

## **Constructing the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' Identity: Conflict and Accommodation**

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**Abstract:-** This paper explores the conflict between the Meeteis and the Bishnupriyas on the one hand and the role of state in accommodating as well as intensifying such tension in the state of Assam on the other. Ethnic conflict is shown to be a consequence of a lingering identity problem, aggravated by language and homeland disputes based on their complex historical relations, as well as equivocal responses of the state. It is argued that continued manipulation of historical events and ethnic demonstration of certain community sometimes turned into conflict with others as well as policies of the state towards ethnic groups in Assam further intensified such tensions in the state. It further tries to link the tension between the Bishnupriya and the Meetei with that of ethnic assertion of the Bishnupriya as well as the policies of the state towards ethnic groups.

**Key words:** *Ethnic identity, Politics, Ethnic formation, Recognition, Conflict, Language.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Most of the states of Northeast India face numerous conflicts based on popular identity movements, a majority of which are directed either against the state or the dominant community of the area as the smaller groups resist assimilation into mainstream society. In the case of the Bishnupriya, the root of the conflict lies in their attempt to suffix the name of their community with 'Manipuri'. The Meeties, the majority community of Manipur consider themselves as the only Manipuris and in their local parlance refer to the Bishnupriya as migrants. This paper aims to chart the origin and course of the Bishnupriya identity movement as well as its social and psychological effects on members of both the communities. Also, it tries to ground this conflict in the major theories governing such phenomena and attempts to draw conclusions based on this comprehensive study. This identity movement of the Bishnupriya is an exceptional issue faced by the Northeast as in most such cases, the smaller ethnic communities either go against the domination of the majority community legitimized by the state or demand more privileges in the name of tribal status. The assertion by the Bishnupriya, however, involves the fate of the Meetei identity in relation to the larger 'Manipuri' identity. Till the recognition of the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' identity by the Governments of Assam and Tripura, 'Manipuris' were synonymous with the Meeteis.<sup>i</sup> With the recognition of the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri', the term 'Manipuri' is now divided between the Bishnupriyas and the Meeteis of Assam and Tripura. The recent formation of Bishnupriya Manipuri Development Council for the Bishnupriya and Manipuri Development Council for the Meeteis by the Government of Assam, helped fragment the Manipuri society further. This institutionalisation of division of the Manipuri community has also stirred up the *Meetei Pangal* or *Pangal* (Manipuri Muslim) community, speakers of Manipuri language (*Meeteilon*), to demand a separate Development Council within the larger Manipuri community in Assam.

The issue of the Bishnupriya identity is not a recent one. This is perhaps, as many observers claim, that during the period immediately following the Second World War which saw the emergence of a number of modern nation-states, the character of ethnic movements changed qualitatively towards increasing politicisation of ethnicity (Glazer & Moynihan, 1975), and quantitatively towards increasing claims of autonomy, statehood, and an independent status. In the case of the Bishnupriya, ethnic consciousness of the educated Bishnupriya youth as well as the changing political and social scenario of the states, especially after independence, resulted in ethnic mobilisation.

Additionally, the movements of various linguistic minorities including the Meeteis<sup>ii</sup> and the Bengalis of the Barak Valley, along with the movements of other ethnic minorities in Assam intensified the Bishnupriya mobilisation. Maintaining the identity and culture of a group depends largely on the preservation of its language as the meaning and structure of the community depend on it. This can be achieved by appropriate legislation which ensures adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue of minority groups not only for primary education, but also in the state's secondary schools and universities.<sup>iii</sup>

Ethnic mobilisation of the Bishnupriyas started within the scope of learning the mother tongue in educational institutions in the Bishnupriya inhabited areas of Assam and Tripura. The intellectuals, educationists, elites and mass organisations of the community are the wheels of the Bishnupriya ethnic mobilisation which emerged as a

direct result of western education and social evolution that began in the colonial period. Manuel Castells (1997) considers this as project identity, the construction of a "new identity that redefines their position in society and, by doing so, seeks the transformation of overall social structure". However, Bishnupriya identity assertion not only includes the demand for recognition of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language but also recognition of the Bishnupriya identity as Bishnupriya Manipuri - as a Manipuri sub-group or as one of the earliest inhabitants of Manipur.

The political recognition of a particular ethnic group can not only reshape the designated group's self-awareness and organisation, but also increase identification and mobilisation among ethnic groups not officially recognised, and thus promote the formation of new ones. This is especially likely when official designations are thought to advantage or disadvantage a group in some way (Nagel Joane, 1994). For instance, in India, the provision of constitutionally guaranteed parliamentary representation and civil service posts for members of the 'Scheduled Tribes', 'Scheduled Castes' or 'Untouchables' contributed to the emergence of a collective identity and their political mobilisation from different linguistic and regional backgrounds. Thus, ethnic mobilisation of the Bishnupriya largely relates to state politics and policies regarding ethnic communities.

