

SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE OF THE MEITEIS (MANIPURIS) IN BANGLADESH**Thongam Bobochandra Singh**

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Abstracts :

The Meiteis in Bangladesh are originally from the Indian state of Manipur in North-East India. The political conflict in the kingdom of Manipur at different point of time in history is the primary reason for Meiteis being driven out of their homeland. The onslaught of Burmese was so vicious and extensive that the Meiteis who had already settled in different areas of Cachar and Assam felt no longer secure there and subsequently were forced to move further into present pockets of settlement of Bangladesh. In course of time, they became the Bangladeshi Manipuris and recognised as indigenous people by the Bangladeshi government. Over the last few years, their socio-cultural identity is being challenged by the host communities. An alarming concern of the Meiteis in Bangladesh is the negative growth rate of population which has a serious implications on their socio-cultural settings. With the receding of the Meitei populace the Meitei villages or the settlements are gradually diminishing. The change in demography and the influence of the host communities upon their society and culture led to the poser of their existential threat. This paper attempts to highlight their current socio-cultural life and to what extent it is being influenced by the host communities and the measures that can be taken up to retain inherent socio-cultural setting.

Keywords: Meitei, Indigenous, Identity, Influence, Existential.

Historical background of the Meiteis in Bangladesh:

To trace the origin of the Meitei settlement in Bangladesh, one has got to traverse back to the historical relations of the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur with Burma back then. The political conflict between the two kingdom was the root causes for Manipuris being driven out of their homeland and subsequently led to settle in various parts of Cachar, Assam, Tripura and Myanmar. By and large Manipur's relation with Burma was almost invariably incordial. History witnessed the war these two countries had fought through the phases of history wherein both sides had experienced the aftermath of war. The hostility between the two kingdoms erupted since the days of Charairongba, the father of Garibniwaj. As Garibniwaj succeeded his father, the hostility between the two kingdoms got worsened and a continual war between the two kingdoms followed. He was a very powerful king of Manipur who defeated the king of Burma in multiple encounters. However, his successors were not as powerful as he was. In 1758-59, Manipur experienced the first devastation when Alaungpaya king of unified Burma invaded and defeated Bhagyachandra, the king of Manipur. When he retreated he carried away with him thousands of Manipuris. Manipur was in a state of desolation. The first reference

regarding the settlement of Meiteis in Bangladesh is found during the reign of Bhagyachandra in an around 1764-65, when one Moirangthem Govinda, a royal man from Moirang settled at Satgaon (khaspur) near Srimongal of the greater Sylhet district, followed by a number of Manipuri people as a result of his dissension with the king.

The settlement of Meiteis in Bangladesh is classified into three time period of zone that is prior to seven years devastation, during the seven years devastation (1819-1826) and post seven years devastation. An instance of the migration of the period prior to seven years devastation has already been referred to when a royal man from Moirang settled at Satgaon. The emigration of Manipur during the seven years devastation was of such a large scale that at least one-third of the total population left Manipur and settled in Cachar, Assam, Tripura and Sylhet to save their lives while half of the population were killed and thousands were taken to Burma as captives. That is when the Meitei settlement in Sylhet and other parts of Bangladesh was by and large started. The Burmese onslaught was so wide and extensive that even the British in Bengal were unnerved. After the Burmese were expelled from the soil of Manipur by Gambhir Singh with the help of British, Chourjit and Marjit stayed back rather than returning to their homeland. While Marjit permanently settled at Bhanugach about 80 kilometers in the south of Sylhet, his elder brother chose to proceed to Nabadweep. There, he breathed last in 1828 in Baisakh, the 28th. Thus, the settlement of Meitei in Bangladesh got firmly rooted during the seven years devastation. After a gap of few years another large scale of immigration into Bangladesh took place during the days of Debendra Singh who ascended the throne of Manipur in 1850. He was not destined to rule Manipur for long. Just as three months on the throne, he was dethroned by Chandrakirti and fled to Cachar. Subsequently, he took refugee in Dhaka and settled there with a large number of his followers. The immigration into Bangladesh continued till late nineteenth century although the scale of migration was gradually on the wane and it almost stopped with the advent of the twentieth century.

