

MANIPURI DIASPORA IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN INDIA AND VARIOUS COUNTRIES

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Abstract :

There was a time when 2/3 population of Manipur (India) underwent mass exodus, leaving the entire valley as they became refugees to the west (mostly Cachar) Assam, to Tripura, Bangladesh and other uninhabited areas; and as war captives for Burmese and also settled in the villages of the Myanmar. In the early 19th century, at the hand of the Burmese, Manipur suffered Seven Years Devastation (Chahi Taret Khuntakpa) (1819-1826). In 1826, at least as many as 500 Manipur levy militias themselves mostly Manipuris who earlier left Manipur throne, marched onto retrieve Burmese occupied Manipur and the much vexed Kabaw valley. Manipur's history thus revolves around interactions, alliances and warfare with other kingdoms, since time immemorial. Manipuris began to settle in many states of India and other countries, and Seven Years Devastation is one of the significant factors apart from political, matrimonial, diplomatic alliances which led to such migration. Manipuri Diaspora in 21st century occupies a relevant position in the study of post-colonial nation-states of both India (Manipur) and other neighboring countries. To maintain the alliance between India and other countries, it is also wise to understand the conditions of Indian Diaspora. James Clifford in his article *Diaspora* states that "the term Diaspora is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggle to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical context of displacement." (Clifford, Page308). The paper, thus attempts to explore the certain characteristics associated with Manipuri Diaspora, which in turn will uncover the past, present and future scope for developing good relations.

Keywords : Cultural lifestyle, Diaspora identity, Matrimonial alliances

Objectives :

1. To look into the Diaspora community of Manipur settled in India and other countries.
2. To explore the historical events that led to the displacement of Meitei community.
3. To bring in the ways how Diaspora community asserts their identity in an alien land.
4. To present an overview of the cultural lifestyle of the Diaspora community; unique and distinct in its own ways.
5. To present the contemporary scenario of Meitei Diaspora and the initiatives of related authorities to safeguard their cultural identity.

Introduction :

Diaspora means the dispersion of the Jews among the Gentiles in 8-6th century B.C. The general meaning of the Diaspora is the dispersion or spread of any people from their original place. Diaspora also denotes anyone removed from native surrounding for security and self-satisfaction. Manipuri Diaspora means those Manipuris who are settled outside of Manipur. In the book, *The Other Manipur*, volume 11, there are definitions about the 'Manipuri Diaspora' i.e. the term 'Manipuri Diaspora is a misnomer, if not a contradiction, quite unlike the Jew Diaspora (of the pre-Christ era) who left Jerusalem two millennia or so ago and settled throughout various parts of the world but mainly Europe, now seeking to resettle (and reestablish) their mythical original home nation.

The cultural identity represents the way how certain community conforms and evolves throughout the history. Manipuris settled outside Manipur entails certain characteristics dependent on a collective memory of the homeland. The priceless legacy of one's forefathers' culture passed down through generations is ingrained in the hearts of people. For the Meitei Diaspora, this seems to be all the more evident, with their life-styles where irrespective of their place of settlement they try as much as they can to retain the age-old culture and tradition of their ancestral homeland. The paper focuses on the historical episodes that led to the dispersion of Meitei community, particularly in Assam, Tripura,

Myanmar and Bangladesh and the contemporary lifestyle of the Meitei Diaspora community bringing in an immediate need to safeguard their identity in their host countries.

Manipuri Diaspora in Myanmar :

Many people of Manipur were settled in Myanmar mainly in the Mandalay near the bank of Ningthi River. Most of the people of Manipur believed that Manipuri were settled in Myanmar during the time of Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826). In N.Kunjamohan Singh's *Manipuri Diaspora in Myanmar*, Dr.Khin Lin of Myanmar claims that Manipuri first settled in Myanmar during the early part of the 11th century A.D. which is clearly written in the chronicles of Burma (The Other Manipur, page2447). In an international workshop about "Importance of Language and Religion in Safeguarding Cultural Diaspora", organized by Department of Dance and Music, Manipur University, Mutua Bahadur stated in his paper *Present Scenario of Manipuri Diaspora Relation* that we came across a common belief which is not in accordance with facts that Meiteis began to settle in Burma largely during the Seven Years Devastation. But in the Burma's ancient books and the royal chronicles written in Burmese Script, the Meiteis came and settled in the 13th century in Awa Kingdom. Manipuri princess, who were married off to the Burmese kings became a force to forge close alliance and friendships among these two kingdoms. Meities were known as Paonas by the Burmese where they are Hindu Brahmins. Subsequently, in various parts of Myanmar, the Paonas (Meiteis) migrated and settled down. Mutua Bahadur also mentioned that Burmese called the Meites as Kate. The word Kathe is derived from the Thai word "Kathe" which means broken ties. Meiteis adopt the Burmese pronunciation and in present days leads to 'Kate', they are the Meiteis of the Myanmar (18th Feb. 2020, Internal Workshop, Manipur University).