## II. STATE POLITICS AND ETHNIC MOBILISATION

The primary task of the governments in the newly independent modern nation-states becomes either national integration or state-building or both (Paul Brass, 1990). This process invariably involves two concurrent tasks: *first*, extending the writ of central political institutions and rules of governance to the peripheral regions and *second*, attempting to build a sense of common national identity and loyalty around specific cultural and iconic symbols accepted by the state. Needless to say, these processes often cause potentially violent conflict between the state and various ethnic groups, all of which differ in their degree of objective internal cohesion and levels of subjective political self-consciousness (Idem, 1979). The homogenisation of the Indian national identity since independence has resulted in the emergence of identity politics.

The state is viewed as the creature of events like communal riots, ethnic conflicts, displacement of citizens, etc. taking place in society. The language policy and territorial distribution along linguistic lines as well as politics of homogenising the state in view of integrating different fragmented cultural groups, i.e., Punjab for the Punjabis, Assam for the Assamese, Nagaland for the Nagas, Manipur for the Manipuris or the Meeteis, etc. lead small vulnerable groups<sup>iv</sup> to assert and maintain their existence as distinct identities. One of the causes for intensification of the Bishnupriya identity mobilisation in Assam and other parts of the Northeast is also related to the policy of the states, as mentioned above.

It may be mentioned that the Bishnupriya community, in its present form, emerged in Manipur (Amallesh, 2006). However, they left Manipur in mass migration to Barak Valley (then Cachar) and other parts of Northeast India during the Burmese attack on Manipur (1819-1826), called as 'Seven Years Devastation'. In view of state reorganisation on linguistic basis, a group is known by their mother tongue as well as their territory or homeland. Thus, the logic for asserting the Bishnupriya identity in Northeast India and parts of Bangladesh is not only related to the claim for recognition of Bishnupriya Manipuri language; but also strives to link its identity with the state of Manipur and tries to justify it as their earliest known place of inhabitation. In keeping with this view, the Bishnupriyas first tried to change the nomenclature by suffixing the term 'Manipuri' in the sense of being a part of the Manipuri society. In order to meet this claim, they have submitted a large amount of literature including the *Linguistic Survey of India* by Grierson (1903) as well as some recent literature produced by Bishnupriya intelligentsia. Some of this literature has been labeled 'concocted' by the Meeteis.

## III. WHEEL OF THE BISHNUPRIYA IDENTITY ASSERTION

It can, however, be assumed that all demands made by the Bishnupriyas relate to the policies that most Indian states, including Assam, have adopted since independence. These include linguistic reorganisation of states which promotes institutions of a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society<sup>v</sup> on the one hand and a politics of unification or integration towards the centre on the other. Besides, the Constitution of India guarantees protection and preservation of linguistic minorities and their interests. These ideal principles of the Constitution have encouraged the numerous linguistic and cultural groups to mobilize in the hope of attaining more opportunities, but such aims are not easily achievable. They can be realised only through political mobilisation; for instance, the movement to make Bengali the official language in the Barak Valley in the 1960s.

Keeping in mind the changing scenario and opportunities available under the Constitution, the Bishnupriya leaders mobilised all the sections of the Bishnupriya society (*Rajar gang* and *Madoi gang*). The Andolan Parishad, the Bhasa Parishad, the Sahitya Parishad, the Mahasabha and the Students' Union of the Bishnupriya community organised meetings in most of the Bishnupriya inhabited areas of Barak Valley and other parts of Assam, in order to make people socially conscious of their ethnic mobilisation; to organise the movement for the recognition of their language; to assert their identity for their existence; and to enable the study of the

language at the primary level of education, etc. The two primary slogans of the Bishnupriya viz., *Amar Dabi Dena Lagto* (our demands must be fulfilled) and *Ima Thare Lerik Tamkarani Dena Lagtoi* (learning by mother tongue must be given) helped the Bishnupriya society mobilise in order to draw the attention of the state (Probbhat, 2006).