Demographic Profile:

An alarming concern of the Meiteis in Bangladesh is the drastic decline of their populace. Balance of demography is essential to retain the distinct social-cultural identity of diasporic community. Currently, there is no official census data of the Manipuris in Bangladesh.

The immigration into Bangladesh continued till 1891 since it started in 1764AD. Thereafter, the immigration was almost halted. After India and Pakistan got independence and present Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan that is prior to 1971, the environment of Bangladesh was not conducive to the minority community because of which the Meiteis in Bangladesh emigrated to Indian states of Assam, Tripura and Manipur. It resulted in the diminishing of Meiteis in Bangladesh by leaps and bound. In the census report of 1901, the Manipuri population in Sylhet, Dhaka and Mymensingh was shown as 30,000; 250 and 200 respectively. But 90 years later, the Meitei settlement in Dhaka and Mymensingh is altogether extinct and in Sylhet also, the population which was expected to increase to about two lakhs by this time, rather decrease to about 25,000. Post 1901 census report, there has been no official census report of the Meiteis in Bangladesh. As stated by A K Sheram the present Meitei population in Bangladesh is around 10,000. The populace of Meiteis in Bangladesh has been drastically reduced. Many Meitei villages in Bangladesh are disappeared now. Altogether, the Meitei village presently in Bangladesh is 45. The Meitei settlement are confined mostly to Sylhet and

Moulvibazar district of Bangladesh. Of the 45 villages, 14 are confined to Bhanugach region wherein more than half of the Meitei populace are dwelt in.

Socio-Cultural life of the Meiteis in Bangladesh:

The term society and culture are closely related. While a culture is the basis of all the festivals and ceremonies observed by a certain section of the people, a society is governed by the value, norm, belief and ethic. Every social group develops a culture which in turns form the identity that holds the group distinguishing and establishing itself.

The Meiteis in Bangladesh are distant away from their homeland, yet they are emotionally deeply touched with the people of their homeland. Along with their emotional attachment with the homeland, they are also concerning to retain their distinctive culture and social system by observing social norms and their rich culture.

The social system of the Bangladeshi Manipuri is the miniature replica of the social system of their homeland state Manipur. Their society is a kinship and lineage based society. Each family belongs to one of the seven clans- Ningthouja, Luwang, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Sarang Leisangthem and Kha Nganba. Again this clan are divided into lineage known as Yumnaks. They follow the patriarchal system of society wherein the head of the family is the father. The respect of husband by their wife is deeply valued in their society. They are generally loyal to their husband- loyalty being considered as one of the good qualities of a devoted wife. Social values and norms play a crucial role in socializing a Manipuri girl and a boy. They lead a well-disciplined life. Inter dinning and intermarriage is absolutely forbidden in their society. They are mainly vegetarian. They usually eat rice, vegetables and fish as their staple food but not meat, egg, garlic and onion.

The term for marriage among the Bangladeshi Manipur is Luhongba- the change of bond. The very essential ingredient of the marriage lies in the concept of Kujaba which consist of four elements such as- the earth, the foodgrains, the cloth and the accessories. There are four forms of marriage of which Hainaba (engagement) is mostly prevalent and highly accepted, except in the case of Chenba (elopement). Intra clan marriage is strictly prohibited. Even there is no usage of intermarriage between the Meitei and the Bishnupriyas. Divorce is very uncommon in their society. Another remarkable feature of their marriage system is that there is no demand of dowry on the part of the groom's family rather it was subjected to the wishes or the economical well-being of the bride's family.

The traditional religion of the Meitei society is deeply respected. Their customs and traditions conform to their religious ethics. Among their religious ceremonies Lai Haraoba, literally 'pleasing the gods' is the most important. According to Elangbam Nilakanta "Lai Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of the Manipur people. It reveals the strength and weakness, the beliefs and superstitions and perhaps also the charms and happiness of the Manipur people." The Maibas and Maibis who would spearhead and guide to celebrate this ritual festival of Meiteis are coming all the way from their homeland Manipur. It is they who would determine the length of this ritual festival- normally ranging from one to two weeks. Their interest and concern of this ancient ritual festival of Meitei origin indicates their emotional attachment with their homeland and inclined to their quest for roots.

