

Ethnic Identity Construction and Contestation in Bangladesh: The Case of the Manipuri and Bishnupriya Communities

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Abstract

In Bangladesh, some groups seek economic or social advantages by claiming ethnic identities to which they are not entitled. This paper examines such claims, focusing on the identity challenges faced by the Manipuri community due to competing claims from the Bishnupriya. Despite clear distinctions in linguistic, historical, and cultural origins, as recognized in the literature, the Bishnupriya community asserts a Manipuri identity, creating tensions and contestations. The Manipuri, known as Meetei locally and internationally, are one of the recognized ethnic groups in Bangladesh. However, their identity is increasingly contested by the Bishnupriya, whose claims lack alignment with established definitions of Manipuri ethnicity. Although this issue is significant for the Manipuri community, it remains underexplored in Bangladeshi scholarship. This study addresses the gap using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and participatory observations, complemented by secondary sources and scholarly research. The findings highlight the complexity of ethnic identity construction and its implications for minority communities in Bangladesh.

Keywords

Manipuri, Bishnupriya, Mahabharata, Manipur, Kangleipak, ethnic identity, ethnic contestation

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Introduction

The Manipuri are an ethnic group residing in the Sylhet Division of northeastern Bangladesh, where they speak Meetei-lon, a language officially recognized in India and the official language of the Indian state of Manipur. The Manipuri in Bangladesh share a common history, language, and culture with their counterparts in India. Their ethnic identity encompasses diverse religious affiliations, including Sanamahi, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, reflecting a history of assimilation. For instance, the Meetei-Pangal (Muslims) were integrated into Manipuri society during the 16th century under the rule of Prince Sanongba (Sheram 2005:117). According to Chowdhury (2005: 314), the Meetei-Pangal community is an inseparable part of Manipuri society, highlighting the inclusivity of Manipuri culture.

Historically, Manipur was a sovereign state from 33 CE to 1949, ruled by the Meetei Kingdom before its integration into India. It became an Indian state only in 1972 (Mangal 2020). There is no historical evidence indicating that any Bishnupriya ruler governed the Meetei kingdom, further emphasizing the distinctiveness of the Manipuri identity. The current Manipur, located in northeast India and sharing a border with Myanmar, is geographically distinct from the Manipur mentioned in the Mahabharata, which is believed to have been situated in the Anga (Bihar), Vanga (West Bengal), and Kalinga (Odisha) regions (Singha 2022). Scholars like Das (1987) and Majumder and Biswas (2018) argue that the Bishnupriya's claims to Manipuri heritage, including their purported connection to Mahabharata's Arjuna, are historically and geographically unfounded.

Despite these distinctions, the Manipuri community in Bangladesh faces significant identity challenges due to the Bishnupriya community's claims to Manipuri identity. Linguistic, historical, and cultural evidence consistently differentiate the two groups. Scholars such as Devi (2017) and Das (1987) suggest that the Bishnupriya claims are politically motivated, aiming to secure socio-economic advantages, including access to government resources in

Bangladesh. This contestation not only undermines the Manipuri language and cultural heritage but also creates confusion among the general Bangladeshi population regarding the true Manipuri identity.

The challenges surrounding the Manipuri identity in Bangladesh remain underexplored in academic literature. While previous studies have addressed Manipuri culture and socio-economic issues, little attention has been given to the identity politics between Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities. This research addresses this gap by examining the socio-economic motivations behind identity construction and contestation, employing qualitative methods such as ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation.

This paper aims to clarify the historical and socio-cultural distinctions between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities and to highlight the implications of these identity challenges. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Barth (1994), Eriksen (2002), Fenton (1999), and Langman (2004), it explores the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic group to better understand the dynamics at play. The findings contribute to the literature by addressing the Manipuri identity issue in Bangladesh and providing insights into how socio-economic factors influence ethnic identity politics.

Understanding Ethnicity and Ethnic Minority

This section clarifies the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic minority, which are essential for comprehending the complex identity politics in Bangladesh. The Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities coexist in Bangladesh but maintain distinct ethnic boundaries as they belong to separate ethnic groups. Both groups are classified as minorities within the country.

Ethnic identity and its formation are widely seen as being under challenge (Eriksen 2002: 76). Eriksen argues that ethnic minorities are citizens of a nation, regardless of their primary identity. He explains:

They remain distinctive despite efforts undertaken by the agencies of the nation-state to integrate them politically, culturally, and economically – or, in other cases, they may try to become integrated as equal citizens, but are kept separate through a politics of segregation” (Eriksen 2002: 121).

