

Re-visiting the Meitei Diaspora in Myanmar

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Abstract

Manipur, a north-eastern state of India is a home to diverse ethnic groups and the Meiteis are one of its major ethnic communities. Meiteis are predominantly larger in population of Manipur occupying mostly the valley region of the state. Meiteis also have a rich history and traditions going back centuries old. As a region situated at the northeastern part of India, Manipur shares its international border with Myanmar and the Diaspora community of Manipur is thus visible especially in this border region. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine the socio-cultural environment of the Meitei Diaspora in Myanmar.

Although, an ethnic minority recognized by the Myanmar government, the Meitei Diaspora community, also commonly known as 'Kathe- Paona' have time and again made its presence felt through their unique cultural identity. The Meitei Diaspora has cultural traits enclosed in their every wake of life just as many Diaspora community. Their story of adoption to and assimilation with their host country deserves a well documented narration, something amiss so far. This paper is a beginning to study the conditions of Meitei Diaspora in Myanmar, in relation to their homeland, Manipur (India) and their host country Myanmar. In sustaining their identity as an Indian Diaspora community in Myanmar, their unique historical, cultural and social nature as well as their religion and language play significant roles.

Keywords Meitei Diaspora, Identities, Cultural lifestyle.

Introduction

The Manipuri Brahmins are referred to as 'Paona' and the non-Brahmins are called 'Kate' in Myanmar. Why the Brahmins are known as 'Paona' was for their services as 'Purohit' (priest) at the royal court of Awa kingdom. The "Kathe - Paona", settled in Myanmar are said to be over two centuries old and are naturally assimilating and evolving with the Myanmar society. And as culture is dynamic and ever-changing, their roots and knowledge of their 'home' have been much hampered lingering in the past values of homeland. Some scholars strongly believe that the influence of Hinduism contribute greatly in preserving their identities as evidenced by the Paona (Brahmin) group of Myanmar, considerably following and practicing their beliefs passionately. Their genesis of migration is a commendable historical formation, from wars to trade and commerce, from matrimonial alliances to the disputed and contested region of Kabaw valley and so forth. Robin Cohen in his book *Global Diaspora: An Introduction*, claims that diasporas exhibits certain features: often traumatically, a dispersal from their homeland, alternatively, in search of work or of trade and other colonial ambitions, departing from their homeland with a collective memory about their idealized ancestral home, and living with strong consciousness sustained over a long time leading to a possible distinctive, creative or even enriching life often due to syncretism or assimilation and acculturation with the cultural lifestyle of the tolerant host countries. Consequently, Diaspora involves displacement and the subsequent yearning to return or connect with the people at home. In doing so, the Diaspora community retains a collective memory or vision or myth about their imaginary homeland and the sentiment of belongingness often lead to a distinguishable social form, a mode of cultural production integrated into their host countries in varying degrees. The main objectives of the paper are to revisit the historical episodes that led to mass exodus of the Manipuri Diaspora community and the aftermath conditions of the Diaspora community and their lifestyle and the subsequent cultural assimilation with the host nation. It also attempts to study how the Meitei Diaspora retains their lives and re-imagine their home to preserve their identities and their contribution in Myanmar society. The paper also explores the importance and influence of religion, language and culture in safeguarding the Diaspora identity. Thereby, the paper is a humble presentation of the common characteristics attributed to the Kathe - Paona of Manipur, the cementation of specific social ties distinct to its history and geography, their political orientations and divided loyalties, as well as their attributes which act as force and

source in economic strategies and international alliance between India (Manipur) and Myanmar.