They prefer to live in small clans comprising of 10-20 houses in rural areas. In almost all the localities there is a Mandapa which is an identifying characteristic of a Manipuri village. Their

houses are the Manipuri traditional houses called Yumjao. In course of time, housing technology and material culture have been influenced. One of the major problems they are facing is the loss of local character due to infiltration of non-indigenous culture. Bengalese elements have been introduced in the construction of the houses. A change in material culture is visible in modern houses. The mud walls have been replaced with brick walls, bamboo paste with narrow concrete column, corrugated iron sheets are commonly used for roofs. Brick, cement and sand have emerged as new building materials. Many of the houses are now being built in Bengali style. Because of which, the cultural practices associated with the traditional Meitei Yumjao has been influenced. A general tendency of them is the shifting of their dwelling places. Disappearance of Meitei settlements over the years is the testament to shifting of their dwelling places.

When it comes to family life, they are very conscious. Since most of the families are economically not sound, they are inclined to have small family. They prefer to lead a balanced life. This small family norm is highly practised among the younger generation. However, when it comes to the family pattern, the joint family system is preferably practised among them. The family pattern of Meitei in Bangladesh is blend of joint and nuclear families. But, with urbanisation and industrialisation the concept of nuclear family is the current trend. The literacy rate of the Meiteis in Bangladesh is very high despite pursuing of higher studies is very limited. The primary reason for less number of people receiving higher education is because they are economically not sound. Moreover, educational institutions for higher studies are far from their communities and they have less capability to compete with mainstream people. The education among the girls is comparatively much less to boys. Before the 80's the number of higher secondary level girls were very few because their parents think that they are getting married someday and live in their husband house, and hence education is not a necessity in an environment where they have to be good housewives only. Youths who prefer higher education and white collar jobs are migrating to cities to explore these opportunities. Changes are observed in their practices and behaviours.

The distinct knowledge system and community-based social structures of Manipuris have deeply been affected by the influence of Bengali language and culture. While I was having an informal discussion with A k Sheram, it is stated that "Manipuri language was influenced to a great extent by Bengali language before 1971. But after 1971 it was gradually improving with the establishment of many organisations with the aim to promote Manipuri language." Under the initiatives of these organisations various literary programmes are being organised to promote Manipuri language. Social media also played a role in the promotion of Manipuri language. Yet, Manipuri language is still being adulterated by the Bengali language. After the liberation, a cultural institute has been set up at the village Madhabpur in the present district of Moulvibazar. They love to appreciate and patronise arts and literature. The Manipuri programme is being broadcasted in the Radio Bangladesh for the promotion of Manipuri language.

The Manipuri males wear long khudei both plain, and those with criss-crossed patterns while the females used to wear plain and thinly bordered phaneks (sarongs) at home. However, these days the Manipuri women also wear Salwar and Saree at their homes. On religious and mortuary occasions males wear Pheijom while women clothe themselves in Pumngou Phaneks and a white upper cloth. They also practise the customary rituals in birth, marriage, death and

in various other occasions. But, these days the ritualists who performed these rituals are rare to find as most of them gave up this professions.

Conclusion:

Despite the Manipuris in Bangladesh have a distinct socio-cultural practices, it is being influenced by host communities. The decline of Meitei population is the fundamental cause for being influenced upon their society and culture. They are reluctant to put forth their demands to the government as they think they are not indigenous and are originated from other countries. This was one of the reasons why they are still lagging behind in any aspect of development compared to other communities. The identity issues with the Bishnupriyas has prevented them from getting government grants for the development of their society and culture. The government of Bangladesh has to address this problem sincerely so that the government grants may also be benefitted by the Manipuris. As language plays a critical role in asserting the identity of a community, it is essential to organise workshops, seminars and literary meet from time to time to promote Manipuri language by the literary organisations in Bangladesh. The cultural meet between the Bangladesh Manipuri and the homeland Manipur is highly recommended.

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