This paper also focuses on the steps taken by the Bishnupriya organisations in order to meet their objectives and challenges faced by them while pursuing their claims. Unlike the Bengali language movement and the Bodo autonomy movement, the Bishnupriya language movement was meant for the introduction of the Bishnupriya language as a medium of instruction in educational institutions and, more importantly, changing the nomenclature from 'Bishnupriya' to 'Bishnupriya Manipuri'.<sup>vi</sup> In short, the Bishnupriya identity issue can be discussed in the following points:

- (i) strive for changing the code structure (ethnic categorisation) from 'Bishnupriya' to 'Bishnupriya Manipuri';
- (ii) demand for introduction of Bishnupriya Manipuri language as a medium of instruction;
- (iii) demand for inclusion of the Bishnupriyas in the state and central OBC lists;
- (iv) demand for broadcasting programs on All India Radio in Bishnupriya Manipuri language;
- (v) setting up of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Development Council.

Beside these objective demands, recognition of cultural values that characterize the 'identity' of a community by both the state and others<sup>vii</sup> is an essential component of ethnic mobilisation. Charles Taylor (1992) observes that social recognition is central to the individual identity and self-worth and misrecognition can gravely damage both. In this connection, Fredrik Barth (1969) first convincingly articulated the notion of ethnicity as mutable, arguing that ethnicity is the product of social ascriptions, a kind of labeling process engaged in by oneself and others. According to this perspective, one's ethnic identity is a composite of the view one has of oneself as well as the views held by others. As the individual (or group) moves through daily life, ethnicity can change according to variation in the situations and audiences encountered. Ethnic identity, then, is the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as an individual's self identification and the outsider's ethnic designation. Thus, Fredrik Barth (1969) argued that both self-ascription and ascription by others are critical factors in the making of ethnic groups and identities. In other words, ethnic groups and identities form in an interaction between assignment, what others say we are, and assertion, who or what we claim to be (Ito-Adler, 1980). This interaction is a continuous process. Taylor's 'dialogical negotiation' highlights the importance of 'recognition from others' in the formation of identities. However, we should also consider the problems that revolve around the process of ethnic identity formation. This is because the 'recognition from others' does not come easily in every context. There are contestations, conflicts and disagreements between groups, especially when one group's claim for identity has an effect on the identity of another. Here, in this study, dialogical relation is considered as an important means by which a Bishnupriya presents his/her views in projecting and asserting the Bishnupriya Manipuri identity.

#### IV. RETENTION OF IDENTITY

Ethnic identity consists of *internal* and *external* aspects and is a socio-psychological process whereby individuals situate themselves in a community *internally* by state of mind and feelings, and *externally* by behaviour appropriate to the *internal* psychological needs (Isajiw, 1999). Nevertheless, the *external* and *internal* aspects of ethnic identity are inter-related; their degree of importance varies with individuals. *External* aspects are linked to observable behaviour, and include:

1. speaking a particular language;
2. practicing ethnic traditions;
3. participating in personal ethnic networks, such as family and friends;
4. involvement in ethnic institutions like churches, schools, enterprises, and media;
5. participating in ethnic voluntary associations like clubs, societies, and youth organisations; and;
6. participating in functions sponsored by ethnic organisations such as picnics, concerts, public lectures, rallies, and dances (Isajiw, 1999).

**Table 1: Retention or formation of external aspect of the Bishnupriya identity**

External Aspect of Bishnupriya Identity (Frequency and Importance)	(A)	(O)	(S)	(N)	(NI)	(SI)	(VI)
Eat ethnic Manipuri food on special occasions	----	95	5	----	7	17	76
Shop at Manipuri stores	----	33	49	18	34	9	57
Speaking of Bishnupriya language	98	2	----	----	----	2	98
Education in Bishnupriya Manipuri language or medium Schools	78	----	----	----	5	7	87
Attend Bishnupriya social and cultural functions	----	89	11	----	18	40	42
Attend Bishnupriya associations meetings	----	57	43	----	14	9	57
Wearing traditional dress by the Bishnupriya women	----	95	----	----	----	10	90
Speaking Manipuri language or <i>Meeteilon</i>	----	10	50	40	96	4	----
Ethnic Friendships among the Bishnupriyas	----	----	----	----	----	60	27

Source: Based on field work between 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2014 to 25<sup>th</sup> June 2015 in Barak Valley.

\*\*A-Always, O-Often, S-Sometime, N-Never, NI-Not Important, SI-Somewhat Important, VI-Very Important

The frequency and importance, as indicated in the table above were the two indicators used to examine the *external* retention or non-retention of the Bishnupriya identity. The four options used to measure frequency (never, sometimes, often and always) and three for importance (not important, somewhat important and very important) were carefully selected to encompass the various possible responses and to facilitate analysis. Greater reliance was placed on frequency as it evaluated observable behaviour of respondents' actions rather than perceptions of what was deemed important.

