

## **The Dilemma of the Bishnupriya Identity**

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### **Abstract**

*Ethnic identity is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity, or sense of self, as a member of an ethnic group. The reconstruction of an identity interacts with historical and social identities in the contemporary world. What is intended to discuss in this article is the reconstruction of the Bishnupriya identity in Manipur, and study it against the Bishnupriyas living outside Manipur. The Bishnupriyas remaining in Manipur prefer to be identified as 'Manipuri Meiteis' rather than Bishnupriyas and the logic for this is presumably the perceptions of Bishnupriyas as migrants by the Meiteis. On the other hand, the Bishnupriyas living beyond Manipur, namely in Tripura, Assam, and parts of Bangladesh, would rather be identified as 'Bishnupriya Manipuris', as an attempt to link their identity with the people of Manipur. An observation throughout this paper leads us to reflect upon what the assertion by the Bishnupriyas that 'they' (the Bishnupriyas) are the 'first cultural race' or the 'first settlers' of Manipur and that the Meiteis to be the 'next immigrants'. This speculation has created much doubt and conflict between the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas.*

**KEYWORDS:** Bishnupriya, Meiteis, Manipur

### **Introduction**

The North Eastern part of India is referred to as a melting pot of Mongoloid, Australoid, and Caucasoid populations, which is exhibited in the unique socio-cultural diversity of the region' (Langstieh et al., 2004: 570). Given the hypothesis that Northeast India is the meeting ground of many diverse culture and population of ethnic and distinctive communities, each unique in its tradition, culture, dress and exotic ways of life, it is evident that migration of people has taken place in different directions. These influx of people brought about a mix of cultural aspects and also racial characteristics. There are important documents for the historical study of the

immigrants. The people from the East with Mongolian blood who came to Manipur during different periods of history were known as *Nongpok Haram* and those who had migrated from the Western sides of Manipur, mainly from Tripura, Sylhet, Cachar, Assam and adjoining areas were known as *Nongchup Haram* (Singh, 1980). On the basis of the information given in the text of *'Identities of the migrated people in Manipur'*, there are certain records for giving the surnames and sub-clans to the Western immigrants (Singh, 2005).

There has been a proliferation of ethnic identity movements for self-assertion, among different communities in North East India resulting in marked ethnic conflicts. An intense debate among different ethnic groups has recently been generated due to the discourse on indigeneity in the North East. Manipur is an area of composite races formed out of several strains, Mongoloid races seem to have mixed with the Indo-Aryan strains from India. The people of Manipur can be broadly classified into four groups, namely, (i) the Manipurese or the Meitheis including the Lois (Scheduled caste); (ii) the Bishnupriyas; (iii) the Hill-men (Scheduled tribes) and (iv) the Pangans (the Manipuri Muslims) (Singh 1980). In the context of other ethnic groups in the state, the Bishnupriyas are in a struggle for the reconstruction of their identity. They are the most controversial class of people, perhaps having no homeland of their own, and subsequently losing their identity (Ghosh, 1992). The reconstruction of the history and culture of the Bishnupriyas assumes special significance in the light of the increasing search for identity in the recent past. The purpose of this paper is to put the question of identity of the Bishnupriyas in Manipur into the context of history and social change and study it against the background of the Bishnupriyas living outside Manipur.

### **Who are the Bishnupriyas?**

Such a question has been raised about the ethno-origin or the history of migration of the Bishnupriyas, and the answer is never easy. The difficulty arises primarily because of the assertion by the Bishnupriyas to link their identity with the state of Manipur and to project it as their earliest known place of inhabitation. The term