The Meiteis of Myanmar still celebrate the annual and ritualistic festival of Manipur in Myanmar such as Cheiraoba (Sajibu month), Rath Jatra (Ingel), Jhulon (in Thawan month), Kartik Puja (month-long prayer in penance during Hiyangei) with Raas Lila, Lai-Haraoba etc. Not only these, Meiteis of Myanmar also practice the old Meitei religious ceremonies such as Nahutpa, Lugun thangka etc. The Paonas used to frequent Manipuri valley to learn old Meitei scriptures and rituals straight from the arch preceptors. They would not only speak Manipuri (written in Bengali script) at homes but even prefer to import books from Manipur. Many scholars noted that the Kathes divided themselves up into three groups: Kathe Buddhists, Kathe Hindus and Kathe Muslims having characteristics of their own, mostly being experts in silk weaving, pony training, cavalry, indigenous medicine and astrology. The Manipuris of Myanmar also worshipped the Manipuri deities such as Panthoibi.

Meiteis in Myanmar do not follow the Yek-Salai (clan system) of Manipur, but strictly practice the Gotra system of Hinduism. Therefore, the inter-marriages among the castes are prohibited and the caste system is followed very vigorously. The advantages of following the caste system are that the Meitei community rarely mingles with other communities of Myanmar which led to the possible thriving and preservation of their unique cultural identity and lifestyle. However, the flipside of such practice is that there's disunion among the different caste and thus, most of the Kathes converted to Buddhism due to the practice of untouchability. Consequently, many of the Kathes and their cultural lifestyle have also become almost undistinguishable from other Myanmar people. There are many bachelors and maidens of marriageable age being left out because of caste system and thus continue to live incompatibly as singles without life partners. Such orthodox tradition of Hinduism helped them to maintain their cultural lifestyle and identity, in successful separation from the majoritarian Myanmar tradition but at the same time resulting into division amongst and left disunited in their host country. Even in 21st century, the Meiteis are following the caste-system very closely that many activists, scholars and NGOs fear that this might be the cause of the declining rate of Meitei population. Up until now, many awareness programs and session are held to allow inter-marriages for good relations amongst the Meitei community, however such initiatives are in vain. In a meet and talk with Mutua Bahadur, he states that during his research in Myanmar, he has discovered that many Meiteis who were forced to convert into Vaishnavism during the reign of King Garibniwaz(1709-1754) fled to Myanmar and lived as "Mirot Oina" (to live incognito). Sadly, when he traces their roots, they have become fully integrated into the Myanmar society and they only know that their homeland is 'Manipur', other than that there is no Meitei identity affiliated to their cultural lifestyle. The condition is same with the Bisnupuriya community in Manipur, they have also

become fully integrated into Meitei society and have become almost undistinguishable from the Meiteis.

Manipuri Diaspora at Tripura and Assam :

Tripura and Manipur before assuming their status as among the Northeastern Indian states, were independent kingdoms with rich and glorious histories. Throughout the historical period of monarchies, there were warfare, political tensions and even matrimonial and political alliances to forge cordial relations between the kingdoms. Ksh. Premchand Singh in an international workshop propounded the limitation of the word “Diaspora” in the context of Manipur. He states that the word Diaspora is mainly associated with trans-nationalism or border-crossing and since Manipur, Assam and Tripura are now consolidated under the Union of India, there has to be a new term such as “Mapal Manipur” (Outside of Manipur) and the homeland or the center as “Manung Manipur” (Inside of Manipur), considering the limitations of the word “Diaspora” (International Workshop 18th Feb. 2020). Many scholars also proposes that the idea of India is only 73yrs of age and the histories of the independent kingdoms of India including Assam, Tripura and Manipur are centuries old. So, it is safe to call the Meitei Population in Assam, Tripura and other parts of India as Diaspora community.