However, in this study, this group deemed friendship within the ethnic community as important and over 87 (eighty-seven) per cent respondents expressed that it was either 'somewhat' or 'very important'. The majority of them, however, viewed ethnic friendship as 'somewhat important' rather than 'very important'; around 60 (sixty) percent responded to the former and 27 (twenty-seven) percent to the latter. Overall, the importance placed on the *external* aspects of Bishnupriya identity by the Bishnupriyas of Barak Valley was manifested through the frequency. They were frequently involved in the consumption of Bishnupriya food and dressed traditionally as well; they spoke and learnt the Bishnupriya Manipuri language. Similarly, attending Bishnupriya functions and association meetings were not less important to the group and respondents engaged frequently in such activities.

**Internal Retention of the Bishnupriya Identity**

*Internal* aspects of ethnic identity refer to images, ideas, attitudes and feelings, and include four dimensions: *affective*<sup>viii</sup>, *fiducial*<sup>ix</sup>, *cognitive*<sup>x</sup> and *moral*<sup>xi</sup>.

Respondents were asked eight questions directly related to these four dimensions, two concerning the *affective* dimension, one each for the *fiducial* and *cognitive* components and five for the *moral* dimension in order to trace the internal aspect of identity formation. A four category scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', was used to elicit response.

**Table 2: Retention or Formation of Internal Aspect of Bishnupriya Identity**

Dimensions of Identity	Internal Aspect of Bishnupriya Identity (Importance)	ST D A	SW DA	S T A	S W A
Affective	Stronger attachment towards Bishnupriya than other ethnic groups	----	----	43	57
	Greater comfort level among Bishnupriyas than other ethnic groups	7	27	27	40
Fiducial	Trust Bishnupriya more than other ethnic groups	14	20	6	60
Cognitive	Spent time trying to find	6	14	20	60

ve	out more about Bishnupriyas				
Moral	Support special needs and causes of the Bishnupriya community	----	----	40	60
	Bishnupriya children learn in Bishnupriya language	----	----	89	11
	Help Bishnupriya get jobs	10	20	47	23
	Marry within the Bishnupriya community	----	----	65	35
Sample size	Respondents- 50				

Source: The data given above is based on field work done in the Bishnupriya inhabited areas

\* Note: Figures in parenthesis are in percentage

\*\* STDA- Strongly Disagree; SWDA- Somewhat Disagree; STA- Strongly Agree; SWA- Somewhat Agree

Table 2 shows a stronger attachment of the Bishnupriyas towards fellow Bishnupriyas than other ethnic groups and support for the special needs and causes of the Bishnupriya community. Moreover, the Bishnupriya respondents strongly or somewhat agree on learning the Bishnupriya Manipuri language by Bishnupriya children. Also, majority of the respondents stick to the practice of endogamy which they feel is important to preserve the Bishnupriya identity.

Attachment towards Bishnupriyas and more comfort with a Bishnupriya; the trust an individual has on his/her ethnic group; importance of the group's history, traditions and customs are important components of an individual's ethnic identity and thus, allocating or not allocating time to attain knowledge about these characteristics serves as a good indicator of the retention or non-retention of the identity. Respondents here had attempted to learn and imagine more about their history and traditions not only by speaking to elders and reading related materials, but also by visiting their ancestral homes, creating lineage and preparing other valuable documents and also with the help of folklore of the Bishnupriya.

The five areas in which the respondents had strong views include: supporting special needs and causes of the Bishnupriya community; speaking and learning Bishnupriya Manipuri language; helping Bishnupriyas obtain jobs and getting advantages; marrying within the Bishnupriya community; and; gathering myths and folktales about the Bishnupriyas in order to trace and imagine an 'ideal' history of origin, marked the internal aspect of ethnic retention of the Bishnupriyas

## V. THE BISHNUPRIYA IDENTITY AND THEORIES OF IDENTITY FORMATION

The Bishnupriya issue, with respect to formation of the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' identity, can best be understood with the help of three dominant theories viz. primordial, constructivist and instrumentalist. This section explores major themes including ethnic self-identification of the Bishnupriya identity among respondents, and reasons for its importance. The main objective, however, is to situate the respondents' reactions vis-à-vis the three principal theories of ethnic identity formation. Thus, responses to Bishnupriya identity are categorized as biological, historical and absolute (*Primordial*); fluid and constructed (*Constructivist*); and rational and tactical (*Instrumentalist*). These three theories are important because they capture all the issues of the Bishnupriya identity movement, beginning from the historical experiences to the context of the present conflict with the mainstream Manipuris or the Meeteis. The focus is also on the respondents' reactions to open-ended questions. This section concentrates on the respondents' reactions in order to gain a richer understanding of Bishnupriya identity formation and consciousness among respondents.