Eriksen highlights that while minorities often strive to retain their uniqueness, nation-states aim to integrate them into the mainstream through socio-economic and political initiatives. Despite such integration efforts, minorities frequently uphold their distinct identities. In Bangladesh, however, the Bishnupriya community denies their own ethnic identity and instead adopts the Manipuri identity, which is disconnected from their original ethnic roots.

Barth (1994) provides a framework for defining ethnic groups, emphasizing the role of cultural traits:

The classification of persons and local groups as members of an ethnic group must depend on their exhibiting the particular traits of the culture. Differences between groups become differences in trait inventories; the attention is drawn to the analysis of cultures, not of ethnic organization (Barth 1994: 12).

Barth further asserts that ethnic identity is validated through specific cultural elements, such as dress, language, housing styles, and general lifestyle. These traits act as diacritical signals that distinguish one ethnic group from another (Barth 1994: 14).

Similarly, Fenton (1999) defines ethnicity as both a cultural and social dimension. He highlights that ethnic groups are established and maintained through material culture, social evidence, and shared ancestry, language, and origin. He said:

Ethnicity is manifested as a dimension of cultural meanings and as a dimension of social structure; ethnic formations are material, symbolic, and social facts. Later ethnic group is used primarily in contexts of cultural difference, where cultural difference is associated above all with an actual or commonly perceived shared ancestry, with language markers, and with national or regional origin (Fenton 1999: 3-4).

Cokley (2005: 518) defines ethnicity as the interplay between personal and social group identity, involving elements such as nationality, ancestry, religion, language, culture, and history. Langman (2004) elaborates on the role of narrative identity in forming ethnic identity:

Narrative of identity typically begins with mythical roots of origin, legends that link the past with the present to establish a distinct people and ensure its continuity over time. Ancestral myths may often include stories of gods and heroes who personify cultural ideals and values. Cultural identities are not just collections of myths and stories, but scripts that are expressed in the ritual performances that sustain solidarity and affirm distinctive roles and identities (Langman 2004: 28).

Langman explains that myths of origin and cultural rituals are integral to affirming and sustaining a unique ethnic identity. These narratives connect the past with the present, ensuring the continuity of a distinct group identity.

While Barth, Eriksen, Fenton, and Langman provide valuable frameworks for understanding ethnic identity, they do not emphasize the potential rejection or denial of ethnic identity when socio-economic advantages are at stake. In Bangladesh, for example, the Bishnupriya community reclaims the Manipuri identity, likely motivated by the socio-economic and political opportunities associated with this identity. This phenomenon highlights how economic and political factors can drive the contestation and reconstruction of ethnic identity.

Method

This study employs ethnographic research techniques to explore the research topic in depth. The idea for this research emerged during my PhD fieldwork in Bangladesh in 2016, prompting me to develop it into a full research paper. The fieldwork was later updated in April 2024. A participatory approach was adopted, combining in-depth

interviews with participant observation to gather comprehensive data. Additionally, I engaged in local cultural events, and insights from these experiences are reflected in the findings and discussion sections.

The fieldwork was conducted from August 2016 to December 2017 in Kamalganj Upazila, located in the Moulvibazar district of Bangladesh. Seven key respondents were interviewed, including a member of the Bishnupriya community, to capture diverse perspectives. These respondents were selected for their roles as resource persons within the community, particularly elders who preserve oral history and recount significant events.

To address concerns regarding respondent anonymity, I shifted focus to secondary research sources for a more rigorous analysis. Some respondents expressed discomfort with having their names and statements publicly disclosed. To respect their privacy, I have presented socio-economic profiles using pseudonyms, identified as R-1 through R-7 as seen in Table 1.

Secondary data sources played a critical role in complementing the primary findings. These included academic journals, books, websites, databases, and other online materials. Such resources were utilized to substantiate arguments and provide contextual depth. To ensure clarity in the presentation of findings, key concepts such as “ethnic minority” and “ethnicity” were carefully defined and contextualized.

This combination of primary ethnographic methods and secondary research ensured a robust and ethical approach to understanding the complex dynamics of ethnicity and identity in the study area.

Table 1
Socio-economic profiles of the key respondents

Respondent numbers (R)	Name of respondents	Gender	Age	Education	Profession
1	Babu	Male	60	High School	Social activist
2	Chingtham	Male	40	Master	Private
3	Lantha	Male	55	Graduate	NGO staff
4	Ranjana	Female	53	High School	Social activist
5	Sudha	Male	43	Master	School Teacher
6	Robin	Male	67	Graduate	Social activist
7	Apura	Male	25	Master	Research Assistant

Source: The author’s analysis

Ethnic Contestation and Cooperative Interactions: The Complex Relationship of Manipuri and Bishnupriya Communities

The findings indicate that the Bishnupriya are the closest neighboring ethnic group to the Manipuri in Bangladesh, though the majority of them reside in Assam, India. Known as Kalichha in both Bangladesh and India, the Bishnupriya and Manipuri communities generally maintain a harmonious relationship despite underlying tensions rooted in identity politics within Bangladesh.