Bishnupriya is presumably derived from Bishnu worship or their association with the history of Manipur during the reign of Garibniwaz king (Chingtamlen, 2009). 'Among the Manipuris, there is a community called Mayang Kalichas (Bishnupriyas) who are more dark-skinned than the Meiteis and have Indo-Aryan features' (Singh, 1988: 53). There are different theories about their origin and settlement in the Imphal valley. Some of the prominent may be briefly mentioned. The North Eastern states specially Assam, Manipur, Tripura and the neighbouring country of Bangladesh (former East Bengal) are the main regions that are considered to be connected with the history of migration of the Bishnupriyas. Gait's *'Assamese Census Report'* (1891) says that the Bishnupriyas are the descendents of the *Doms* and Bengalis of low caste who married Manipuri wives. Kirti Singh (1988) cited that 'M. Jhulon Singh is of the view that they have been in Manipur since the time of Maharaj Khagemba (1597-1652) as captives' (p. 53). Khagemba was the last king of the Meiteis who preserved the old Meitei culture and used to defy the expansion of Hindu religion in the Meitei society. 'Some Manipuri scholar-historians like R.M. Nath holds that they came from Kamarupa to Manipur during the reign of King Khongtekcha in the eighth century. They established their headquarters at Vishnupur which means a place where Visnu resides' (Singh 1988, p. 54). During the time of Garibniwaz (1709-1748 A.D.) in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the Bishnupriyas were brought into the valley of Manipur to teach the Hindu customs to the indigenous inhabitants of the valley who considered them as the descendants of 120 Hindu families of different castes (Singh, 1980).

The Mayangs (Bishnupriyas) are the descendants of Hindus who originally emigrated from the West. They formerly occupied the site of Mayang Imphal, which remained deserted for 30 years, but has since been occupied by another class of immigrants from the West, the Muslims. The name Mayang, which simply means a 'Western man, which is frequently applied to the Muhammadan immigrants; but it is evident that there were two groups of these immigrants, and that the name Mayang was, in the first instance, applied to, and was appropriated by, the Hindu settlers. The Muslims

are the descendants of Bengali immigrants, who retain a knowledge of Hindustani and Bengali, and are not distinguishable in appearance from the Bengalis who have never left Cachar (Dun 1992).

Another view says that the Bishnupriyas came from Lakhimpur with a stone idol of Vishnu and halted at Vishnupur at first after descending from the Laimatol range. They came to be known as Bishnupriyas since then (Nath, 1948). Soyam (1983) in his book '*Identity and Crisis of Identity: A Case Study of Manipur*' articulated that the Bishnupriyas, low castes from Bengal, were given *Yumnaks* (surname) along with the corresponding *Salais* (clan). The Bishnupriyas are found chiefly in Mayang Imphal, Nachou, Ngaikhong Khullen, Khanghabok and Heirok villages in Manipur (Dun, 1992). An alternate aspect is that there are two groups among the Bishnupriyas, the one of which is *Leimanai* (servant of the queens) and the other *Ningthoumanai* (servant of the kings). The first group settled down in some loi (degraded) villages: Heirok, Khangabok, etc. The others lived in the villages such as Ningthoukhong, Ngaikhong, Bisnupur, Nachou and places around the Loktak Lake (Singh, 1980). Beyond Manipur, they have lived in Cachar, Sylhet and Tripura after the war of 1891 (Anglo-Manipuri). Very few of them lived in Manipur after this war (Singh, 1980). An alternative view reported that they left Manipur in mass migration to Barak Valley (then Cachar) and other parts of North East India during the Burmese attack in Manipur (1819-1826), known as "Seven Years Devastation" though they came to Manipur as war captives during 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Singha, 2016). They developed a dialect called the Khalachari (Vishnupriya) which is different from Manipuri (Roy, 1958). According to Kalita (2013), the Bishnupriya Manipuri morphology is of Indo-Aryan origin and is a kin to Oriya, Assamese and Bengali. On the other hand, the Meitei morphology is of the Kuki-Chin branch of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. It was difficult for the small number of Bishnupriyas who remained in Manipur to retain their language because of the impact of the Meitei, although it was found that a considerable number of speakers (1000) in lived two or three villages near Bishnupur, locally known as Lamangdong (Grierson, 1903).

According to Kalita (2013):

Those who are staying in the Heirok, Khanghabok, Ningthoukhong, Ngaikhong and Nachou villages of Manipur are known as Bishnupriyas even now and are similar to the Bishnupriyas living outside Manipur with respect to their appearance and complexion. They, of course, neither speak nor understand the Bishnupriya language; they all speak *Meiteilon* (Manipuri). Formerly, the Bishnupriya language speakers were very numerous in the localities mentioned above. But, when a great majority of these people fled from Manipur, due to various reasons, it became very difficult for those who remained back to retain their language in the face of the impact of Meitei spoken by the majority. They gradually began to forget their language and assimilated the dominant language, *Meiteilon* (p.1).