In light of the data collected through fieldwork, it is apparent that on the whole, the formation of the Bishnupriya identity in Assam corresponds to *Primordial*, *Constructivist* and *Instrumental* theories. Thus, although notions of common descent, place of origin, culture, dialect and history provide the foundation for the Bishnupriya identity, it is also viewed as dynamic, fluid and constructed. The Bishnupriya identity in Assam is specifically constructed in relation to place, interactions, time and hence contains situational or instrumentalist characters too. At the same time, it is also perceived as a result of resistance against the assimilationist tendency of the mainstream Manipuri or the Meeteis following the theory of hierarchy and difference.

### *The Bishnupriya Identity and Primordialist Approach*

The fact that the Bishnupriya respondents in Barak Valley have deep, long-lasting historical roots was usually brought up in the interviews as an important element of Bishnupriya identity assertion. When

considering responses and comments of the respondents, an overwhelming support for the primordial theory was apparent. About 88 (eighty-eight) percent of the respondents conceded that common biological, cultural, historical and geographical ties and dialect provided the fundamental base for their Bishnupriya identity. The Bishnupriyas who strongly retain the Bishnupriya Manipuri dialect also regard language as an important attribute of Bishnupriya identity assertion. Dialect served as an external indicator of their ethnic identity, and a symbol through which they could maintain a rigid boundary against other groups.

### ***The Bishnupriya Identity: A Constructivist Approach***

This sub-section explores the *constructivist* nature of ethnic identity, by specifically examining the waxing and waning of the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' identity in relation to characteristics of time and place as well as respondent's experiences in these places. In Assam, social and economic concentration into the hands of majority Assamese in greater Assam and Bengalis in Barak Valley facilitated the construction and perpetuation of the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' identity; distinctions were drawn based on racial or broad ethnic lines in post-independence India. The local population, referred to as 'others', simply considered the Bishnupriyas as Manipuri, and this was clearly illustrated by the respondents.

The local community could not distinguish between the Bishnupriya and Manipuri. This was especially observed when the locals used terms like Meetei-Manipuri, which the Meeties do not accept. Thus, consciousness of the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' identity was strengthened by others and those who always identified a Bishnupriya as a Manipuri while responding during the interview.

As exemplified through responses and experiences in the Northeast, the Bishnupriya identity is not only rooted in descent and history, but is also fluid and constructed. Further illustrations of the contingent and shifting nature of ethnic identity are apparent through the examination of articulation of the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' identity among the Bishnupriya respondents residing in Assam, especially in Barak Valley. Two major factors contributed to increase the consciousness and articulation of the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' identity outside Manipur. They include intra-ethnic interactions and perceptions of 'hierarchy and difference'.<sup>xii</sup>

### ***Intra-ethnic Interactions and Perceptions of 'Hierarchy and Difference'***

Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) argue that '*the emergence of ethnic groups and the awakening of ethnic consciousness are the product of historical processes which structure relations of inequality between discrete social entities*'. Meanwhile, Peake and Ray (2001) and Yon (1996) remind us that in western societies 'whiteness', the dominant culture, can contribute to the formation of other identities or minority cultures. Interestingly in Assam, consciousness of the Bishnupriya identity is not stimulated in relation to 'Bengalis or Assamese', but is formed vis-à-vis the Meetei, the numerically and culturally dominant Manipuri ethnic group. This theme is effectively captured by respondents who expressed '*resentment on (his/her) part that we were educated, had money, and were not ill-treated by the Bengalis, and thought that the Manipuri would also treat us better*'. While the other response expresses that '*the Meetei never considered us as Manipuri and we had a colony of our own.*'

As alluded earlier, history plays a fundamental role in the formation of the Bishnupriya identity as ideologies of *hierarchy and difference* initially created in Manipur are resumed, reaffirmed and reconstructed in Assam. Ethnic boundaries are reinforced in a new setting through social transactions between the Bishnupriya and the dominant Manipuri sub-group. Drawing on the notions of *inferiority and difference*, characteristics such as respondent's places of birth, inability to speak Manipuri language (*Meeteilon*) and learning in Bengali medium schools help in the construction of Bishnupriya identity in Assam.