Both groups strive to establish their place within Bangladesh’s social and economic sectors to sustain themselves. However, the Manipuri are significantly more socio-economically disadvantaged than the Bishnupriya. According to Babu (R-1), the Manipuri face economic, social, and political vulnerabilities in Bangladesh. Their population is relatively small compared to the national demographic, which exacerbates their challenges, particularly in addressing contested identity issues. For instance, the Manipuri often have limited access to government programs and facilities.

In contrast, the Bishnupriya enjoy greater socio-economic opportunities. Many of their senior members occupy influential

positions in media, academia, and government institutions in Bangladesh. These individuals have contributed to the official recognition of the Bishnupriya under the Manipuri label, despite evidence demonstrating that they lack historical, linguistic, and cultural connections to the Manipuri identity. Field investigations confirm that the Bishnupriya do not possess authentic traits associated with the Manipuri heritage.

The Manipuri people assert that they are the original inhabitants of Manipur, considering themselves the true Manipuri. In contrast, the Bishnupriya claim to be the original residents of Manipur, citing references to the region in the Mahabharata as proof of their ancestral ties. Chingtham (R-2) suggests that the Bishnupriya may be attempting to connect themselves to the Mahabharata's history in order to gain attention and legitimacy through association with a revered sacred text. It is important to note that the name "Manipur" is used for several locations in both India and Bangladesh, including a place in the Mirpur area of Dhaka city. Additionally, the research indicates that the Bishnupriya lack historical, mythological, linguistic, or cultural ties to the Manipuri identity.

The economic benefits are more significant than the identity dispute between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities. Both groups use the term "Manipur" to secure official economic and political advantages. As a result, the people of Bangladesh have become confused by the existence of multiple Manipuri identities, according to Lanthia (R-3). The Meetei argue that they are the true Manipuri because they speak the Manipuri language and use the Manipuri script (Meetei Mayek), an ancient script that has been in use for an unknown period of time. Lanthia further notes that the Meetei script is recognized by major platforms like Microsoft and Google. The Manipuri also contend that the name "Manipur" itself is relatively recent, only coming into use in the 18th century, with the region previously known as Kangleipak. In contrast, the Bishnupriya claim descent from Arjuna of the Mahabharata, pointing to mentions of Manipur and Arjuna in the epic. However, recent research

suggests that the Manipur referenced in the Mahabharata is located in present-day Odisha, far from the current Manipur or the historical Kangleipak.

Manipuri respondents (R-4, R-5, and R-6) argue that the term “Manipuri” has become a commodity due to its widespread use in Bangladesh. For example, respondents claim that the Bishnupriya communities are using the Manipuri identity to apply for government jobs. Additionally, Manipuris assert that non-Manipuris are accessing government-provided services under the Manipuri label, which results in Manipuri people losing access to these resources. The Bangladesh government appears indifferent to these claims. The multiple competing claims to the Manipuri identity create confusion, and the Manipuri people are unable to effectively address the issue with the government due to their social, economic, and political vulnerability. Meanwhile, the Bishnupriya communities continue to participate in local and national cultural events under the Manipuri name, despite not identifying as Manipuri. These practices are affecting the coexistence and symbiotic relationships between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities in Bangladesh.

Robin (R-6) raises a question about the Bishnupriyas’ claim to be descendants of Arjuna from the Mahabharata, pointing out the contradiction if they are indeed the descendants of low-caste Hindus. He also argues that the maids of the Manipuri king and queen should not assert they are the “true” Manipuri. Despite this, the Bishnupriyas are in a more favorable position socio-economically in Bangladesh and are capitalizing on these opportunities while concealing their true ethnic identity. Another concern is the misleading information about the Manipuri in Bangladesh’s national textbooks.

The discord between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities is not universal. A notable example of cordial inter-ethnic relationships can be found in Tetaigaon village in Adampur Bazar, Kamalgaj thana. Based on my own field observations, the two communities in Tetaigaon maintain a strong and harmonious relationship. In this area, most Bishnupriya people understand the

Manipuri language, a result of their physical proximity and the mutually beneficial interactions between the communities. The Manipuri and Bishnupriya share various socio-economic activities, such as agricultural work, including sharecropping and hired labor, and often provide each other with mutual assistance. The communities are well-acquainted and dependent on each other for their daily economic activities. In this context, identity politics are less prominent, as the Bishnupriya in Tetaigaon are not focused on such issues. The two communities have lived side by side for many years, frequently inviting one another to social and religious events. However, this spirit of cooperation and mutual respect is rarely observed in other Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities across Bangladesh.