Grierson (1903) is of the opinion that:

A tribe known as Mayang speaks a mongrel form of Assamese known by the same name. All of them can speak Meithei. They are also known as Bishnupriya Manipuris, or as Kalisha Manipuris, and are said to be comparatively numerous among the Manipuri population of Cachar and Sylhet, where their special dialect is still spoken in their homes, as well as Meithei and Bengali. It will be seen that both in vocabulary and grammar, it is strongly infected with the peculiarities of the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the Manipur

state. This is just as much the case with the speakers of Mayang who are settled in Sylhet, so that it may be taken as certain that they come there from Manipur, although, according to tradition, they originally came into Manipur from an Aryan speaking locality (p. 419).

The Bishnupriyas living outside Manipur identify themselves as the Bishnupriya-Manipuris, distinct from the Meiteis, and they wish to be designated as a Bishnupriya-Manipuris. On the contrary, the Bishnupriyas inhabiting Manipur prefer to be identified as Manipuri Meiteis, rather than as Bishnupriyas. Both the parties identified themselves as the 'indigenous people' of Manipur so that it might be taken for granted by all that they are the original inhabitants of Manipur. The Bishnupriyas on their part claim their origin in Manipur as the Meiteis and they have extended this even further by claiming that 'they' (*i.e.*, the Bishnupriyas) are the original inhabitants of Manipur (Zehol, 1998). So, the Bishnupriyas call themselves to be the 'first cultural race' of Manipur and the Meiteis have been thoughtlessly projected to be the 'next immigrants' despite the fact that the Meites are the original settlers of Manipur.

In the view of Chingtamlen (2009):

When we trace the history of Kangleipak (before Pamheiba Garibaniwaz) and Manipur in the pages of history, written by the indigenous people, by English foreign writers and other documents written after the Hindu kings of Manipur, we do not find any trace of outsiders called Mayang by the local people before the reign of king Kongyamba (1324-1335 A.D.), that is, before the 14th century A.D. (p. 14).

Today a sharp controversy has developed on the identity of the Bishnupriyas. Much of this controversy has its origin in happenings outside Manipur (Zehol, 1998). On one hand, the Meities, the majority community of Manipur, consider the Bishnupriyas as migrants and the Meiteis of Assam consider the

Bishnupriyas as *Ashaba*; on the other hand, they are trying to imitate or be identical with the Meiteis. The root of the conflict lies in the attempt of the Bishnupriyas of Assam in 1992 to suffix to the name of their community the word "Manipuri" (Singha, 2016).

## **Religion**

Manipur has diverse ethnic groups who are adherents of Hinduism, Christianity, Sanamahism (Meitei indigenous religion), Buddhism, Islam and other folk religions. The religious system prevailing today in Manipur valley can be taken as a legacy of Hinduism that evolved during 18th century Manipur. According to Singh (2011: 164), the advent of Vaisnavism in the valley of Manipur is traced to the reign of Meitei King Kiyamba (1467-1508 A.D.) though he was not initiated into Vaisnavism. Khagemba (1597-1652) was the last king of the Meiteis who preserved the old Meitei culture and used to defy the expansion of Hindu religion in the Meitei society (Zehol 1998: 44). In spite of it, Charairongba (1698-1709) was the first king who was formally initiated to Vaisnavism by a Brahmana called Krishnacharya alias Rai Vanamali. However, he did not make any attempt to impose Vaisnavism upon the people as a whole, nor did he neglect the worship of traditional deities. The worship of traditional deities, namely *Sanamahi*, *Leimarel*, *Panthoibi*, etc., continued side by side with Vaishnavism. It was under the fervent patronage of the celebrated Meitei King Pamheiba (1709-1748), later on known as Garibniwaz (a Persian name meaning 'Refuge of the Poor') that Vaisnavism became state religion and strong measures were taken to impose it upon the masses (Singh, 2011). Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Meitei religion with its gods and goddesses and myths, its own legends and traditions, its social customs and usages, and its priests and ceremonies, and of Brahmanical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha and Krishna (Singh, 2015).