Perceptions of Bishnupriyas *as inferior or having lower status* by the Manipuris or Meeteis were commonly expressed by the respondents; whereas five percent (5%) of the others regard the Bishnupriya as non-Manipuri. However, other seventy percent (70%) regarded them as Manipuri though they knew that the Bishnupriya never speak Manipuri nor live in Manipur. For instance, some of those respondents knew that *the Bishnupriyas are of Indo-Aryan and the Meeteis are of Mongoloid origin*. Several respondents recalled incidents when their inability to speak Manipuri resulted in them being treated 'impatiently', as a 'degraded class', 'second-class citizen' or as 'pretty much invisible'. The statement '*if you don't speak Manipuri, then you aren't considered Manipuri*', echoed the experiences of many amongst the Manipuris or Meeteis. While the Bishnupriya call the Manipuris or Manipuri speaking people as 'Meetei', the Meeteis recognised the Bishnupriyas as *Kalisha* in Assam and *Leimani*<sup>xiii</sup> or *Ningthounai*<sup>xiv</sup> in Tripura. In this regard, some of the Meetei respondents consider the Bishnupriya as *Ashaba* which means *trying to be imitate or trying to be identical*.

In response to the views of the Meeteis mentioned above, the Bishnupriya respondents opined that *I know we are different and a minority compared to the Meeteis, but we are still proud and still Manipuri*.<sup>xv</sup> Bishnupriya identity in Assam involves re-articulation of *difference and hierarchy* in a new setting. Referring to the Bishnupriya history, minority status and distinctness of the Bishnupriyas in Barak Valley effectively

captured the sentiments of several Bishnupriya respondents. Such responses stimulate consciousness of the Bishnupriya identity, and motivate to return to their roots, learn more about Bishnupriya history, which will help them to proudly state that they are Bishnupriya.

### ***Bishnupriya Identity as Situational or Instrumental Approach***

The *Instrumentalist* theory argues that ethnic identity can be used as a tool to acquire political, economic and social benefits, and many respondents (50% of the Bishnupriyas, 60% of the Meeteis and 24% of others) agreed with this stand and offered examples. Illustrations in the economic sphere relate to using the 'Manipuri' identity to enjoy the opportunities provided by the Centre and concerned States in areas such as radio and television broadcasting, as well as inclusion of the Bishnupriya community into the state Other Backward Classes (OBC) lists. Meanwhile, in the socio-cultural context, it includes the assertion of the Bishnupriya community to gain membership in ethnic categorization and cultural heritage of Manipuri dance and sports which are recognised internationally as well as dress so as to ensure participation in social events of the Manipuri society.

As discussed previously, the political leaders and elites of Barak Valley supported the strengthening of the base of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language movement. In this regard, responses like *Politicians use their ethnic identity to drum up support from their demographics*<sup>xvi</sup> may be mentioned. The involvement of politics in ethnicity is widespread because people of the same ethnic background can vote as a block or stand together to influence the government to change policies.

Nonetheless, when asked to provide specific examples in which their ethnic identity was used for instrumental reasons, merely ten respondents were able to provide a rational response, of which only seven illustrated the instrumental use of the Bishnupriya Manipuri identity. One respondent<sup>xvii</sup> stressed the point in relation to the economic benefits offered by the assertion of her Bishnupriya Manipuri identity. She further asserted that *I do consider Bishnupriya as Manipuri because the use of Manipuri dress and food habits enables the Manipuri handloom and goldsmith to further their business in Barak Valley of Assam and other parts of Tripura.*

The above discussion clearly shows that the Bishnupriya identity assertion as 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' is a constructed identity which is induced by a number of factors. The facts behind the demands for the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' identity are very much related to the instrumentalist theory of identity formation which includes the role of the state and closely relates it with the contemporary issues relating to identity.

## **VI. RESPONSE OF THE STATE, JUDICIARY AND THE MEETEIS TO THE BISHNUPRIYA IDENTITY ASSERTION**

As discussed in the previous section, the Bishnupriya identity assertion was also intensified by the privileges offered to members of distinct cultural communities. In connection with this, the Bishnupriya first adopted a blueprint to mobilize the whole community by changing the nomenclature from 'Bishnupriya' to 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' so as to authenticate a Manipuri sub-group. Along with this, the community also demanded inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri in the state OBC list in Serial 13 as a sub-group of Manipuri including Manipuri Brahman and Manipuri Muslims (both are Manipuri speakers). This is perhaps because the Bishnupriya youth faced difficulties in obtaining OBC certificates on the grounds that the name 'Bishnupriya' or 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' did not appear on the OBC list of either the Government of Assam or that of India.

In 1993, the Government of Assam established the Assam Backward Classes Commission on the basis of a Supreme Court judgment<sup>xviii</sup> and the Commission, as a consequence of constant pressure by the Bishnupriya organisations like Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha, the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Students' Union and the Samaj Santha, Guwahati, directed the Government of Assam to amend Serial 13 in the state OBC list to include Bishnupriya Manipuri along with Manipuri Brahmins (*Bamon*) and Manipuri Muslim (*Pangal*) on 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1995.