The theory of Diaspora and Manipuri Diaspora

Diaspora is often associated with the “ideas of forced emigration, displacement, social and political marginalization of an individual or a group of refugees”. It is derived from the Greek word “diaspierein”, which means “to scatter”, “the fruitful scattering of seeds”. It is defined particularly of the “settling of scattered colonies of Jews outside ancient Palestine after the Babylonian exile”. Through the lens of Diaspora, historians have applied the term conveniently to the Armenian Diaspora in the 6th century A.D of trade and commerce, the African migration due to slave trade, the Irish migration due to famine and so on. The Greek terminology is thus, used widely despite diverse historical instances which carries diverse definitions, and is said to connote “all expression covering sin, scattering, emigration and possibilities of repentance and return”(Cohen, page21). The conception of the term ‘Diaspora’ is still heavily debated. The contemporary issues of migration due to globalization or trans-nationalism for economic engagements have forced the researchers to re-examine and rethink the assumptions and ideas in categorizing a group as Diaspora. The parameters to invoke a diasporic identity involves voluntary or forced migration, association with symbolically designated space of ‘home’, or a place of the ‘origin’, and of cultural identity. In a diasporic dialogue, such postmodern connotations are used to loosely linked and cover diverse definitions of migrations. The area of Diaspora has also become a recent significant space for the post-colonial studies as the aftermath of colonialism involves trans-nationalism of voluntary or forced migration of the colonizer and the colonized alike. James Clifford in his article *Diasporas* feels that the current term Diaspora entails the Jewish diasporic experience and many a times does not include or work for other diasporic groups. He proposes the concepts of ‘nation-state’, of ‘borders’, of ‘indigenous’ people to define Diaspora. He writes, “the term Diaspora is a signifier, not simply of trans-nationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacements” (Clifford, page308). Dr. Ksh. Premchandra Singh also highlights the important to discuss Diaspora from the context of Manipur. Meitei Diaspora is thus to be termed as transnational or border crossing. Meitei’s settled in Myanmar and Bangladesh are called Meitei Diaspora very conveniently but for the Meitei’s in Assam,

Tripura and scattered in other parts of India, to call them Diaspora bear both reasoning and uncertainties. As the Meiteis scattered around are now under the same constitution of India, the question arises with regard to Meitei Diaspora. He argues that there has to be a Manipuri equivalent word for Diaspora such as “Mapal Manipur” and he feels that the idea of India is just 73yrs of age whereas the kingdom of Manipur expands centuries old and it is high time to depart from Western paradigm in viewing Diaspora as ‘trans-national’ or border-crossing, (18th Feb. 2020, International Workshop, Manipur University).Records again prove that Meitei Diaspora or Manipuri Diaspora began during past periods of Manipuri Kingdom, Ahom Kingdom and Tripura Kingdom. The image of Diaspora is innumerable and it is time to introspect into the nature of Manipuri Diaspora and bring forth the condition of Diaspora community in Manipur to better understand the current socio-political and cultural climate.

Many scholars and the common masses of Manipur strongly believe that the unfortunate historical event of Seven Years Devastation(1819-1826) mark the beginning of Meitei Diaspora in Myanmar, as Mutua Bahadur claims, “*Meitei sing asi awa leibakta khuta yairi lengduna pukhi*” (18th Feb. 2020 International Workshop, Manipur University). Angelle Wolleng in his thesis, *Manipuri Diaspora in Myanmar* (2010), writes that, “The Meiteis in Myanmar are the off-springs of the war victims deported to Burma as a consequence of the political crisis between the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur and Burma (now Myanmar)”. Mutua Bahadur refutes such popular claims as he felt that the settlement of Meiteis in Myanmar has many historical intricacies that go beyond warfare engagements. He explains that the visibility of Diaspora community got more distinct from the event of Seven Years Devastation, but to see them solely as political victims of such warfare is baseless. There are many more factors and instances that led to mass exodus of Meitei to Myanmar, through matrimonial alliance or even through diplomatic political relationships. He proposes in his article, *Manipuri Diaspora in Myanmar: Past and Present* that Meitei began to settle in Myanmar in the 11th century during the Bagan period. During the reign of King Bayiuaung (1551-81) of the Taungoo period, there are records of present day Polo (originated from Manipur) being played and there are instances where many Meitei horsemen or Kate horsemen served under this king. The Meitei Diaspora in Myanmar shares a long history with the kingdoms of Myanmar, of Burmese and Shans since the conquest of Kabaw valley in 1470 A.D. There were constant contact between Manipur and Burma, even leading to matrimonial alliances. In 1702, the king of Toongao dyanasty of Awa (Burmese kingdom)