I propose several distinctions between the Manipuri (Meetei) and the Bishnupriya (Kalichha) communities. The terms “Bishnupriya” and “Kalichha” are often used interchangeably. This paper avoids using the term “Indigenous” because it is prohibited under the 15th amendment of the Bangladesh constitution. As a result, the term “Indigenous” is replaced with “ethnic community.” Within the broader challenges faced by ethnic communities in Bangladesh, inter-ethnic politics also play a significant role. For example, the Bishnupriya community seeks to access resources provided by the Bangladesh government under the Manipuri label (Robin, R-6). Meanwhile, the actual Manipuri community is often unaware of the government opportunities available to them. Due to their limited representation in official institutions, Manipuri connections with relevant stakeholders are almost nonexistent.

The issue of Manipuri identity and its contested politics remains largely unknown to the general public in Bangladesh. This contestation unfolds across various arenas. For instance, the Bishnupriya community occupies the “Manipuri Lalitkala Academy” in Kamalganj, Moulvibazar, under the Manipuri name. As a result, the public is confused by the multiple identities and activities claimed by the Bishnupriya. They assert various identities, such as

Bishnupriya Manipuri, Manipuri Bishnupriya, and Kalichha, further complicating matters. Additionally, the Bishnupriya community is divided into two factions based on linguistic backgrounds: the Ranir gang and the Madai gang, as noted by respondent Apura (R-7). The Meetei, on the other hand, refer to them as Leima-nai (descendants of the queen's maid) and Ningthou-nai (descendants of the king's maid). Another factor contributing to the confusion is the adoption of surnames like Singha, Sinha, and Devi by Manipuris after converting to Hinduism, which overlap with surnames used by the Bishnupriya. Recently, however, the younger generation of Manipuris has started using family clans and sub-clans as surnames, which are categorized under seven main clans, offering a clearer distinction.

The field investigation revealed that several organizations have been established by the Bishnupriya (Kalichha) community under the name of Manipuri in Bangladesh, leading to complex identity politics. The Manipuri/Meetei community believes that the Bishnupriya should rename or rebrand these organizations, retaining their original Bishnupriya (Kalichha) identity. This change would help alleviate the confusion among the general public in Bangladesh, making it easier to identify the true Manipuri community.

Examining Identity Contestation between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya Communities in Bangladesh

The people of Bangladesh are often confused by the various uses of the term “Manipuri.” This discussion aims to clarify this confusion and address the current identity challenges faced by the Manipuri community in Bangladesh. The analysis is organized thematically, with the following sections divided into several subsections that examine the research findings, relevant literature, and the objectives of the study.

The Origin of the Manipuri

Manipur was a sovereign state from 33 CE until 1949. By the 18th century, the region had largely adopted Hinduism, and the state was known as Kangleipak (Sheram 2005: 117; Sebastian 2021: 20). The name Kangleipak was changed to Manipur in the 18th century. However, it is important to note that the Manipuri did not abandon their ancient Sanamahi religion, even though their holy book, the puya, was burned and replaced by Hinduism and the Bengali script (Devi 2018-19: 870). Hindu missionaries from Sylhet arrived in Kangleipak in the 18th century, where they helped transform Kangleipak into Manipur, and the Indigenous Meetei people were redefined as Manipuri (Saad 2018: 2). Since then, the Meetei have been known as Manipuri, both locally and internationally. The name “Manipuri” is relatively recent in the history of Kangleipak. As such, “Manipuri” and “Meetei” are synonymous terms, with the Manipuri being locally known as Meetei. They identify as Manipuri at the local, national, and international levels.

The Meetei also have a distinct group structure, with Manipuri identity being organized into seven clans (Haripriya 2017). Each clan consists of several sageis (sub-clans), and at times, Meetei individuals use their sub-clan as a family name. For example, “Roghu Wahengbam,” where “Wahengbam” is one of the sub-clans of the Manipuri. The Bishnupriya, however, do not belong to this clan structure.

The Origin of the Bishnupriya

The Bishnupriya do not originate from Manipur as supported by relevant literature. According to Grierson (1903-1928: 20), the Bishnupriya come from the Aryan-speaking region. He suggests that the Bishnupriya share linguistic and cultural similarities with the Aryan people. Similarly, Bishnupriya writer Devi (2017: 82) claims that the Bishnupriya originated from Bishnupur in West Bengal, India, due to linguistic and cultural similarities with the people of that region. Grierson (1903-1928) states:

There is also a degraded class called Kalacheiya or Bishnupuri, which consists of the descendants of Doms and other Bengalis of low caste. They speak a language, which is different from that of the true Manipuri, and is in fact closely allied to vulgar Bengali (Grierson 1903-1928: 20).

