

Identity Crisis of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Ethnic Hindu Community



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There are around 7000 languages in the world out of which 50-90% is predicted to be extinct by the end of the 21st century.[1] TRT World magazine cites a survey by Australian National University (ANU) to report that around half of the 7000 languages are currently endangered with 1500 languages deemed to be probably extinct in another 80 years. While Articles 344(1) and 351 of Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India recognises 22 languages, the lingua franca enlisted in the 2001 Census of India includes 122 major and an additional 1599. According to the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) conducted by Bhasha Research and Publication Centre over a period of two years starting from 2010, there are 780 languages in India, which also includes dying dialects. A Times of India report dated Aug 9, 2013 cites the survey by Bhasha Research and Publication Centre of the extinction of 220 languages in India in the last 50 years.

Suzanne Romaine, an American linguist who was professor at Oxford University, rightly writes, "...diversity is at risk when languages become extinct because languages are a critical vector for cultural diversity... Protecting cultural and linguistic diversity means ensuring their continued existence." [2] Romaine's analysis holds true for many languages which are in the verge of extinction or facing an identity crisis due to lack of recognition in the Indian context in particular and the world framework in general.

The present analysis centres on the identity crisis of the Bishnupriya Manipuri ethnic Hindu minority community and language. The 8th Schedule to the Constitution of India recognizes Manipuri as one of the 22 official languages of the Indian Republic; this language is Meitei, which is also the official language of Manipur. There are two

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sections of Manipuris – Meitei, which is the majority and Bishnupriya Manipuri, a minority. As recorded in census.gov.in for 2011, there are 1,522,132 Meitei speaking people in Manipur with an all-India count of 1,760,913. Though there are around 2,00,000 Bishnupriya Manipuris in Manipur, only a few thousands speak their native mother tongue; lingua franca of the majority is Meitei. However, the 2011 Census records the number of Bishnupriya Manipuris in India at 74069 and Manipur at only 284, which corroborate the fact that this language is dying. If not protected and recognized, this language will face extinction in a few decades.

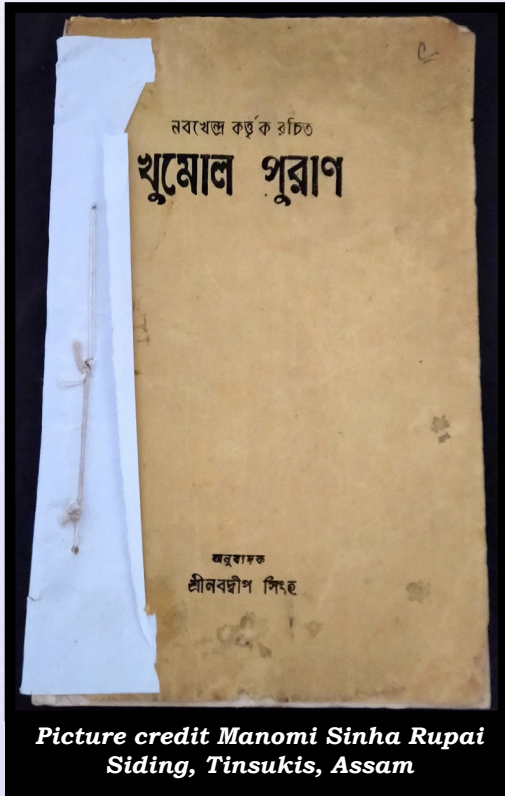
George Abraham Grierson, a linguist in British India, was appointed as superintendent of the Linguistic Survey of India in 1898. He conducted a survey, documenting spoken languages across the country, the reports of which were published in The Linguistic Survey of India in 19 volumes. Grierson wrote thus about the Bishnupriya Manipuris, identified as Mayangs or Kalachais or Kalisa, in The Linguistic Survey of India, Vol 5, Part I, “In Manipur, and in isolated villages in Sylhet and Cachar where there are settlements of Manipuris, the Mayangs speak a mongrel form of Assamese, called by the name of the tribe. There are said to be about a thousand of these people in Manipur, while the number in Sylhet and Cachar is estimated at 22,500.”[3] Grierson writes further, “Except for their language the Mayangs are indistinguishable from the general Manipuri population. All of them can speak Meithei. They are also known as Bishnupuriya Manipuris or as Kalisa Manipuris and are said to be considerable numerous among the Manipuri population of Cachar and Sylhet...”[4] To quote Grierson further, “In the Manipur State, the headquarters of Mayang are two or three plains villages near Bishunpur (locally known as Lamandong), 18 miles to the south-west of Imphal.”[5]