Dissatisfied Meeteis contested the move of the Commission on the grounds that both the *Bamons* and *Pangals* are Manipuri (*Meeteilon*) speakers, but the Bishnupriyas' language belongs to the Indo-Aryan group and they are hence not considered as an indigenous people. The Meeteis even went to the Supreme Court of India, filing Special Leave Petitions<sup>xix</sup> by the Government of Manipur and K. Kumardhan Singha of Assam. However, the Court could not change any of the judgments given by the Commission and the Gauhati High Court; instead it dismissed the civil appeal.<sup>xx</sup>

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

The Bishnupriya identity issue revolves around changing the nomenclature from 'Bishnupriya' to 'Bishnupriya Manipuri'. This is the point around which the Meeteis' contestation revolves too. This issue came in popular discourse only after the recognition of the Bishnupriya Manipuri by the Governments of Tripura and Assam by notifications<sup>xxi</sup> in 1995 and 1999 respectively to introduce the Bishnupriya Manipuri language as a subject in the primary schools in Bishnupriya inhabitant areas of Assam and Tripura. However, contestation had

already started since the first attempt of the Bishnupriyas to change their ethnic nomenclature by suffixing the term 'Manipuri' in the 1960s and 1970s. The first objection was raised through a letter<sup>xxii</sup> addressed to the Station Director, All India Radio, Gauhati, Assam, expressing the wrong inclusion of a Bishnupriya Manipuri programme of 15 minutes during broadcasting. According to Chandra Singha, a Meetei respondent, this is due to misrepresentation of facts with respect to the Meetei and the Manipuri language (*Meeteilon*). Moreover, he added that there is no community called 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' or 'Manipuri Bishnupriya' in to the census report of 1961.<sup>xxiii</sup> As mentioned earlier, the question of the Bishnupriya identity does not arise in Manipur because at present, there are no Bishnupriyas residing there. However, in Assam and Tripura it has, for four decades, been an issue in both the academic and everyday lives of people, mainly Meeteis in Assam and Tripura, and to a lesser degree, in Manipur and other places in the Northeast. The issue acquired critical proportions when a number of Manipuri organisations, including the Government of Manipur, began contesting the reformation and reshaping of the Bishnupriya identity as Bishnupriya Manipuri both in Assam and Tripura. In this regard, a number of memoranda and objection letters were submitted to the concerned authorities by the political and non-political bodies of the Meeteis. Moreover, contestation later reached a peak, taking the forms of strikes and picketing government offices in certain parts of Assam. The Meeteis claim that there is no language as 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' in Manipur. The Manipuri language (*Meeteilon*) is the one and only language accepted as the state language of Manipur from the time of Maharajas. Therefore, there can be a Bishnupriya language but never be a 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' language on the same footing as there is no Bodo Assamese, Bishnupriya Assamese or Bengali Bishnupriya language in Assam. A majority of the Meetei respondents opined that the arguments raised by the Manipuri-speaking people of India against the recognition of Bishnupriya Manipuri instead of Bishnupriyas are legal, democratic, relevant, logical and well-grounded.

Liberals among the Meeteis opined that *let them (the Bishnupriya) consider themselves as Manipuri or a section of it*. This group further justifies its stand by saying that they (the Bishnupriya) had no alternative to identify themselves in a dignified way. However, this liberal group makes clear objection against the steps taken by the Bishnupriya to change their history; for instance, claiming themselves as the earliest inhabitants of the state of Manipur and descendents of Arjun, the third Pandava. The alternative hypothesis established by the Bishnupriya with respect to being the earliest known inhabitants of Manipur indicates that the menace is an offshoot of racial chauvinism and neo-fascism. If the issue was left un-resisted by the Meeteis, the massive disinformation literature designed by the Bishnupriyas would, in all probability, have rewritten Manipuri history and erased the Meeteis out of the annals of Manipur (Sanajaoba, 1989). The Union Government, its agencies and the appropriate state governments should take measures for safeguarding the Manipuris or the Meeteis, against such steps taken by the Bishnupriya.