From Grierson's evidence, we can infer that "Kalichha" was the original identity of the Bishnupriya. Grierson further asserts that the Bishnupriya language differs significantly from the original Manipuri language. According to him, today's Bishnupriya language is distinct from the contemporary Manipuri (Meetei). The Mayangs (Bishnupriyas) are descendants of Hindus who originally emigrated from the West (Ranjita 2019: 60; Kamei 2019: 60), reinforcing the idea that Bishnupriya identity is not connected to Manipuri culture, identity, or language. Grierson summarizes the linguistic evidence as follows:

I have shown it as a form of Assamese, merely because its speakers all live in the territory under the political influence of the Assam Government. According to tradition, they originally came from an Aryan-speaking locality (Grierson 1903-1928: 419).

Grierson (1903-1928) argues that the Kalichha identity has strong Assamese and Aryan influences. However, more recently, the Bishnupriya have redefined their identity, shifting from Kalichha to Bishnupriya or Bishnupuri, a reflection of new identity formation and socio-economic factors:

The Bishnupriya language is originally an Indo-Aryan language of the Eastern group, alongside Bengali and Assamese. The origin of this language is Bishnupur in West Bengal. However, the linguistic identity has shifted due to political interests, concealing ethnic and religious identities (Devi 2017: 88).

As Devi (2017) points out, the Bishnupriya have concealed their original identity and religion to gain political benefits. Therefore, the Bishnupriya (Kalichha) should be considered a separate ethnic group. Devi also describes how the Manipuri identity has been challenged:

Their (Bishnupriya) adoption of the nomenclature Bishnupriya Manipuri, especially advocated by their leaders and supported by their false propaganda literature, has created a menace to the linguistic identity and history of the Meeteis or Manipuris (Devi 2017: 82).

The works of Devi (2017), Das (1987), Ranjita (2019), and Grierson (1903-1928) establish the origin of the Bishnupriya and their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As such, it is clear that the Bishnupriya are distinct from the present Manipuri or Meetei.

Linguistic Identity of the Manipuri and Bishnupriya

The Manipuri language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family, while the Bishnupriya language is part of the Indo-Aryan family (Sinha 1960, Chakrabarty and Mondal 2021). Sinha (1960: 7) further claims that the Bishnupriya language shares linguistic characteristics with Oriya, Bengali, and Assamese. Thus, the Manipuri and Bishnupriya languages are derived from different linguistic roots. Moreover, these two communities do not share a common culture or history. As Sinha (2022) states:

The Bishnupriya language developed from Magadhi-Apabhramsa and bears a close relationship with Assamese, Bengali, and Oriya. In contrast, the Manipuri language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group, making the two languages distinct (Sinha 2022: 82).

Grierson (1903: 426), in his *Linguistic Survey of India*, refers to the Bishnupriya language as “Mayang” or “Bishnupuriya.” This further reinforces the distinction between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya languages. In practice, when members of the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities communicate with each other, they typically use Bangla, which serves as the lingua franca in Bangladesh. The Table 2 illustrates the linguistic differences between the two communities.

Table 2

The Linguistic Differences between Manipuri and Bishnupriya

Manipuri Language	Bishnupriya Language	English Language
Nahakki ming kari kouge	Tumar nam han kihan	What is your name?
Nang ngasi kari charage	Ti ajika ki diya khailta	What did you eat today?
Ei football shannaba yamna pamja-rammi	Mor priyo khelahan oila football	My favourite sport was football.

Source: The author’s analysis

The Cultural Identity of the Manipuri and Bishnupriya

Like many other ethnic groups, the Bishnupriya have a rich culture and language. However, culturally, the Manipuri and Bishnupriya are distinct from each other. While this study primarily focuses on the issue of Manipuri identity, it is important to note that cultural differences play a significant role in defining ethnic groups. Fenton (1999: 63) argues that ethnicity creates social connections and influences daily practices:

The cultural aspects of ethnicity are grounded in social relationships and are a conscious part of daily life. These cultural elements—shared ancestry, common customs, language—are used by ethnic group members to give substance to their ethnic identity.

According to Fenton, shared ancestry, customs, and language are essential for forming and preserving an ethnic group. In this context, the Bishnupriya do not share cultural or linguistic traits with the Manipuri/Meetei, who view their culture as distinct.