The majority of Bishnupriyas are Hindus, with a small percentage being Christians. It is interesting to note that those Bishnupriyas who remained in Manipur do not follow Sanamahism unlike the Meiteis who follow both Hinduism and Sanamahism.

Hinduism, as we see now among the Bishnupriyas in Manipur, is a fusion of the two religious traditions, one represented by classical Hinduism and the other by the primordial religion of the Meiteis. They believe in both Hindu and primitive gods and goddesses such as *Pakhangba* (moon-god), *Sanamahi* (sun-god), *Panthoibi* (earth-goddess), etc. Their function is to promote the birth, nourishment, and welfare of the people. *Sanamahi* is worshipped in the northeast corner of every house regularly. They also believe in both the categories of deities, viz., (i) pre-Vaisnavic deities which includes forest deities (*Umanglais*), household deities, royal deities, attendants of important deities (*Lai Sarois*) etc.; and (ii) the gods of the Vaisnavas. The school of Vaisnavism worshipped Krishna as a supreme deity with Radha. Besides Krishna and Radha, they also believe in other gods, goddesses, angels, and spirits such as Saiva, Nityananda, Hanumanji, etc.

The important thing is that what Manipuri Hinduism did not share with the reformed movements of Vaisnavism was the complete abolition of caste system. The unique feature of Manipuri Hinduism is that there are only two castes viz. Kshatriya and Brahman. The Bishnupriyas today have only two castes, viz., Brahman and Kshatriya, unlike other Hindu communities which have four castes, namely, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra.

### **Marriage**

The Bishnupriya is a patrilineal society. They are exogamous as regards the clans or *salies* into which they are divided, but are village endogamous as regards members of other villages. The Bishnupriya concept of marriage implies the sacred and ceremonial union of a man and a woman with due religious rites. The vernacular term for marriage is '*Luhongba*' which is a combination of two words, "*Lu*" which means "head" in archaic Manipuri, and "*Hongba*" which means to solemnize. Hence *Luhongba* is the ceremonial union of the "*Lu*" of the man and the woman implying the oneness of their heart and soul rather than the state of their being double. Monogamy is the common practice of marriage among them, though there are cases of polygyny which is the social arrangement, wherein social norms

allow the husband to keep more than one spouse at a time. There are three distinct forms of marriage among the Bishnupriyas, viz., (i) marriage through arranged/mutual consent (ii) marriage through elopement, and (iii) marriage through capture.

### **Marriage through Arranged/Mutual Consent (*Hainaba*)**

At present, this form of marriage is the most common form of marriage. Consent marriage is again classified into two sub-types. The first involves the mutual consent of a boy and a girl. In this case, the boy and the girl already have an affair or know each other; they inform their respective parents about their relationship. If they themselves cannot reveal it to their respective parents, then a friend or a relative would help them out by informing their parents, who would then make arrangements for the marriage. The second relates to the consent of the parents of the parties concerned which can be termed as true arranged marriage. In this form of marriage, the interested male party will approach the female party following some customary laws. If both the parties agree to the proposal, the date of the marriage will be fixed.

### **Marriage by Eloping (*Chelhong*)**

Marriage through elopement is customarily approved and accepted among the Bishnupriyas. In this case, there is a romantic relationship between a boy and a girl for months or years prior to the elopement. On an agreed day, generally considered to be auspicious day, the girl would run away from her house with the boy. Usually, the girl is kept in the house of the boy's relatives or friends for a short time or over a night before taking her to the boy's house. The boy's friends would then pass on the news of the elopement to his father and the father would ask them to bring the girl to the house as early as possible.