This survey by Grierson was published in 1903, which suggest that by 1903, in Cachar district of Assam and Sylhet, now in Bangladesh, the Bishnupriya Manipuris constituted 22,500. In Manipur, Bishnupriya Manipuri speaking people constituted 1000 in numbers though this number is not exhaustive, as over time, after the Burmese aggressions in 18th-19th centuries in addition to internal conflicts, the Bishnupriya Manipuris ceased speaking in their original language and adopted Meitei in their homeland. Ironically, a correct census data of the Bishnupriya Manipuris is lacking in Manipur in particular and India in general.

Madhav Singh, Block Level Officer (BLO) for the upcoming census records, Jiribum, Manipur, wrote to me, “Total Bishnupriya Manipuri speaking people in Jiribam District of Manipur are 2826. In other districts like Bishnupur, Thoubal, and other areas of

Manipur, there are many Bishnupriya Manipuris, who speak Meitei language. In number, they exceed two lakhs.”

The Manipuris have a cultural continuity from pre-Mahabharata times. Both the Meiteis and Bishnupriyas trace their ancestry to Babruvahana, the son of Kuru prince Arjuna and Manipuri princess Chitrangada. The Adi Parva of the Mahabharata describes about Prabhanjana as one of the oldest ancestors of Raja Chitravahana, the king of Manipur.



Picture credit Manomi Sinha Rupai Siding, Tinsukis, Assam

By the boon of Shiva, each generation starting from Prabhanjana, bore one son. Raja Chitravahana begot a daughter Chitrangada; he initiated her as Putrika. Kuru king Arjuna married Chitrangada. Their son was Babruvahana, who became the king of Manipur after Chitravahana’s death. As per Meitei traditions, Babruvahana had a son named Pakhangba. The Khumal Purana describes the first five generations of the complete lineage from Arjuna and Chitrangada and then chronicles the rulers from Khumal (son of Pakhangba) starting from the 6th generation. Khumal started the Khumal dynasty after dividing his kingdom into five principalities ruled by five descendants of Babruvahana viz. Moirang, Angom, Luwang, Mangong (all brothers of father of Khumal, Pakhangba) and Khumal himself. There are, thus, five main clans among the Bishnupriya Manipuris

called the Pancha Bishnupriyas. The Meitheis by Hodson, who cites the royal chronicles and other traditional historical accounts of Manipur, presents an incomplete and short genealogical account of the ancestors of Manipuri princess Chitrangada, starting from God Brahma till Babruvahana to Pakhangba.[6] The Meiteis worship Pakhangba as an ancestral deity. The Bishnupriya Manipuris worship Khumal, also known as Apokpa, as their ancestral deity or Kuladevata. The Khumal Purana describes Khumal as a manifestation of God Shiva.

There has been a controversy that the Manipur of Mahabharata is located in present Odisha. But this is a distorted narrative that has been created to destroy the ethnic identity of the descendants of Babruvahana, the king of Manipur. At present Manipur, there are traces of the continuation of a 5000 plus-year-old cultural and civilizational legacy being carried forward since the time of Babruvahana, which is substantiated by

several historical documents. The Mahabharata, Jaimini Ashwamedha, royal chronicles of Burma, Tungkhungia Buranji and several more ancient and medieval historical chronicles depict Manipur as located in the northeast.

