM). Modern Indian Languages and Elective Languages are the two language categories in HSSLCE. As in 2015, Modern Indian Languages include Bengali, Hindi, Hmar, Kom, Manipuri (Bengali script), Mizo, Nepali, Paite, Tangkhul, Thadou Kuki, Vaiphei and Zou. Students whose mother tongues are not included in Modern Indian Languages category can choose to study a paper called Alternative English. Under the category of Elective Languages the papers are Bengali, English, Hindi and Manipuri (Bengali script). In HSSLCE, Manipuri papers in both the category of Modern Indian Languages and Elective Languages are still written in Bengali script and not in Meetei mayek. All those Meetei students who did not learn Meetei mayek in schools cannot be marginalised by making Meetei mayek as compulsory while writing the Manipuri paper in UPSC Civil Services Exam or MPSC Civil Services Exam. Thus, Meetei Mayek is absent in both the Civil Services Exams.

### **Colonialising Hindi in Manipur**

Fearing colonisation through cultural domination through Hindi language, Hindi has been banned in Manipur for over decades by non-state armed groups. No theatre in Manipur valley screen Hindi movies (Kshetrimayum, 2011) despite their popularity across the globe.

With sustained militarisation and growing number of Hindi speaking Indians in Manipur, there is an increased perception of threat from the Hindi speaking Indians. The fear went to the extent

of ban in teaching of Hindi in schools. In 2004, three students' organisations, the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU), the Democratic Students' Alliance, Manipur (DESAM), and the Manipuri Students' Federation (MSF), which are based in the valley, banned the teaching of Hindi in schools as part of a protest against Armed Forces Special Powers Act (*The Telegraph*, 2004). Ban on Hindi movies and songs were also declared by a non-state armed group like Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) (Gokhale, 2004). For the Meetei groups involved in the ban of Hindi and Bollywood movies, it is a fight against cultural invasion of the coloniser.

It is perplexing to note that some Meeteis believe that they were mentioned in Mahabharata (Hodson, 1908) and further believe to be the descendants of Arjun of Mahabharata (Zehol, 1998; Roy Burman, 1970, cited in Gangte, 2010) or Hindu descent. Hijam Irabot Singh, who is now revered as freedom fighter, while addressing a crowd on the eve of Nupi Lan on January 7, 1940 asked the women of Manipur '...to avenge the "blood of the Brahmini"' (Sharma & Devi, 2011, p. 25). Such claims and historical facts are counterproductive for anti-Hindi activists and for those who trace the cause of degeneration of the claimed erstwhile tribal Meetei culture.

### **Reviving Meetei Mayek**

Going beyond the diktat for compulsory use of Meetei mayek in Manipur, the Meetei Erol Eyek Loinasillon Apunba Lup (MEELAL) also reportedly ordered the people especially the Meetei religious people to avoid using 'foreign languages' in 'songs of religious ceremonies'. The MEELAL had ordered the use of Meetei mayek both in Government and private vehicle registration plates. It also asked all the Newspaper agencies to have one full page News items in Meetei mayek from first week of April 2015 (*Sangai Express*, April, 2015). Failure to carry News items in Meetei mayek will lead to a ban of the Newspaper agency and 'dire consequences' against hawkers (*Hueiyen Lanpao*, 2015). Such diktats may be seen in the context of the observation of Paul R. Brass (2010) that '...one defends one's mother tongue when one cannot speak at all or well a language of wider communication when one's own language is dying

out or is useless for improving one's life chances' (pp. 82-83). Requiring even the tribal students to learn Meetei mayek in schools may be seen by some tribals as '...a sophisticated device of the ruling class to completely formalize education in the name of modernity and progressivism in order to perpetuate elitism' (Barua, 1978, p. 73). Enforcing use of Meetei mayek will definitely engender resentment and a sense of alienation and domination among the tribals.

The language politics of Meetei extends beyond the territorial boundary of Manipur. The interests in language issue of the Meetei of Manipur are found to have effect in Assam. The All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU) protested against the decision of the Government of Assam to introduce Bishnupriya-Manipuri language in the Barak Valley districts at primary level schools (*North East News Agency*, 2001). AMSU imposed bandh in Manipur to protest against the recognition of Bishnupriya as Bishnupriya-Manipuri in Assam and Tripura (*Sangai Express*, 15 January, 2006). As seen above the Meetei people felt threatened by the Bishnupriya-Manipuri who made a counter claim that they were the first inhabitants of the land of Manipur. The wave of movement for preservation of Meeteilon and Meetei mayek has trans-border effect. 'Manipuri Language Centre' was established in Bangladesh in April 2015. All Meeteis claim their origin in Manipur. This explains why a Language Centre of Meeteilon in Bangladesh is named Manipuri Language Centre instead of Meetei Language Centre. The idea of Meetei being the indigenous people of Manipur is integral to it.

### **The Plebiscite Demand**

Some organisations, including non-state armed groups, do not consider Manipur to be a part of India. This is clear from the public meetings for plebiscite (*Sangai Express*, 1 April, 2011) which is endorsed by non-state armed groups in Manipur (Talukdar, 2011) and even by some local Indian politicians (*Sangai Express*, 15 May, 2011). Police registered a 'case under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and Punjab Security Act for advocating "plebiscite" for secession of Manipur from India' against some prominent persons that included the titular king of Manipur, Leisemba Sanajaoba Singh,

and former tribal Lok Sabha Member of Parliament, Kim Gangte, among others (*The Telegraph*, 2006). If Hindi and Hindu religion are feared as instruments of colonisation in Manipur, plebiscite is probably seen by the Government of India as the sure-footed political weapon to defeat India.