requested the hand of a Manipuri princess, and Charairongba of Manipur gave his daughter Chakpa Makhao Ngambi in marriage. The princess was ill-treated which in turn created diplomatic and military tensions among the two kingdoms. During the reign of king Gharibniwaz (also known as Meidingu Pamheiba, 1690-1751), repeated invasions of Burma were recorded thereafter. Gangmumei Kamei in *History of Manipur: Pre-colonial Period* (2015) writes about the campaigns in Kabaw Valley which was recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba* where Garibniwaz conducted seven military expeditions in 1717, 1718, 1720, 1722, 1737, 1748 in Samjok. In 1735, Garibniwaz made a successful large scale invasion beyond the Chindwin, attacking Myedoo in Shwebo province of Burma, followed by the most successful expedition against king Mahadhamma Yana Dipati of Awa kingdom, conquering Sagaing. According to Ningthourol Lambuba, a Manipuri chronicle, Garibniwaz accepted the request of Burmese king asking the hand of his daughter, Princess Satyamala. And, this marriage brought a peaceful relationship between the two kingdoms for about a decade. In 1752, Alaungpaya took over the Toungoo dynasty and founded a new dynasty, Konbaung dynasty (1752-1886) which greatly changed the political situation of Burma as well as its relation with Manipur. In 1758, King Alaungpaya made an invasion in Manipur which marks the beginning of the repeated Burmese invasion in the 18th and early 19th century. In 1764, king Hsinbysin (1760-73) invaded Kabaw valley and defeated the Manipuri forces. The Seven Years Devastation (1819-26) also took place in such manner which brought a reign of terror. Kamei proposes that, “The Burmese invasion of Manipur was a part of a greater plan of conquest of North East India and even Bengal. The Burmese conquest of Manipur in 1819 was different in intention and character from their earlier invasions” (Kamei, page 337). The oppressions and cruelties were prevalent as recorded in Manipuri history. The kingdom of Manipur was almost depopulated with handful sections of people being fled to Cachar accompanying King Marjit Singh, and the remaining left in fear and many were taken as captives to Burma leaving Manipur as an empty and deserted kingdom. The horror stories, of genocide and tortures that took place at the hand of the Burmese are still recounted to this day. The Seven Years Devastation also known as ‘Chahi Taret Khuntakpa’ is a major historical event that changes the demographic as well as social structure of both Manipur and Myanmar. The unfortunate event caused mass scale migration of Meitei in Myanmar, Bangladesh and in many states of India. Prior to this, there were many trade routes and transaction and also pilgrimage to these states which also became one of the many reasons of migration. Nevertheless, *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* was a turning point in history causing a mass exodus of the Meitei population in Manipur.

It cannot be denied that the Seven Years Devastation had left a huge impact on both sides. Many research scholars strongly believe as evident from the statistics that the Meiteis in Sagaing and Mandalay provinces are the political victims of the Manipuri Burmese warfare and are descendants of the captives. In his article *Mandalay see a ray of hope in Modi*, Oinam Sunil writes that according to Shyambihari Anoubam aged 38 who runs a pharmacy in Sagaing province, majority of Meitei in Myanmar are weavers and hold petty business and few works for the government. Thus, many are not financially sound and are eager to receive help from Manipur and its international policies under the current ruling, Modi government. He further examines, “Manipuri’s king has had matrimonial ties with the Awa royal family, but the majority of Manipuris in Mandalay and Sagaing provinces are the descendants of those who were taken from Manipur as forced labourers during the Burmese war from 1812-1825” (Oinam, *Times of India*, 2015).

The Conditions of Kathe - Paona in Myanmar Society :

Manipur lies geographically at the international borders linking the routes of South Asia and South-East Asia, leading since ancient days to the intercourse of trade and commerce. Through land routes and mountain ranges, through the hills of Manipur the eastern India and upper Burma maintains trade in present days and in ancient times the trading expands from Manipuri kingdom to neighboring kingdoms of Assam, Tripura and to Burma (now Myanmar). In 15th century, the conquest of Kabaw Valley by King Kiyamba (1467-1508) led to regular contacts and trade as well as social relationships with the Shans and Burmese. There happened to be no specific boundary between Manipur and Burma and people moved freely from one region to another region, in search of their needs and necessities. The Kathe-Paona community mainly settled in and around Mandalay which used to be the trade centre and capital of Myanmar, now shifted to Yangon. The trade consisted of cotton, silk clothes, embroidered scarves, wax ivory, elephants, ponies etc. The elephant trade was a royal monopoly and the ponies from Manipur were in great demand, to boost the strength of Burmese cavaliers. In small or large groups, trade and commerce is another factor of migration from one kingdom to another. Many of the Kathe - Paona as mentioned above, thus remains to this day as traders or weavers and have successfully maintained their pristine state in various ways.