Manipuri culture is expressed through various festivals, rituals, and dances. Notable festivals include Shajibu Cheiraoba (Manipuri New Year), Ningol Chak-kouba (an annual gathering between

married women and their ancestral families), Lai Haraoba (a festival for God appeasement), and Thabal Chongba (a full-moon festival). The Thabal Chongba festival, which highlights the moon's beauty, is associated with the God Pakhangba, a serpent god of the Manipuri. The Ningol Chak-kouba festival aims to strengthen relationships between married women and their ancestral families.

The Manipuri also follow the Sanamahi religion, with Sanamahi being the supreme god. Every Manipuri household is required to have a shrine dedicated to Sanamahi, who is considered the head of all gods and goddesses.

Manipuri handicrafts are deeply connected to their identity. Traditional clothing, which reflects their history, culture, myths, and beliefs, is commonly worn by Manipuris. Weaving is a central aspect of their social and economic life, serving as both a cultural preservation tool and an essential livelihood activity (Singha 2022).

The Rasa dance, one of India's classical dances, originated in Manipur in the 18th century. Another key cultural event is the Lai Haraoba festival, which is important to the Manipuri as it is the source of many traditional dances. Lai Haraoba is considered the mother of all Manipuri dances, including Thabal Chongba, which originated from this festival. Additionally, the modern Manipuri Rasa dance has adopted several motifs from Lai Haraoba.

The Bishnupriyas also celebrate their own festivals, such as the Rakhal dance (depicting the story of Sri Krishna and his cowherds), Rath Yatra (a chariot festival), and Jhulan Yatra (a religious occasion). Despite these shared aspects of cultural celebration, there are key differences between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities. Raj (2011: 334) asserts that both groups have different ethnic origins, further emphasizing the cultural distinctions between them.

The Physical Appearance of the Manipuri and Bishnupriya

The Manipuri belong to the Mongoloid racial stock, and their physical appearance closely resembles that of Thai and Chinese

nationalities. In contrast, the Bishnupriya share characteristics with the Indo-Aryan racial group. The Bishnupriya are typically darker-skinned (Sinha et al. 2023: 3406). Grierson (1903-1928: 334) notes that the Bishnupriya are descendants of lower Hindu castes, such as the Dhom (one of the castes in India). Grierson's seminal research delved into the identity of the Bishnupriya, highlighting their historical roots. However, in contemporary times, the Bishnupriya have evolved into a more advanced and developed ethnic group.

Manipuri Dance and Identity

Manipuri dance is a significant aspect of Manipuri identity, deeply rooted in the state's origin, history, beliefs, myths, and philosophy. It plays a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of Manipuri cultural identity. One notable connection is between Rabindranath Tagore and Manipuri dance.

In 1919, during his visit to Shillong (the capital of Meghalaya), Rabindranath Tagore had a stopover in Sylhet, where he encountered the Manipuri Rakhal (cowboy) dance in a Bishnupriya area. While Manipuri dance and the Rakhal dance were not exclusive to the Manipuri community, as they were open to all groups, Tagore did not witness the dance in Sylhet in 1919. Instead, he experienced it earlier during a visit to Tripura in 1900, before his time in Sylhet (Sheram 2020). Singha (2014: 7) further explains that during the reign of Radha Kishore Manikya in Tripura, the Manipuri "Vasanta Ras" dance was performed in honor of Tagore, who was captivated by its beauty. Inspired by this experience, Tagore initiated the introduction of Manipuri dance at Santiniketan.

Building on his Tripura visit, Tagore later established a Manipuri dance department at Visva-Bharati University in Shantiniketan, Kolkata. Since then, he has been revered by the Manipuri community, and his efforts have contributed to the broader recognition of Manipuri culture.

Identity Challenges of the Manipuri

The works of Sinha (2010) and Singh (1987) offer valuable insights into the identity challenges faced by the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities. Sinha (2010: 351) argues that Arjuna, a central figure from the Mahabharata, is said to have visited the seacoast of Manipur to admire the scenery of the Mahendra Mountain. However, there is no historical or geographical record of such a mountain existing in Manipur. Similarly, the history of Manipur and academic sources do not corroborate the existence of the Mahendra Mountain, suggesting that this reference is more mythological than factual. Additionally, the term “Kalisha” is not native to Manipur, as Singh (1987: 9) observes. Singh further highlights that a significant population of the Kalisha community resides in the Cachar district of Assam, identifying them as part of the lower caste Bengali communities, traditionally engaged in fishing. Based on these points, Singh concludes that the demands made by the Bishnupriya do not align with the history, culture, customs, or social events of Manipuri people.