### **The Inner Line Permit System demand**

Students and various organisations in Manipur valley have been demanding the implementation of ILP which according to the Union Government is ‘unconstitutional’ (*The Telegraph*, 5 July, 2014). The Joint Committee on Inner Line Permit System which is spearheading the movement for the imposition of Inner Line Permit is religiously engaged in demanding the implementation of the said permit system. As in Malaysia which has banned immigrants to avert demographic imbalance (Chadda, 2010) the aforesaid Committee endeavours to influence the authorities to implement the permit system and check the inflow of migrants and immigrants into Manipur. SR Tohring (2010) observed that the Inner Line Permit is:

...used in such a way that those who are suspected to record Human Right Violations in Nagaland or any one suspected to sympathize with the native cause are harassed or never given [the permit]. These things, which are going on there could not be made known to outside world of the Nagas (p. 37).

Manipur which has several instances of human rights violations and active movements against such violations certainly needs scholarly and media attention both at national and global level. In view of this the people of Manipur may introspect further on the imminent state of human rights violations far removed from the attention of national and global attentions with tightened restrictions on national and global human rights activists.

The Legislative Assembly of Manipur engaged itself with the concept of Manipuri in 2015 in response to a popular movement lead by Joint Committee on Inner Line Permit System (JCILPS) to identify the people of Manipur and prevent the inflow of outsiders or

*Meetop*. Meetop is a term used to identify the non-local people. Meetop is derived from the phrase 'Mee atokpa' meaning other people/ outside people. The People of Manipur Bill 2015 passed in the Assembly was ultimately rejected by the President of India on various grounds. According to *The Hindu*, (Singh, 2016) 'the definition of a "Manipuri" proposed by the government was based on the census conducted in 1951, which is flawed as the census exercised that year did not cover the entire state. "The infrastructure at that time was not enough and many people were left out in the process. The computation was not exhaustive. If we go by 1951 records, half of the tribes would be declared stateless". According to the Bill, 'Manipur people means persons of Manipur whose names are in the National Register of Citizens, 1951, Census report 1951 and village directory of 1951 and their descendants who have contributed to the collective social, cultural and economic life of Manipur'. However, the Manipur Government failed to produce the National Register of Citizens of 1951 when it was demanded by a social activist through Right to Information (Editor, 24 June, 2016). Moreover, the Bill was rejected as 'it was passed by the Assembly as a 'Money Bill' and not sent to the Hill Areas Committee for consultation' as required by the Constitution. The People of Manipur Bill 2015 which did not spell out any budget allocation was thus passed as Money Bill as the Government sensed resentment against the Bill from the tribal people and it affected primarily the tribals. The mortal remains those killed by police during protests against the Bill were buried after more than six hundred days in 2017.

The Manipur Students' Association, Delhi view the influx of migrants into Manipur as part of a policy termed as 'demographic invasion' (Manipur Students Association, Delhi. 2012). Various methods have been used to check the inflow of migrants. There had been protests, fasts, and even killings of 'non Manipuri residents, mainly from Bihar', by 'underground rebels' (*Nagaland Post*, 2012). Such fear based on census data contributes towards protests for implementation of the colonial instrument- Inner Line Permit to check the inflow of 'outsiders'.

## **Scheduled Tribe Status Demand**

Consequent to the fear of outsiders there is a growing demand for Scheduled Tribe status. According to the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee, the Scheduled Tribe status would ensure protection of land, people and identity and bring the hill people and the valley people closer.

Ambedkar (1982), in his *Annihilation of Caste*, discussed two variants of majority: Communal majority and Political majority. According to him, Communal majority is made up of members born within the Communal majority and entry of outsiders is not possible. Political majority on the other hand 'grows' and admission of members is open to all and accommodates various classes. The kind of majority the Meetei fear is the outsiders' political majority which is believed to be imminent if the influx of Hindi speaking Indians is not checked.

There is also an emergence of fresh identity narratives from among the Meeteis. Dr. Irengbam Mohendra Singh (2014) espoused a research finding by N Thongbam and Y Mohendro that 'genetically proved' that Meetei were originally tribal and came from Africa. He further exhorted intellectuals in Manipur University to research and prove *Meeteilon* (Meetei language) not belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. He rejected the Hindu narrative of origin of Manipur valley believed to have been created by the *trisul* (trident) of Shiva that drained water from the valley and allowed 'Radha and Krishna to indulge in their amorous pastimes'. To salvage the Meetei from the influx of migrants he asked the Meetei to revoke the Other Backward Classes (OBC) status of Meetei and 'revert to...original tribal status' and fight for Scheduled Tribe status. Thus, groups seeking Scheduled Tribe status, with no exception granted to the Meeteis, may be seen as a 'part of a strategy of political survival and advancement' (Prabhakara, 2010, p. 263).

## CONCLUSION

The Meeteis of Manipur have successfully spread a sense of collective fear among the Meeteis. This fear has been instrumental in engineering collective actions to fight for preserving their language and cultural identity. The ascribed Manipuri identity on tribals stands contested by the tribals of Manipur. Even the claimed primordial Manipuri identity of the Meeteis continues to face challenge from the Bishnupriya-Manipuri. The Manipuri identity is further threatened by non-native people migrants and immigrants whose increasing number is becoming a matter of serious concern for the survival of Manipuri identity. The process of Manipuri identity indigenisation, legitimisation and construction is partly guided by the revolutionary movement, Constitutional benefits and social fear. Neither the ethnic nor the linguistic dimension of Manipuri is found to be accepted among the tribals of Manipur. Manipuri remains contested and challenged. Nevertheless the social fear instilled among the Meeteis is seen to be an effective instrument in creating a mass based social capital created to be used to fight against their perceived minority status in their own place.

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