In the contemporary world, after colonialism the Myanmar society just like every colonized nation undergo changes with the introduction of modern education, advanced scientific technology and gradual economic transitions. The Kathe - Paona also began to adapt to the changes and it has become difficult to differentiate between them and the Myanmarese. They have same dressings, food and lifestyle and the oppressive military regime of Myanmar could be one causative factor for the cultural assimilation. Moreover, the division of Kathe and Paona and their divergent standards of living, have also hampered the solidarity of being Meitei in an alien land. The Paonas enjoyed an honorable social status and to this day led a higher living status. The Paonas took the privilege of British Colonial period and have secured high ranking jobs and government services while the Kathes majorly stick to their age old professions like weaving, blacksmith, pottery, agriculture etc. The practices of caste system and untouchability push many Meiteis to turn to Buddhism. Many researchers and activists who have visited Myanmar claim that the Meiteis in Myanmar are all Brahmin community and hardly there are Meiteis who are not themselves Brahmins. According to the findings of Mutua Bahadur, the Meitei yumnak (surname) as recorded in Awa leibak (kingdom) are around the numbers of 55 (fifty-five). He explains that it is true when people say if you visit Mandalay, you will encounter that the Burmese Meitei are all Bamons. However, there are two types of Bamons in Burma: one who practices the system according to the school of Hindu-Meitei texts and the other kind are the Bamons validated by the Kings of Awa and given the legality to practice their belief. There are differences because the *yumnaks* of Manipuri Meiteis such as Pukhrabam, Takhellabam, Awangtabam, Nongsatabam which are not brahmins in Manipur are recognized or placed as Bamons for the Awas. However, in 1917 in Mandalay, Brahmins from Manipur went to Meitei localities like 'Ningthem Porohit Khul' and bring in the practices of 'Amang – Asoi' (Caste system). And the Meiteis begin to convert into Buddhist slowly. The most peculiar characteristics of the Awa Bamons are their way of worshipping deities. 'Mangsatabam Yumnak' will worship 'Jaganath' and 'Yumtabam' will worship 'Jiridari'. And in such a way each yumnak will worship deities in accordance to their beliefs (18th Feb. 2020, International Workshop, Manipur University).

The Paonas played major role in the society of the Burmese monarchy especially in the court circles as they served under the king as priest, astrologers, architects, etc. In Burma, Poanas have very influential role in the sustenance of social traditions and religious customs. The

Brahmins who wore the salve thread of nine strings only have the privilege to work for consecration and coronation ceremonies of Burmese monarchs. The king has high regards for the eight Paonas and the coronation for crown prince was only observed by them. Even, in military expeditions, the Paonas performed rituals to ensure safety and victory of the Burmese armies. The Paonas were also successful as astrologers and even had major contribution in the field of literature, medicine and diplomacy. After the British colonialism and with the fall of Burmese monarchy, the Paonas although reduced to joblessness seek multifarious occupations and have earned their livelihood as physicians, teachers and astrologers. The contributions of Paonas, rather the influence of Hinduism have made the Diaspora community sustain their cultural identity. The Burmese monarchy also assigned tasks to the Meitei war captives according to their expertise such as archers, horsemen, blacksmith, physicians etc. Many women also accompanied Manipuri princess who was married to Burmese king and were very skilled weavers. The women, even in present days in Amarapura, Sagaing and Innwa provinces still continue their skill of weaving to create livelihood. The “Achiek phanek” is one of the national clothe of Myanmar, and it is woven manually by Meitei women. Manipuri captives who were skilled in horse riding, artillery and use of arms were very much sought after for their expertise and were regarded as far better horsemen than the Burmese and were used in military expeditions. With their professional expertise, they made a larger contribution to the stability of Burmese Monarchy. The descendants followed the professions even in present days to sustain their lifestyle.

The role of Language, Religion and Culture in Safeguarding Diaspora Identity :

Myanmar, just like Manipur is a land inhabited by diverse ethnic communities. The Burmese comprises of 68% of the population, and the remaining comprises of 135 other ethnic groups recognized by the Government of Myanmar, as Burma officially became the ‘Union of Myanmar’ in 1989. Despite the centuries long residence in Myanmar, the Meiteis still maintain their distinct identity and are quite successful in doing so because of their adherence to the ‘home’ language, religion and culture.

Thongam Polash, a Bangladeshi Meitei, in his paper *Role of Language & Religion in sustenance of Diaspora Culture*, presented in the workshop, explains that on November 17, 1999, UNESCO declared 21st February as International Mother Language Day. On 21st February, 1752, an event occurred regarding language where police personnel brutally committed mass shooting. In 1948, the West Pakistan announced Urdu as the National Language and the subsequent use of force to adopt the Urdu language in East Pakistan sparked protest. The protest got out of control and ended with numerous deaths. The significance of 21st February, *Amor Ekushey* that led to the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 which positions the importance of language (18th Feb. 2020, International Workshop, Manipur University). Such is the importance of language in human civilization, a language is a carrier of culture and the Bangladeshi Meiteis and Myanmarese Meiteis have successfully retain their identity in terms of language to this present day.