On the Meiteis and Bishnupriyas, KP Sinha writes in *The Bishnupriya Manipuri Language*, "...these two sections of people have a common stock of culture; their kirtana, dance, music, dress, etc.—all are of the same type." [7] It is the language that is the key distinguishing factor between the Meitei and Bishnupriya Manipuris. To further quote KP Sinha, "The Meiteis call their language 'Meitei' or 'Manipuri'. This language, being the state-language of Manipur, is now called simply 'Manipuri'. Formerly, the Bishnupriyas used to call their, language simply 'Manipuri' but now with a view to distinguishing it from Meitei, they call it 'Bishnupriya Manipuri'." [8] The Bishnupriya Manipuri language has lexes majorly from Sanskrit, Meitei, Assamese, Oriya, and Bengali. There are certain similarities between Meitei and Bishnupriya Manipuri lexicons.

The Khumal Purana describes how in the 18th century, during the rule of Pamheiba (Gharib Nawaz), Vaishnavite saint Shantidas Adhikari, also called Shantadas Goswami, named the Khumal clan of Manipuris as Bishnupriyas, because they believed in Vishnu as the Supreme Deity. [9] Shantadas initiated the existing Hindus of Manipur to follow a proper ritualistic tradition of worshipping Vishnu. For the initiation, they were to undergo certain rituals like performing penance and taking a holy dip at the Nongkhrang Tank. Many Manipuris, especially the Khumals, refused to take a bath at the sacred tank. They were thus initiated without observing the said rituals. A division arose within the community between two groups – those who took a dip in the tank and those who did not, before the initiation. The division only widened with time. Pundit Nabakhendra wrote thus in the Khumal Purana, "Thus even the descendants of the same parents were divided into two groups. One group was known as Bishnupriyas and the other group as Meiteis." [10]

There are several sub-clans including the main clans (Pancha Bishnupriyas) called lokeis in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community divided according to the gotras. People from the same lokeis are called sakeis. Marriage within the same gotra and sub-clan is prohibited. Gotras amongst both the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas in particular and all Hindus in general are in the names of Rishis namely, Shandilya, Atreya, Bharadwaja, Angarasya, Baiyagra Padya, Kashyapa, Maudgalya, Kaushik, and more.

Dils Lakshmindra Sinha, Author, Researcher, Socio-cultural Activist, Govt Literary Pensioner and President, Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Assam wrote

thus about the identity crisis of the Bishnupriya Manipuris, “The total population of the Bishnupriya Manipuris are estimated to be of more than 4 lacs throughout the globe. Two lacs of Bishnupriya Manipuri population in Manipur area cannot speak their own language but ethnically they identify themselves as Bishnupriyas..... the Bishnupriya Manipuri language is enlisted as endangered language by the UNESCO. Here, I would like to draw the attention of the international community to come forward to protect this language and unique culture from extinction.”

Note: This piece along with a detailed history of Manipur from pre-Mahabharata times to the present turmoil is elaborated in three sections in the upcoming book under Garuda Prakashan banner - **The Manipur Conundrum: History. Exodus. Conversion.** by Manoshi Sinha, Dr Ankita Dutta, and Vladimir Adityanath.

Key Ref:

- [1] **The Global Extinction of Languages and Its Consequences for Cultural Diversity, Suzanne Romaine, in Cultural and Linguistic Minorities in the Russian Federation and the European Union, eds. HF Marten et al, Multilingual Education 13, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-10455-3_2, Springer International Publishing Switzerland 2015, p-31.**
- [2] **Ibid, p-43.**
- [3] **Linguistic Survey of India, Vol 5, Part I, GA Grierson, Office of the Superintendent, Govt Printing, 1903, p-394.**
- [4],[5] **Ibid, p-419.**
- [6] **The Meitheis, TC Hodson, Govt of Eastern Bengal and Assam, London David Nutt, 1908, p-5.**
- [7],[8] **The Bishnupriya Manipuri Language, KP Sinha, Dept of Sanskrit, Guwahati University, Phirma KLM Pvt Ltd., 1960, p-1.**
- [9],[10] **Khumal Purana, A Short Ancient History of the Khumals in the Manipur Valley, Pandit Nabakhendra (18th century royal court scholar), translation, Nabadwip Singha, De Quality Printers, 1983, p-65.**