On the girl's side, the parents, usually reluctant to believe that their daughter had eloped willingly, would inform the lineage members and close relatives about it. It is the girl's parents' choice to request the boy's parents or relatives to send back their daughter (*nupi thillakpa*) on the same night or the next day evening. And if the girl's

parents want their daughter to be brought back on the same night, then the boy's parents and along with their few relatives have to bring her back to her parent's house on the same night. If not, the boy's father, along with two male members, mostly relatives and at times neighbors of the boy, will go to the girl's family on the next morning. The three men chosen to break the news to the girl's family would negotiate about when to bring her back to her family; and if both the parents agree then the next date for the meeting would be fixed to discuss about the wedding. In case there is a conflict between the two families, especially when the girl rejects the boy after elopement, (*chenba*) the marriage may not happen. As such, the boy may also reject the girl after they have eloped if he had not willingly eloped with the girl. In such cases, the girl's family and relatives could charge them a fine, either in cash or in kind, for violating established norm of the society and for dishonoring the girl's family even if the girl forced the boy to elope with her. Nevertheless, the boy is very free of any stigma; whereas once a girl has eloped with someone, she would be called *chelurabi* and not considered a virgin anymore. The stigma of having eloped would always be attached to her even if she can marry again someone later on.

### **Marriage through Capture (*Chingba*)**

This form of marriage involves the use of force. However, this tradition has become rare among the present society of Bishnupriyas. Interestingly, in such form of marriage, the usual pattern is for the boy's family to repeatedly request the girl's family to become relatives and to forgive and forget the mistake their son has committed. The girl's parents might agree to the marriage after lots of persuasion from the boy's side. If the girl refuses to marry the boy, the girl's family and lineage may impose a fine on the boy's family for the dishonor brought on their daughter. There would be no fixed amount; but whatever fine the girl's side asked for would be given, although not without lots of bargaining by the boy's family.

### **Bishnupriya Wedding Rituals**

Marriages are performed in accordance with the customs. Now it has been followed with certain modifications of the Hindu religion. Ritualistic preparations are made both at the residence of groom and the bride on the day of marriage. Ancestral deities, local deities and *sanamahi* are worshipped on this day. Both the bride and groom are ritually sanctified on this day. To sanctify a marriage, the Bishnupriyas have three different types of rituals. They are: (i) *Keinakatpa*, (ii) *Loukhatpa*, and (iii) *Luhongba*.

### ***Keinakatpa***

*Keinakatpa* is the simple form of marriage ceremony which may shorten the marriage ceremony in a few cases of eloping. It is a very less expensive form of marriage. In this kind of ritual performance, the boy and the girl would elope first with mutual consent. However, if the girl's parents have some issues for any reason, then they would not like to opt for the grand and long process wedding (*luhongba*), then they would opt for the *keinakatpa* ceremony to formalize the relationship. The reason can be that the girl's family is poor, or that the girl's family does not like the boy, or that the boy has another wife and children, or that the boy is a widower and has children, etc. The *keinakatpa* ceremony would be performed on the same day of the elopement if the day is considered to be auspicious by both the families. Nevertheless, if the day is not considered to be fortunate, then they would find a favorable day as early as possible for the ceremony. The ceremony of *keinakatpa* usually takes place at the girl's house. The articles which are brought by the groom's family are offered to the deities (*Sanamahi*, *Leimarel*, *Lam Lai ancestral gods*). The bride walks ceremonially seven times around the groom and at every completion of the round, she casts flowers upon the groom. This ritual is called '*Lei-Koiba*' (flower offering). In case of *keinakatpa* ceremony, the number of *Lei-Koiba* round can be reduced to five or three. At the end of the round, the bride would garland the groom with a pair of garlands made of jasmine (*kundo*). And the person who guides the groom (*borsenaba*) separates the two strings of garland and hands over one of them to the groom to garland the bride. After the bride and the groom have exchanged the garlands, the recitation of some hymns will be done

by a Brahmin and the couple bow down to the elders present at the ritual and before the bride's household deities such as *Leimaren*, *Sanamahi*, *Apokpa*, and others.

### ***Loukhatpa***

If the boy and the girl had eloped because their families are not in favour of their marriage due to close blood relationship, such as belonging to the same clan (*yek tinnaba*) or because of difference of religion, the girl would be ex-communicated not only by her parents but also by her lineage people till they perform a ceremony called *loukhatpa*. The parents and relatives from the groom's family would request the bride's family to be kind and accept the couple by holding the ritual. This ceremony allows both parties to enter each other's house. After hectic negotiations between both parties, an agreement is arrived at after which an auspicious date is fixed for the ceremony by consulting the village pundit.