Singha (2016:9) asserts that the Bishnupriya have misrepresented history. For example, they claim to be the descendants of Arjuna and the Pandavas from the Mahabharata, as well as the first settlers of Manipur. Such assertions have fueled confusion regarding the true identity and culture of the Manipuri in Bangladesh. However, historical records and scholarly sources do not support these claims. For instance, the Cheitharol Kumbaba (or Cheithalon Kumpapa), the Royal Chronicle of Manipur, which chronicles the reigns of 76 kings from 33 CE to 1955, makes no mention of the Bishnupriya. This absence further undermines their claims and highlights the challenges the Manipuri face in maintaining their distinct cultural identity.

The term “Manipuri” was used by the Bishnupriya community in Bangladesh. Sinha (2010: 347) notes the presence of the “Manipuri Lalitkala Academy” in Kamalgaj, Moulvibazar District, Bangladesh, established by the Ministry of Culture to support the Manipuri community and other ethnic groups. However, the Bishnupriya

have appropriated this academy, representing their own culture under the Manipuri name. Sinha (2010: 399) further observes that the Bishnupriya have created various organizations in Bangladesh using the name “Manipuri.” The Manipuri community argues that it is they, not the Bishnupriya, who should represent Manipuri culture, including its dances and traditions.

A similar issue arises in the educational sector. The Bangladeshi government has introduced ethnic-based education at the primary school level, but the promotion of the Manipuri language has been hindered by the Bishnupriya’s involvement. This situation disproportionately affects the Manipuri/Meetei community, who already face challenges accessing education.

The Manipuri identity is deeply tied to their history, culture, language, folk songs, folktales, and mythology. In contrast, the Bishnupriya community possesses its own distinct cultural practices and an Indo-Aryan linguistic heritage. Sinha et al. (2023: 3411) highlight the linguistic diversity within the Bishnupriya community, further underscoring the cultural and linguistic differences between the two groups. These differences indicate that the Manipuri and Bishnupriya belong to separate ethnic entities. Fenton (1999: 63) explains that ethnic identity is shaped by shared ancestry, customs, and language, which are used by members to give meaning to their ethnic label.

Similarly, Eriksen (2002: 59) argues that a shared origin is essential for the formation of an ethnic identity. History and its interpretation play a crucial role in validating, supporting, and maintaining that identity. Eriksen (2002:60) further asserts: “In order to understand ethnic identity, we must explore what aspects of ethnic classification and categorical belonging resonate with the people involved”.

This research demonstrates that the present-day Manipur has no connection to the Manipur described in the Mahabharata. The current Manipur was only named in the 18th century when its king

adopted Hinduism (Devi 2018:19). Another key point is that the Mahabharata describes Manipur as being by the seaside, yet there is no sea in present-day Manipur. Additionally, there is no historical evidence to support the claim that the Bishnupriya ruled Manipur between 33 CE and 1949. The Mahabharata does not mention the Manipuri state of the Meetei, a claim that has been thoroughly investigated by scholars. For example, Kim and Kim (2008: 9) note that historians widely agree that the Bishnupriya migrated to the northeastern part of India from the western regions, characterized by their Aryan physical features and speaking an Indo-Aryan language.

The term “Kalisha” is believed to be a corruption of “Kalichaiya” (Singh 1987: 21). Singh (1987:21) further argues that the term “Bishnupriya” originated outside of Manipur, asserting:

The Bishnupriyas are socially, culturally, politically and linguistically distinct from the Manipuris. They are not Manipuris nor their language has anything to do with Manipuri. They may either be called Assamese Bishnupriyas or Bengali Bishnupriyas after the name of the state to which they belong. There is no justification on their part to appropriate the name “Manipuri” for use either as a suffix or a prefix to “Bishnupriya”. “Bishnupriya” alone can identify the community and the language too.

Another important point is the socio-economic disparity between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities in Bangladesh. The Bishnupriya community enjoys a stronger socio-economic position and a larger population compared to the Manipuri. On the other hand, the Manipuri community is socially and economically marginalized. Additionally, the Manipuri rarely mobilize to address their issues with the government, as their smaller population and low literacy rates hinder their ability to organize and advocate for their rights. For instance, the Manipuri community does not demand special reserve seats for employment and education in Bangladesh (Haider 2010: 35). The study also finds that the Manipuri community is less organized and connected compared to their Bishnupriya

counterparts. When faced with natural disasters or emergencies, the Manipuri struggle to cope due to the lack of collective organization and financial resources. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Manipuri community was severely affected because they lacked the organizational support and funds to assist financially stressed individuals. In contrast, the Bishnupriya community is highly educated, affluent, and better organized. Traditionally, the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities had a cordial relationship, but the identity issue has strained this bond.