The Meitei Diaspora in Tripura has rich history and unique cultural identity. The Manipuri princesses married to Tripura kingdom also have major contribution in Tripuri Society. Many Manipuris were settled in different places of Tripura and Assam. From the ancient times, Tripura had relations with Manipur. Manipuri call the Tripuri as ‘Takhel’ and the Tripuri call the Manipuri as ‘Mekhli’. From the earliest period, Manipuri were settled in the Tripura. It is clearly shown in the matrimonial relations between these two kingdoms, as found in Rajmala- a Chronicle of Tripura kings. Taidakkhin (the 43rd king of Tripura) married a Manipuri princess. The real turning point for the Manipuri Diaspora came after the terror historical period of the 1819-1826(Seven Years Devastation) , when most population of Manipur seek refugee to the neighboring kingdoms. Among the total Cachar population of 85,522, 12% i.e. 10,723 are Manipuri as recorded in the 1851 census report. In 1931, the total population of the Silchar, Halakandi and North Cachar had 5,70,531 and among this, 55,550 were Meiteis. Before and after the Seven Years Devastation Manipuris migrated to Brahmaputra region of the Cachar. During the time of Ahom kings, many Manipuris were settled in the Sibsagar district. There were four Manipuri villages and after the Seven Years Devastation, many more Manipuris migrated to such strategic places such as Hojai, Jamunamukh etc. Dr.Ksh.Premchand also stated that “From 1760s, Bhagyachandra Maharaj along with numbers of soldiers started to settle in Tekhao” (18th Feb, International Workshop, Manipur University).

Manipuris have started to settle in Tripura since 1789 A.D officially, from that year the pious Manipur king, Bhagyachandra, on his pilgrimage came to Tripura along with his daughter Harisheshwori and got her married to Rajdhar Marikya (1785-1805), the then king of Tripura and settled her retinue of helpers and attendants on a hillock to the southeast of Putratan(old) Agartala, since known as Mekhlipura. Even the temple and mandap were established for the princess’ Istadev, “Radhamadhav” that were brought by her from Manipur and installed it at Radhanagar of present capital Agartala. Ras Lila is organized to this day every year in Raj-Purnima at Shri Shri Radhamandav temple. Since, over 214years as many as 13 Meitei princesses have come over here in wedlock to the Tripura royalty.

Meiteis of Tripura well preserve their culture, art, dance and music and the descendants even speak Manipuri in Tripura palace. They perform the traditional festival of Lai-Haraoba every year. They worship the god of Meiteis. Rishiraj Sinha in his article, *History of Manipuri Queens in Tripura and their contribution towards development of state* proposes that “The Manipuri queens enriched the royal palace with their religion and culture besides receiving royal patronage to preserve and spread their culture and religion” (Sinha, Page5). He claims that Maharani Tulsibati who got married to Tripura king will be remembered forever for creating women education and giving them strength, freedom and dignity through vocational training. Further, he writes that Maharani Tulsibati also composed poems and songs and her songs of Holi festival enjoyed popularity during her days. In Tripura palace, to flourish Manipuri culture mandap and temple with Manipuri gods were constructed and Manipuri dance, festivals and other performing arts are observed with utmost care. The queens in different parts of Tripura constructed many temples and ‘Pakhangba’

temple near Motor Stand, Agartala was such construction by Maharani Rajeshwari. At Abhoynagar, Agartala, Maharani Tulsibati also erected 'Puthiba' temple. Thus, Manipuri queens play significant role in influencing and enriching the cultural atmosphere in Tripura in royal palace. In such a way, Raas Leela dance, Manipuri kirtan and other art forms were introduced in royal palace where the princesses performed such performing arts in the palace. Manipuri dance, as one of the renowned classical dance of India also gain acceptance when Rabindranath Tagore visited Tripura palace where Manipuri dances were performed at Malancha Niwas, Agartala. Impressed with the art form, Tagore introduced Manipuri dance in Santiniketan requesting the king to send a dance teacher to teach Manipuri dance. Rajkumar Buddhimanta Singh was sent accordingly by the King to Santiniketan. Thus, Manipuri culture helped in bringing out a unique characteristic of Tripuri kingdom.

The last king of Tripura, King Bir Bikram Manikya (1929) set up an organization for Tripuri Meitei regarding the rule for administration. He selected nine persons to form this organization. Rajkumar Budhimanta as sabhapati (chairman) and Sanasam Kaminikumar as general secretary. The organization was in the position to make rules about the Manipuri people who were settled in Tripura. In 1945, the Manipuris in Tripura began to set up an organization to promote the language and custom of Manipur. They tried to publish Manipuri books, newspaper, articles etc. After constant efforts, in 1947, they successfully published a journal known as Khongjel. The editor of this article was Rajkumar Madhabajit. In 1998, the Government of Tripura ordered to take classes of Manipuri subject in 21 schools. There is also separate constitution, Demabali made only for the Tripuri Meiteis.