The traditional festival of *Lai Haraoba* is known as “rejoicing of the gods”. *Lai Haraoba* is a traditional festival of the pre-Hindu ancient animistic beliefs of the Meiteis. The festival involves rituals and dances of Meitei’s mythology and folklore and is celebrated to evoke pleasures and satisfaction of the deities thereby blessing the humankind with abundant crops and fruitful lives, with happiness and prosperity. In a place called Yeechi Pao of Gaave near Amarapura, beside the *Ningthe* river bank, the Manipuri Diaspora to this day celebrates *Lai Haraoba* festival. The place was home to many deported and migrant KATHES, however no KATHES can be found in the place in present the day for they have converted themselves to Burmese. They are now followers of Buddhism and are citizens of Myanmar. They have lost touch with the Meitei language but interesting there are small huts of bamboo built for ‘Ema Leimarel Sidabi’ and ‘Ema leimarel Sidaba’ also called ‘Tousee’ and ‘Tounsee’ in Burmese and are the deities of Meitei Community i.e. Sanamahi and Pakhangba. On special occasions, people still worship the old deities. They also preserve swords, utensils and old materials used in *Lai Haraoba* which are centuries old and brought from Manipur. Every year, KATHES from various parts of Myanmar and even the Burmanised KATHES flock to Yeechi Pao to celebrate *Lai Haraoba*. The celebration took place successfully involving a team of Amaibi (Priestess), Amaiba (Priest) and Pena Khongba (one who plays the one-stringed fiddle) and, although Burmese attire were used instead of Manipuri traditional koyet, pheijom and phanek, the chandon mark adorned on their forehead gives out the vibe of typical Manipuri.

Almost every household of Paona family owns temple of Hindu deities. However, all the mandops in Myanmar are surrounded by iron grilles unlike in Manipur, where there is open mandop. The home of the Myanmarese Meiteis also tries to conform to the style of Manipuri 'Yumjao', especially in the case of Paona. It is evident when one enters the 'Bahmon Leikai' of Mandalay with the houses facing east and the sacred 'Tulsi' plant in the middle of spacious courtyard.

Mutua Bahadur proposes that the Meitei language is still prevalent among the Burmese Meitei. He feels that if we come across Burmese Meiteis while travelling Mandalay who cannot speak Meitei language fluently it does not mean that they do not understand the language. Just as we travel for long miles and our legs become numb but that does not mean that we cannot walk. The Burmese Meiteis can certainly speak the language although it takes time. They are familiar with the language even though they do not use it frequently due to their cultural climate. He opines that the Manipuri Meitei should help their kith and kin and it is high time to bring into public eye the need to safeguard the identity of the Meitei Diaspora community. Fortunately, a project entitled "Development Perspective of Manipuri Culture (Dance) and Diaspora Relations under the Aesthetic Influence of Hinduism" under the aegis of UGC-STRIDE Component-I is implemented by Manipur University for a duration of three years. Similarly, many initiatives have been taken up by the Manipur and India government to safeguard the Diaspora community in Myanmar as well as in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The beginning and history of Meitei settlement in Myanmar is thus replete with instances of political, diplomatic and matrimonial alliances. The war captives, political victims as well as voluntarily migrated Meiteis were mostly skilled in many arts and the Burmese monarchy's preference of Meitei Brahmins in the royal court and Kate-horsemen in expeditions, have all contributed to the betterment of Burmese society. With the nomenclature of 'Kathe - Paona' given to the Meitei community in Myanmar, they are now one of the ethnic communities of Myanmar. Although, in medieval period and in modern period because of military Junta in Burma the connections and communications have much been hampered, in

the 21st century Meiteis in Manipur and Meiteis in Myanmar have the ability and the required infrastructure and political alliance to communicate. The Myanmar Meiteis are advancing their hope to safeguard their roots, their collective memory of home. Khelen Thockchom in his article, *Myanmar Meiteis in search of roots*, also talks about the many Myanmar Meitei who are successful in their profession are striving to preserve their roots in their host country. He laments their journey as fighting a losing battle, however he also mentions that there's a flicker of hope as he records the initiative of the Indo-Myanmar Fraternal Alliance in their 20-day trip to Myanmar from June 7, 2008 with an aim to restore old ties between Myanmar Meiteis and Manipuri Meiteis (Thockchom, Telegraph India, 2008).

Indeed, there's a ray of hope in reviving the Meitei culture among the Meiteis in Myanmar. The study of diaspora with relation to Manipuri diaspora is very much relevant and significant in the 21st century where globalization happens to be the major event resulting people to move conveniently or inconveniently across the globe. Humans as social animals need culture, language and religion to retain the identity of their own, and it is even more significant in the post-modern fragmented society.

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