On the selected day, when the couple, along with the groom's family, has arrived at the girl's house, they are made to sit on one side of the courtyard. The bride also sits in a corner of the courtyard and is not allowed to enter the house till the ceremony is over. When all invitees are present, the *piba* (head of the lineage) gets up from his seat and goes to pat the head of the groom with the words *se se loukhatpire changlaklo laklo* which signifies acceptance and he can now enter the bride's house. After that the bride and the bridegroom bow in front of the elderly people as well as to the bride's household deities. The priest then conducts the rites and offer some eatables brought by the groom's family to the deities to legitimize the marriage. After distributing the eatables brought by the groom's family to the invitees present, the ceremony comes to an end.

### ***Luhongba***

Formal rituals are made elaborately at the residence of the bride and it sometimes covers a period of several months. There are different phases prior to the ritual of *luhongba*. The wedding process begins with the *Hainaba* ritual, which is the preliminary stage which refers to the very first approach to the girl's family by the boy's family

with some gifts of fruits and other items. If both the parties agree and if it is found suitable according to the *Salai* (Clan) theory and also favorable from the astrological points of view, then both the families fix another date for the next formality. The next pre-wedding ritual is the *Yathang thanaba*. This is the ritual ceremony where the parents of the girl give their approval for the marriage and it is held at the girl's residence. In this ritual, the eldest male member from the boy's family, along with some relatives, come to the girl's house. Both the families are involved in the negotiation and approval of the date of the ceremonial marriage. *Wairoipot-puba* is the third phase prior to the ritual of Bishnupriya marriage (*luhongba*). Once the date is agreed upon an official announcement of the marriage (*wairoipot*) is made. In this ceremony, the boy's family with friends and relatives approach the girl's house with fruits, sweets and other things which are to be offered to *Sanamahi*, the family god of girl's house. *Heijingpot-puba* is another ritual and one of the most important ceremonies performed on an auspicious day and a few days before the marriage. This ceremony also refers to the formal engagement of the couple. In this ritual, the groom's parents, relatives, friends, and invitees come together to the house of the bride along with seven varieties of fruits including banana, coconut, sugarcane, apple, orange, etc., and special traditional clothes and ornaments for the bride. Nowadays, different kinds of sweets and eatables are also brought mainly for the friends of the bride. Apart from these, parched rice (*kabok*), betel nut and betel leaf are the most essential items for the ceremony; these will be brought in decorated baskets called '*Phingairuk*' and '*Heijing Kharai*' (decorative container made of bamboo with cover). One *phingairuk* contains fruits for the ancestor's deities and another for local deities (*Lamlai*). Finally, the eatables including *kabok*, sweets, fruits, etc., are distributed to all the invitees by a person called '*Arangbam*'.

'*Luhongba*' - It is a formal marriage ceremony. Ritualistic preparations are made both at the residence of groom and of the bride on the day of the marriage. However, the wedding procession starts from the groom's house. There are also certain other things to be put into the *Phingairuk* which are to be taken to the house of the bride.

They are *Chengluk-Nungshang* (mainly filled with raw rice), *Apokpa's Phingairuk* (containing different kinds of fruits), *Lamlai's Phingairuk*, *Ushin Nga* (containing fish for the ritual *Meetam Nga-Thaba*), *Phingairuk*, *Athenpot luk-mai* (decoratedly arranged raw rice with different kinds of vegetables), etc. The carriers of these *Phingairuks* are to be arranged in a serial manner led first by the "*Chengluk Nungsang Pubi*" which will be carried by an "ideal woman" (one who is not a widow or divorcee and has a first-born living male child) and locally known as *jatra pubi* and followed by others. *Nat Sankirtana* (folksong) plays an important role in a wedding ceremony. The wedding attire of the bride has a unique style which is not so easily found in any other community. The bride wears '*potloi*' (*a bright and colorful round skirt*) at the waist, a velvet blouse is worn on top and a white chador (*Inafi*) on the upper body and a headgear on the head. The groom usually wears a white dhoti and kurta and also a turban.