In olden days, the Meiteis called the Ahom kingdom as "Tekhao Leipak". The Meiteis in Assam and their history of migration and settlement are mired with historical, political, matrimonial alliance as well as warfare between the two kingdoms. The Meiteis are settled mainly in Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley. Manipuri King Bhagyachandra (1764-1798) also fled to Cachar when his uncle Moirang Ningthou Khelei Nongnang Telheiba tried to execute him for the throne with the help of Awas (Burmese). Rajashree Bhagyachandra took shelter under the king of Tekhao Swagadev Rajeshwor Singh. Khelei Nongnang Telheiba sent a message to the king of Tekhao asking to kill Maharaj Bhagyachandra, and they had planned to kill him at the hand of a wild elephant. At that time, Maharaj Bhagyachandra had taken Dikhya from Sri Rup Parmanda and he became the real bahkta of Lord Krishna. Lord Krishna consoled him in his dream that he will successfully conquer the hearts of Tekhao people. Next day, the wild elephant for some reason lean down in front of Bhagyachandra. For this act, he was called King Jai Singh by the Ahoms. For successfully capturing of the wild elephant, the king and people of Tekhao believed that Bhagyachandra was the son of God. With the help of Tekhao's king, Bhagyachandra returned to Manipur and he stayed at Langthabal palace as a king of Manipur. As a promise to Lord Krishna, Bhagyachandra searched for the jack fruit tree in Kaina Ching as told by Krishna in his dream and built Sri Krishna's idol and placed at the Anantasai as an idol of Shri Shri Bhijaygovinda in 1779. The Abhishek of the idol was celebrated with the introduction of Raas Leela, one of the classical dances of India. Thus, the genesis of the migration can be traced centuries back but Seven Years Devastation and repeated invasions by Awas of Myanmar are the main causative factors of the mass exodus of Meiteis in Assam. The Manipuri princes Chaurajit Singh, Marjit Singh and Gambir Singh ruled Kachar (Cachar, Assam) during these seven years after successfully driving out the then Kachari King, King Govinda Chandra who subsequently fled to Sylhet. Such political domination in Assam helped them in retaining their homeland cultural identity and lifestyle. Meiteis in Assam and Tripura follow the same vertical structure of social class, ruled by King on top and no caste and class hierarchy among individuals just as in Manipur.

In Assam, since 1930s *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* movement started amongst the Meitei population to reassert and retrieve the old customary practices and faith of their ancestors. In an article published on March 5, 2020 in The Hill Times, Vas INC writes "Considering the significant population of Manipuri Diaspora in Assam, Honourable Manipur Chief Minister N.Biren Singh said that he had already spoken to his Assam counterpart Honourable Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal for the inclusion of Manipuri language to the list of subjects in the examinations conducted by Assam Public Service Commission (APSC)" (Hill Times, 2020). At the function of the World Meitei

Convention 2020, held at Lamargram village in Cachar District of Assam, Manipur Chief Minister (N. Biren Singh) in his inaugural speech appreciated the spirits of Manipuri Diaspora in protecting and preserving their cultural identity and assured that Manipuri government would address the grievances and problems faced by the Diaspora community to the Assam government. Honourable Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh laments the mass exodus of Meitei community to various parts of the states and in other countries that had taken place in the past due to various reasons. Also, in an article, "Tripura CM designate assures help to Manipuri settlers", Honourable Tripura Chief Minister, Biplab Kumar Deb assures that "Tripura has had special cordial relations with Manipur. After all there were three queens from Manipur who were married to Tripura prince. The government shall pay special attention to the needs of Manipuris in the state" (Business Standard, 2018). Thus, there are many instances and initiatives taken up by the government authorities to ensure the safeguarding of cultural Diaspora of Manipuris migrated in different states of India and other countries.

Manipuri Diaspora in Bangladesh :

Most Manipuri in Bangladesh are settled in Dhaka, Mymensingh and comilla. The Manipuri who were settled in Dhaka (the present capital of Bangladesh) is itself mired with controversy: one side claiming that in 1661 some Manipuris taken as war captives were settled in Dhaka. The areas where Manipuri settled are known as 'Manipuei Para'. And another thing is that there are documentary evidences of particular Oinam families having first settled in Bangladesh in 1695.

