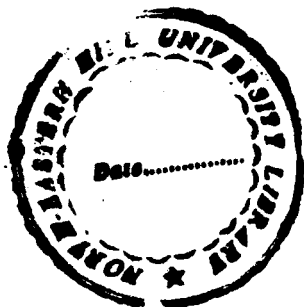


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**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

**SIXTH SESSION
AGARTALA : 1985**

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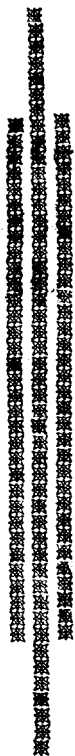
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Preface

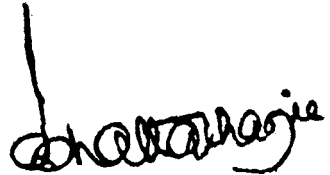
The Sixth Annual Session of the North East India History Association held at the Calcutta University Post-Graduate Centre, Agartala on October 3-5, 1985 was one of our most colourful academic meets in the region, attended by the largest number of delegates. Professor H. L. Gupta, formerly Head of the Department of History, Saugar University presided over the Session, which was inaugurated by Sri Nripen Chakravarty, Chief Minister of Tripura and graced by Dr. B. D. Sharma, Vice-Chancellor, North-Eastern Hill University as the Guest of Honour. Shri Dasarath Deb, Deputy Chief Minister of Tripura also addressed the delegates. Our colleagues, Professor J. B. Ganguly, Director, CUPG Centre, and Dr. Mahadev Chakravarti, Reader & Head, Department of Modern History at the Centre did us great honour as Chairman of the Reception Committee and the Local Secretary of the Session respectively.

We are grateful to the Calcutta University Post-Graduate Centre, Agartala for hosting the Session and warm hospitality offered to the delegates. The administration, members of the teaching faculties and the students' community in the Centre were all involved in the Session. The Centre received generous support from the Government of Tripura. The Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister and their cabinet colleagues generously spared time from their schedules to be with the delegates and participate in academic discussions. They entertained the delegates and offered as gifts some publications on Tripura and excellent pieces of indigenous handicrafts as token of love and affection of the people of the State. The Directorate of Information and Culture, Government of Tripura, organised colourful programmes depicting the rich cultural heritage of Tripura. Study tours were organised to the places of historical importance. On the whole, the delegates shall cherish the fond memory of the Session for a long time.

The academic standard of the Session was also very high. We have maintained our tradition of steady growth in membership pattern and the number of papers presented and discussed. Tripura is one of such areas in our region where we do not have enough historical studies. In Agartala Session, we indeed achieved a major breakthrough. Majority of the papers presented there were on Tripura. These shall certainly generate further research. The volume is a collection of sixty two papers, empirical as well as

analytical and interpretative. Some of the papers, particularly by the colleagues in other disciplines, have added to the merit of the volume by fitting well in our scheme of recording the living history.

I am personally thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. M. S. Sangma, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal and Dr. Gautam Sengupta for the ready help in editing and publishing the volume.



Shillong
The 22 August 1986

(J. B. Bhattacharjee)
General Secretary
North East India History Association

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The Bishnupriya Manipuris in Tripura : Past and Present

Rabindra Sinha

The Left Front Government's decision on 2nd February, 1985 to introduce both Bishnupriya and Meithei languages at the primary level in Tripura sparked off debates not only in the State but also in other adjoining States. While one section of the Manipuris congratulated the decision, because it fulfils their demands, a section of the Meitheis criticized it on the ground that the Bishnupriyas of Tripura are no Manipuris at all ; and that the Government's decision to recognise Bishnupriya language as a constituent part of the Manipuri language was unjust and politically motivated one. The aim of the present paper is not to go into the debates as such, but to establish that Bishnupriya and Meithei speaking people are both Manipuris.

Settlement of Manipuris in Tripura

Manipuris are not original inhabitants of the State. They are the immigrant settlers and their immigration date back to the 18th Century. While foreign aggression in their home land i.e. Manipur, and economic forces were the factors responsible for their immigration to Tripura. The matrimonial relations between the princely families of Manipur and Tripura might have also facilitated Manipuri settlement in this State.

Census Reports

In 1931 Manipuri population in the State was 19,200 and it rose to 27,940 in 1961. In both these two Censuses, there was no classification of Manipuris as Meitheis and Bishnupriyas. In 1971 Census, Bishnupriya population was 9,884 while Meithei and Manipuri population were 4,463 and 17,144 respectively. Why such classification was made is not clear to us. The census report contains an explanation,

"Manipuri is, however, not a language as such. This is a tribe or community members of which speak two different dialects viz. Meithei and Bishnupriya. Enumerators were specially instructed to ascertain the respective dialects and to record them

separately. But some of the respondent could not answer the question properly and some enumerators did not record them rightly. Consequently all the three dialect viz. Manipuri, Bishnupriya and Meithei were classified according to the figures noted in the individual slips".¹

That the Manipuris are not tribes needs no explanation and that there are no "three dialects viz. Manipuri, Bishnupriya and Meithei" is also obvious. We find in Manipur Gazette (1979) that the Manipur Government declared,

"Manipuri language means Meitailon written in Bengali script and spoken by the majority of Manipur population".²

Again in 1983 an order of the Assam Government states,

"The Governor of Assam is pleased to approve the inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri language, as Medium of instruction in the primary stage of Education at Cachar District".³

The Commissioner for the Linguistic Minorities of India wrote a letter to the Secretary, Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Student Union, Silchar on 29th August, 1973,

"The Manipuris residing in Cachar district are divided into two distinct sub-groups, viz. Meithei and Bishnupriya."⁴

We may therefore say that Meithei and Bishnupriya categorisation of Manipuri population in the State has been done only 14 years ago and it has been done for enumerating the Manipuris along linguistic line. We cannot totally negate the possibility of misrecording in 1971 Census.