The ceremony starts with the bridegroom sitting in a special seat locally known as '*Luhong-Phan*' in the middle of the courtyard near the basil plant (*tulsi*). There follows related rituals by a Hindu Brahmin of chanting mantras and recites the genealogies of both the bride and groom. After this rite, the ceremony process is almost same with the first ritual called *keinakatpa*. Thereafter, the bride stands up and walks ceremonially seven times around the groom and at every completion of the round, she casts flowers upon the groom. This ritual is called '*Lei-Koiba*' (flower offering). Once the bride starts walking around the groom, two women from both the families release a pair of taki fish into the water, which symbolizes the bride and the groom. Last, but not the least, a lavish feast is served to the deities for the blessing and happy life of the newlywed. Ancestral deities, local deities and *sanamahi* are worshipped on this day. At the end of the round, the bride would put around the neck of the groom a pair of garlands made of jasmine (*kundo*). And the person who guides the groom (*borsenaba*) separates the two strings of garland and hands over one of them to the groom to garland the bride. After the bride and the groom have exchanged the garlands, the priest will recite some hymns, and the couple bow down to the elders present at the

ritual and before the bride's household deities such as *Leimaren*, *Sanamahi*, *Apokpa*, and others. With this, the main ritual performance of the marriage ceremony comes to an end.

### **Customary Laws of the Bishnupriya Marriage System**

The customary laws which are strictly prohibited in marriage can be broadly classified into four categories. They are (i) *Yekthoknaba* or *Putinnaba* (belonging to the same clan/kinship) (ii) *Shairuk tinnaba*, (iii) *Pendinnaba* and (iv) *Mugnaba*.

#### ***Yek thoknaba***

Marriage within the clan or *yek-Salai* is strictly prohibited. This is an ancient time honored custom in the Meitei society. Like the Meiteis, the Bishnupriyas in Manipur are socially divided into seven clans known as *salais* or *yeks*, viz., Ningthouja, Angom Khuman, Luwang, Moirang, Khaba Nganba and Chenglei. Persons who belong to the same *Yek-Salai* cannot marry each other as they are descended from a common ancestor. So *yek thoknaba* is also known as *Pu-tinnaba* (*Pu*-forefather, *tinnaba*-same origin). This rule is especially based on blood relationship. Those who neglect the customary law would be exiled as outcastes and ex-communicated. Intermarriage between two different clans is also forbidden, e.g., *Khuman* and *Luwang* do not intermarry as both of them are descended from a common ancestor.

#### ***Shairuk Tinnaba***

The term *Shairuk tinnaba* is also a kind of prohibited degree. It may be divided into two (i) *Shairuk Achouba* (big relation) and (ii) *Shairuk Macha* (small relation). The *Shairuk Achouba* is applied among the royal families and the persons are permitted to have matrimonial relation under the rule of *Yek-thoknaba*, and the prohibition is forever. *Shairuk macha* is applied among the common peoples and the restriction is only for a period of two generations.

#### ***Pen-tinnaba***

Along with the patrilineal form of kinship, the Bishnupriyas also followed the rule of matrilineal consanguineal kinship like the Meiteis. Such kinship relation, traced from the matrimonial side, is known as *Pen-tinnaba*. *Pen-tinnaba* literally means the progenies of the same grandmother but of different grandfathers. Thus people belonging to two-different clans who are the offspring of the same mother but of different fathers are prohibited to intermarry as they are uterine brothers and sisters.

### ***Mungnaba***

*Mungnaba* is another proscriptive marriage rule. It is also a custom that prohibits intermarriage between the offspring of two sisters who were married, but to husbands belonging to two different clans. Thus the offspring of two sisters though belonging to different clans are forbidden to intermarry. In the same way, though to a lesser degree, intermarriage between the offspring of the daughters of two brothers who were married to women belonging to different clan is also forbidden.