In this regard, the Minority Commission of India, the Census Authority of India, the Registrar General of India under the Union Home Ministry, the State Government of Assam and any other concerned state should be made to revoke and nullify any order, report or instruction that mandates the nomenclature 'Manipuri' to be juxtaposed with 'Bishnupriya'; or for that matter with any other non-Manipuri community or linguistic group. The Government of India has a moral obligation to raise this issue with the Government of Bangladesh, which, on the initiative and pressure of the Bishnupriyas, has raised questions against the authenticity of the established Manipuri cultural history by way of adding 'Manipuri' to the Bishnupriya (Sanajaoba, 1989). Therefore the smooth functioning of the state government with respect to such groups and a cordial relationship between the Bishnupriya and the Meetei necessarily depends on the recognition of the Bishnupriya identity by the Meeteis because identity requires others' recognition and cannot be formed in isolation.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> A field study of different Bishnupriya inhabited areas of Barak Valley found that there was not much difference between the Bishnupriya and the Meetei vis-à-vis the Bishnupriya and the Manipuri, because the Meeteis were synonymous with Manipuris till the demand for Bishnupriya Manipuri identity from linguistic point of view. This is perhaps true for the *pangal* (manipuri Muslims) too. Because there is no much cultural similarity between the Meeties and the Pangal but linguistically they belong to the mainstream Manipuri or also Meetei. From this linguistic ground a Manipuri includes Meetei, *Bamon* (Manipuri Brahman), *Pangal* (Manipuri Muslim) and other low caste Manipuris like *Lois*, *Andros*. An instance of the Bishnupriya being a part of the Manipuris was found in a village called Dudpatil where speaking Manipuri language was mandatory and those who failed were fined before the Bishnupriya Manipuri identity movement.

<sup>ii</sup> It may be mentioned that the Manipuri language movement was started in Cachar in 1961. The Board of Secondary Education, Assam has been conducting the HSLC Examination since 1979 in Manipuri medium under notification no. SEBA/CA/4515-4516 dated 8<sup>th</sup> June, 1978, Gauhati and Memo no. SEBA/AM-LM/Man. 8687 Dated 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1979, Gauhati.

<sup>iii</sup> For more details see Article 350. There is an international legal basis for such legislation. Under the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, to which India is not a party, states have agreed that it is important to allow minorities to use and teach their own language. UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education opened for signature in Dec. 1960.

<sup>iv</sup> Those groups do not have their own script, language and distinct culture independent from other cultural groups.

<sup>v</sup> As a consequence of re-organisation of states on linguistic basis, the importance of linguistic community and their proper inhabitation has increased in Indian politics including in Assam. As a result of Assam state re-organisation, seven states were formed in 1972 and since then, many small linguistic communities have been asserting either for a new identity for their survival or more autonomy while staying within the ambit of state.

<sup>vi</sup> This is the major area in which the mainstream Manipuris or the Meeteis are contesting.

<sup>vii</sup> Here 'others' refers to non-Bishnupriyas and non-Manipuri residing in Assam, particularly in Barak Valley.

<sup>viii</sup> The *affective dimension* involves feelings of attachment to the group, and is of two types: *firstly*, feelings of sympathy and preference for one's group with regard to other groups; *secondly*, feelings of comfort with one's group above other groups or societies.

<sup>ix</sup> The *fiducial dimension* of identity refers to the trust of an individual in his/her group, and the sense of security it can generate.

<sup>x</sup> The *cognitive dimension* of identity refers to self-images and images of one's group. They consist of the knowledge of one's group's values, heritage, and historic past.

<sup>xi</sup> The *moral dimension* entails a sense of obligation to the group, and is associated with an individual's commitment to his/her community, as well as the implications of the group has for the person's behaviour. Teaching the group's ancestral language to children, helping members find jobs, and marrying within the ethnic community are some examples of the moral dimension of identity (Isajiw, 1999). The majority of empirical studies of identity have focused on behaviour such as attendance at community events, contributions to organisations and charities associated with the ethnic community, and observance of religious traditions (for instance, Bubis & Marks, 1975; Chrisman, 1981; Petrisans, 1991; Wilder, 1996).

<sup>xii</sup> For details see Dipankar Gupta, 2000.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Leimanai* is a section of Bishnupriya community speaking the dialect *Madoigang*.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ningthounai* is a section of Bishnupriya community speaking the dialect *Rajargang*.

<sup>xv</sup> Karen, 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2013, Silchar.

<sup>xvi</sup> Rebecca, 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2011, Hailakandi.

<sup>xvii</sup> Bishojit, 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2012, Cachar.

<sup>xviii</sup> For details refer Ms. Indra Swahaney & Other's case.

<sup>xix</sup> The Special Leave Petition Nos. 9046-47/1999, 8862/1999, 8864/1999, 9280/1999, 9281/1999.

<sup>xx</sup> Nos. 4797 and 4798 of 2000 as withdrawn and dismissing the Civil Appeal No. 4799, 4800 and 4801 of 2000 dated 8<sup>th</sup> March, 2006.

<sup>xxi</sup> Vide memo No A (1) E 154/95/182 dated 25/5/99.

<sup>xxii</sup> A letter given by Chandra Singha of Cachar, Assam to the Station Director, All India Radio, Gauhati, Assam.

<sup>xxiii</sup> For details see NBMM, 2009: 180-181.