In Cheitharol Kumbaba, king Devendra was expelled by king Chandrakirti in 1850 after the former was king of Manipur for barely three months and exiled to Dhaka. He was popularly known as Dhaka Taba in Dhaka. He died in Dhaka. In this place many temples, homes etc. were developed and many princes, Brahmins also came here and began to settle there. Now, at the heart of Dhaka, the place stood as Manipuri Para. During 1920 to 1940s the numbers of Manipuri settled in Manipuri Para have been reduced significantly. Some of them migrated to Tripura and others migrated to Sylhet of Bangladesh because of the communal riot that took place between the Hindu and Muslims in the pre-partition days. In the early 18th century many Manipuris began to settle in Dacca (Dhaka), Mymensingh and Comilla. Now, at Tejgao area near Dhaka, there is no longer any Manipuri in Manipuri Para. Mutua Bahadur cited of Manipuri Diaspora that in Sylhet, however there are 13-15 villages of Meiteis (18th feb. 2020, International Workshop, Manipur University).

Mutua Bahadur also cited about Manipuri Diaspora in Bangladesh in the international workshop held in Manipuri University about the importance of language and religion in Bangladesh that Bangladeshi Meiteis do not try to show the properties of being Meitei. There are many historical places in Bangladesh and temples but they can be considered as dead. The concept of Meitei is almost near to extinction. In 2012, through a request of Indian government, the Bangladesh government passed an act to protect the historical places. Thongam Polash (a Manipuri Bangladeshi) another paper reader in the workshop also cited that "the Bangladeshi Manipuri fluently speak Meitei language. Some family settled in Sylhet and Dhaka, a very few and countable has language barrier". In Bharawas, there are 14 localities where Meitei population is widespread and the Manipur Cultural Complex is built in its centre. In terms of dance and music, the same has been followed. In Bharawas, 2/3 of the Meitei population resides in almost five major localities such as Mangaemaking, Mangolpur, Nobar etc. So, the cultural exchange programs happened more conveniently in such areas (18th Feb.2020, International Workshop, Manipur University).

The religious practices of Bangladeshi Meiteis are the same with Manipuri Meiteis. Some follow, Gaura Vaisnavism and some other follow Sanamahism; to each their own. Like the Manipuri Diaspora in Burma, Assam and Tripura, the Manipuri Diaspora in Bangladesh also perform the annual ritual festival Lai Haraoba of Manipur. Thus, they try to observe the tradition of Manipur. In a book *The State of the Rural Manipuris in Bangladesh (2006)* authors Md.Faisal Ahmed and Lakshmikanta Singh talk about the problems and difficulties faced by the Manipuri people as ethnic minority in Bangladesh. They write that similar to all other minority groups in Sylhet region, "Manipuri people tend to be ignored from research work and studies. This has created a huge information gap regarding these indigenous people. The unique nature of their livelihood, way of life, and rich culture has a distinct character

which is less known to the mass people resulting in most of the information regarding this ethnic group being a mixture of assumptions and stereotypes. Literature on Manipuri people is incredibly limited in Bangladesh. As a result of such a void in accurate information and understanding of Manipuri community, we initiated an investigation in order to draw a comprehensive picture of the socio-economic condition and problems of the Manipuri community based on qualitative social research.”(Ahmed & Singh, page10). Many Manipuris and young generations are not aware of their kith and kin in other parts of the world as they lost touch with each other and have come close to forgetting their own history. The Manipuris settled in many parts of India and other countries are all ethnic minorities, in transit of every-changing cultural identity. It is to be noted that Manipuri diaspora community has their own histories and it is time, their stories to be heard and to be written.

Conclusion :

The paper has explored the certain characteristics attributed to Manipur Diaspora located in Assam, Tripura, Myanmar and Bangladesh. It also highlights the major historical episodes that led to mass displacement of Manipuri population, particularly the unfortunate event of Seven Years Devastation that almost depopulated the kingdom, bringing significant change in Manipur as well as in its neighboring kingdoms. Apart from such warfare, there were also many alliances, of matrimonial restoring and retaining peaceful relationships among kingdoms. The Diaspora community, thus are enclosed with rich history and in transit of making new histories in their host countries with their unique and distinct lifestyle and cultural identity. However, the Diaspora communities as minorities are inclined more towards dissolving their identity, often a result of cultural assimilation, dominated by the majoritarian culture. Language, religion and culture play important roles in safeguarding their identity, of their collective memory of homeland. The government of India (Manipur), NGOs, social activists and research scholars are bridging the gap between the displaced Diaspora community and their homeland, Manipur. Indeed, the study of Diaspora and Manipur Diaspora in particular can uncover, in recent times, innumerable paths and it is the need of the hour to recognize such possibilities.

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