### **Birth and Death Rituals**

A number of rituals and ceremonies are performed from birth to death in the life cycle of the Bishnupriyas. The birth rites and rituals are now on the Hindu pattern but certain Meitei traditional rituals are also combined. During pregnancy, the father of the baby is not allowed to kill any kind of animals because they used to believe that it will be a bad fortune to the baby. In the past, after the birth of the baby, the umbilical cord was cut off by a sharp bamboo knife known as *wakthou*. The reason for cutting it with the bamboo knife is due to the belief that just as the bamboo grows gradually in uniformity, the baby will also grow up in healthy in a uniform manner. The umbilical cord was then put in the earthen pot covered with earthen lid and buried at the corner of the house. In birth rituals, we observe the synthesised elements in different stages. The first birth ritual ceremony is performed on the sixth day of the baby's birth. It is known as *Heisoï Eepan Thaba (Swasti Puja)*, and during this ritual they worshipped various deities. On this day relatives from

the child's mother side visit the house. They come in a procession and it is a unique one. They carry presents in round baskets (*Phingairuk*) in which sweets, beatal nuts, fish, etc., and clothes for the baby and the mother are placed. In the evening a Hinduised form of puja is conducted along with the indigenous ritual of arrow shooting by the maternal uncle in view of protecting the child from evil spirits. In Bishnupriya society, it is widely believed that after the birth of a baby, the house is impure for eleven days. Another ceremony for the sanctification of house (*yum-sengba*) is performed in the morning by a Brahmin on the twelfth day after the baby's birth. Both the baby and the mother are given a bath on this day. After that, the baby, the mother and the house are treated as sacred.

All the rites and ceremonies consequent on the death of a person are in the hands of the Brahmins though part of the Meitei traditional rites are incorporated in the ceremony. Burial only allowed only in the case death of children under the age of two years, and the burial takes place by preference on the bank of some river. It is well known that after the advent of Hinduism among the Manipuri, the dead body used to be cremated. In the Bishnupriya society, the dead are cremated with Hindu rites. The dead person is taken out of the house to the verandah. The body is bathed and dressed in white clothes before it is cremated. The cremation is done with seven layers of firewood (meaning seven goddesses), four green bamboo poles (representing four lords of directions) and a canopy (the body of human being descending from the Almighty) on the bank of a river or lake. In the funeral ritual, there are traditional rituals accompanied by the Hindu practices like walking around the funeral pyre seven times, etc. If a family member died (father or mother), the eldest son used to light the pyre. The Brahmin does incantations and then the pyre is lit. The males stay back till the body is consumed by fire. The persons who attend the funeral do not go home direct. They are allowed to go home only after taking bath. Those who go to the deceased's family, do not enter the house till they meet a person with fire. They believe that the evil spirits are then removed. The deceased person's bedding is burnt. The bones of the deceased are collected from the ashes. These are placed in bamboo tubes and taken to holy

places. In fact, there are two important ceremonies that are performed after the death of a person. The first ceremony is called *asti-sanchaya* or *mangani Leihun* which is performed on the sixth day of death. It is followed by a small ceremony named *yumsengba* (cleaning of the house with holy puja) in addition to the Hinduized Shradha (*sorat lanna thouram*) on the thirteenth or fourteenth day (for aged people).

## **Conclusion**

Both the Meiteis and Bishnupriyas fashioned themselves to be the 'indigenous people' of Manipur so that it may be taken as granted that they are the original inhabitants of Manipur. In connection with this, the logic for the Bishnupriyas alleging and claiming to be the original inhabitants is to link their identity with the state of Manipur. Therefore, the pertinent question is whether the Bishnupriyas originated from Manipur or from the West, based on their linguistic origin. However, the Bishnupriya culture is being merged and legitimately assumed into the Meitei culture in Manipur. It may be mentioned that the Bishnupriyas now residing in Manipur have lost their language and are likely soon to merge their distinct identity and undergo a more or less rapid and substantial cultural change as a consequence of contact with other neighbouring people of Manipur. Keeping this in mind, it may be noted that though there is cultural affinity with the Meitei community, the Bishnupriyas look different from the Meitei with respect to physical features, complexion, and are also perhaps genetically distinct because of the marriage restrictions or minimal genetic contacts between them. I do not think this conflict will vanish in near future. Therefore, the Assam and Manipur Governments and other obliged groups should discuss their concerns and interests, and thereby formulate an effort to end the conflict and perceptions of Bishnupriyas as inferior or having a lower status than the Meiteis.

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