The largest population of Bishnupriya people resides in greater Assam and Tripura in India (Kalita 2013). Unlike in Bangladesh, the Bishnupriya in Assam maintain a strong connection to their true identity. A significant segment of the Assamese Bishnupriya community actively advocates for their identity in Assam (Bishnupuriya Report 2020). Notably, the Bishnupuriya Language and Development Organization (BLDO) asserts that they are “Bishnupuriya,” not Manipuri, and that they originated from the Bishnupur region of West Bengal (Bishnupuriya Language and Development Organization 2017). The Assamese Bishnupriya community states that they neither speak the Manipuri language nor follow Manipuri culture. They are committed to preserving their original “Bishnupriya” or “Bishnupuri” identity in Assam, based on historical facts and evidence. It remains uncertain whether this example will influence the Bishnupriya in Bangladesh. The Bishnupriya in Bangladesh may eventually reclaim their original identity, similar to their Assamese counterparts, where the majority of them live. There are also some Bishnupriya in Manipur who identify as either Bishnupriya or Hindu Manipuri (Sinha 2022-23: 221). However, given the benefits associated with the Manipuri “identity,” this seems unlikely.

There is also inter-ethnic politics surrounding the Manipuri Rasa dance. For instance, the Bishnupriya have adopted the Manipuri Rasa dance to some extent and subsequently claimed that they are also Manipuri because they can perform this dance. In contrast,

Manipuri respondents argue that anyone can learn the Rasa dance, as it is a form of art open to all communities, regardless of race, color, or religion. They further contend that knowing the Rasa dance does not make the Bishnupriya Manipuri, just as learning Korean Taekwondo, Chinese Kung Fu, or Japanese Judo does not make someone Korean, Chinese, or Japanese. As one respondent puts it: “Manipuris are those who call themselves Meiteis and are called Manipuri by others” (Rahman 2019, as cited in Grierson 1904: 20).

Thus, the Bishnupriya’s use of the term “Manipuri,” whether as a prefix or suffix, is motivated by the potential socio-economic and political benefits in Bangladesh, rather than by historical facts, evidence, or records. The conflation of the historical Manipur with the modern state of Manipur in Bangladesh serves the interests of the Bishnupriya community, who misuse the Manipuri identity for their own purposes.

In some cases, researchers have divided the Manipuri community into two or three distinct groups, which has led to misleading information and unfounded claims. However, after thorough investigation, these claims have been proven invalid. The Manipuri ethnic group remains united under a single, common identity, applicable in Bangladesh, Manipur, and other regions of India. Ultimately, this study concludes that “Manipuri” and “Meitei” are synonymous terms, and that the Bishnupriya community’s use of the term “Manipuri” serves primarily to gain socio-economic and political advantages in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the identity challenges faced by the Manipuri community in Bangladesh, emphasizing the differences between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities in linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts. Despite efforts by the Bishnupriya to identify as Manipuri, the research confirms that the two communities belong to distinct ethnic identities. The paper further establishes that the term “Kalichha” was the original name for the Bishnupriya, and

their attempt to reframe their identity as “Manipuri Bishnupriya” or “Bishnupriya Manipuri” is primarily driven by socio-economic factors rather than cultural or historical considerations. This appropriation of the Manipuri identity has led to a sense of threat within the Manipuri community, which is further exacerbated by challenges in introducing Manipuri-language education in Bangladesh. The study underscores the significant role of socio-economic considerations in shaping ethnic identity, often more so than historical, linguistic, or cultural factors.

The research also reveals the socio-economic disparities between the Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities in Bangladesh, with the latter community enjoying better outcomes in health, education, and political organization. The Manipuri community, on the other hand, is disadvantaged, and their ability to organize and make political representations is hindered by a lack of resources and social cohesion. This inequality is compounded by the lack of awareness of the Manipuri community’s identity challenges among the government and relevant cultural bodies. The study suggests that the Manipuri community requires urgent support from the state to address their identity concerns and to rectify the misappropriation of their cultural and linguistic identity.

This study has a few limitations, primarily due to its focus on the identity challenges faced by the Manipuri community in Bangladesh, which may not fully capture the broader regional or international dynamics of the issue. Further research is needed to explore the broader dynamics of identity struggles in these communities, as well as the long-term impact on their socio-economic development and political engagement. Moreover, investigating the role of government policies and institutional support in addressing the identity challenges of minority groups would be valuable in proposing more effective solutions. Further studies could also explore the long-term impact of identity struggles on socio-economic development and political engagement within these communities.

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