Affinities and Dissimilarities

A comparative estimate of the life and culture of Meitheis and Bishnupriyas may now be presented.

Livelihood : Plough cultivation is the mainstay of both the Meitheis and Bishnupriyas. Big farmers, middle farmers, small and marginal farmers share-croppers and landless labourers may be found among both these two sections. Women belonging to both are equally skilled and experienced in Manipuri handloom weaving. It is interesting to note that among the Bishnupriyas and Meitheis, there is no blacksmith, barber, washerman and potter.

Dress : The traditional fabrics of dressing used by the Meitheis and Bishnupriyas do hardly have any perceptible. While 'dhuti' and 'Panjabi' are in popular use among the elderly men, the women are fond of using a special type of cloths. Love for ornaments equally prevails among the women belonging to both.

Food : There is no difference between the Meitheis and Bishnu-

priyas of Tripura, so far as food habits are concerned. They are more or less vegetarian. While meat is a prohibited item of food, taking fish is permissible among both the sections.

Religion : Generally speaking Manipuris are found to worship Lord Vishnu. Both the sections, however, claim that they have been practising Vaishnava religion since the 17th Century, when the Vaishnavite religion entered into Manipur. An interesting point to note is that though the menfolk of Bishnupriya and Meithei wear the sacred threads, still all of them are not Brahmin by caste. They wear it as a mark of their identification as Kshatriya which they claim. In their society Hindu caste-structure does not exist as such; there are only Brahmins and Kshatriyas, and no Baisya or Sudra.

A characteristic feature of the Manipuri Brahmin is that, they are acceptable to both the Meitheis and the Bishnupriyas. The surnames of the Manipuri Brahmins are alike those of the Hindu Brahmins viz. Chatterjee, Mukherjee, Sharma, Banerjee etc.

In the matter of religious worship 'Singlup(s)' i.e. groups are formed around the Brahmin family (ies) in the villages. The Brahmin priest is the head of the 'Singlup'. There is a temple and a 'Mandap' i.e. gathering place for each 'Singlup'. To a Manipuri Brahmin priest a Bishnupriya as well as a Meithei may be his disciple.

Religious ceremonies observed and the Gods and Goddesses worshiped by Meitheis and Bishnupriyas are identical. The Gods Goddesses worshiped by both the two groups include Vishnu, Siva, Jagannath, Mahaprabhu Sri Chaitanya, Durga, Laxmi etc. while their religious ceremonies observed are Rathajatra, Krishnasthami, Radhasthami, Rashpurnima, holi festival, Paush - Sangkranti, Vishnu-Sangkranti etc.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the two religious books of the Meitheis and Bishnupriyas. 'Padabalis', particularly Joydeb's 'Git Gobinda', are the most popular religious songs.

A singer, a dancer, a music player, and a 'Guru', whether belonging to Meithei or Bishnupriya groups, are equally respectable and acceptable to all Meitheis and Bishnupriyas.

Art : The rich heritage in the art of dancing is common to both Meitheis and Bishnupriyas. The influence of Vaishnavite religion on Manipuri dance is well-known. To both Meitheis and Bishnupriyas dance appears to be an integral part of their social life and religious worship. Based on the life history of Lord Krishna Manipuri dance has evolved and developed. Thus 'Rakhal Nritya'.

'Kalanka Bhanjan', 'Man Bhanjan', etc. are the most popular dance drama among the Manipuris belonging both Meithei and Bishnupriya. The musical instruments viz. 'Manjir', 'Kartal', 'Khul', 'Mridanga' etc. are found to be commonly used by both Meitheis and Bishnupriyas in all social and religious ceremonies.

Though the marital relation between the Meitheis and the Bishnupriyas is not socially practised, a 'Gandharba' type of marriage between these two linguistic groups cannot be denied. In general, 'Prajapatya' type of marriage is the popular system. To both these groups women are accorded a place of honour in their respective social structure. 'Satidaha' system is not reported to be present in their respective societies.

In the matter of religion, some differences may be ascertained. Bishnupriyas are all Hindu Vaishnav and their surname is Singh or Singha or Sinha. Meitheis are also predominantly Hindu Vaishnavs and only a small section of them are Muslims. The surnames of the Meithei speaking Muslims are 'Sekh', 'Khan' etc. Surnames like 'Datta', 'Roy' are also found among the 'Kirtaniya' belonging to Meithei Linguistic group.

Folk dance like 'Thabal Chungra' 'Lai Harauba', 'Khamba thaibi' which are performed by the Meitheis are non-existent among the Bishnupriyas. On the other hand, the cultural competition like 'Kartikar Phangna' organised by the Bishnupriyas are not at all popular among the Meitheis.

Conclusion

We therefore, see that excepting the linguistic difference, the differences in other spheres of life of the Meitheis and Bishnupriyas are minor and insignificant. The debate that has come up with the Left Front Government's decision to introduce both Meithei and Bishnupriya languages at the primary level has got no historical basis. To conclude we may say that the Meitheis and Bishnupriyas are two sub-heads under the head "Manipuri", and that their continued unity shall contribute to Indian National integrity.

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