

# THE BISHNUPRIYA

Mrs. Shibani ( Biswas ) Das

*Dissertation*

SUBMITTED

IN

PART FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT OF THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

To

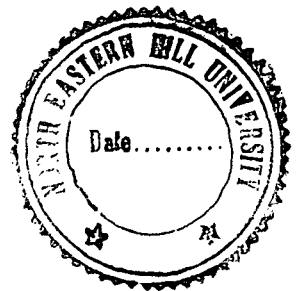


DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY  
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY

SHILLONG (MEGHALAYA)

INDIA

APRIL, 1987





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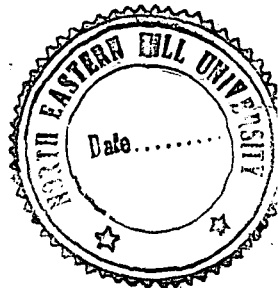
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This is to certify that Mrs. Shibani Biswas(Das) has satisfactorily completed all the course requirements in the Master of Philosophy programme in Anthropology:

- i) Systems of theory and data processing
- ii) Culture and cognition
- iii) Historical Methodology
- iv) Philosophy of social science.

She is permitted to submit her M.Phil Dissertation to North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India.



  
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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation  
"The Bishmupriya", submitted by Mrs. Shibani (Biswas)  
Das in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of  
Philosophy to the North-Eastern Hill University,  
Shillong, is a record of bonafide research work carried  
out by her under my supervision and guidance.

The result embodied in this dissertation have not  
been submitted to any other University or Institute for  
the award of any degree or diploma.

In habit and character Mrs. Shibani (Biswas) Das  
is a fit and proper person for the degree of M. Phil.

  
(A.P. Sinha)  
Reader

Department of Anthropology,  
North-Eastern Hill University,  
Shillong

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## CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter - I	
INTRODUCTION	1-11
Chapter - II	
CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS	12
Chapter - III	
THE BISHNUPRIYA IDENTITY - A HISTORICAL SURVEY	21
Chapter - IV	
THE BISHNUPRIYA IDENTITY - REVIEW OF INDICATORS	46
Chapter - V	
THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND	83
Chapter - VI	
THE BISHNUPRIYA IN CACHAR - AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE	125
Chapter - VII	
DISCUSSION	202-223
Chapter - VIII	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	224

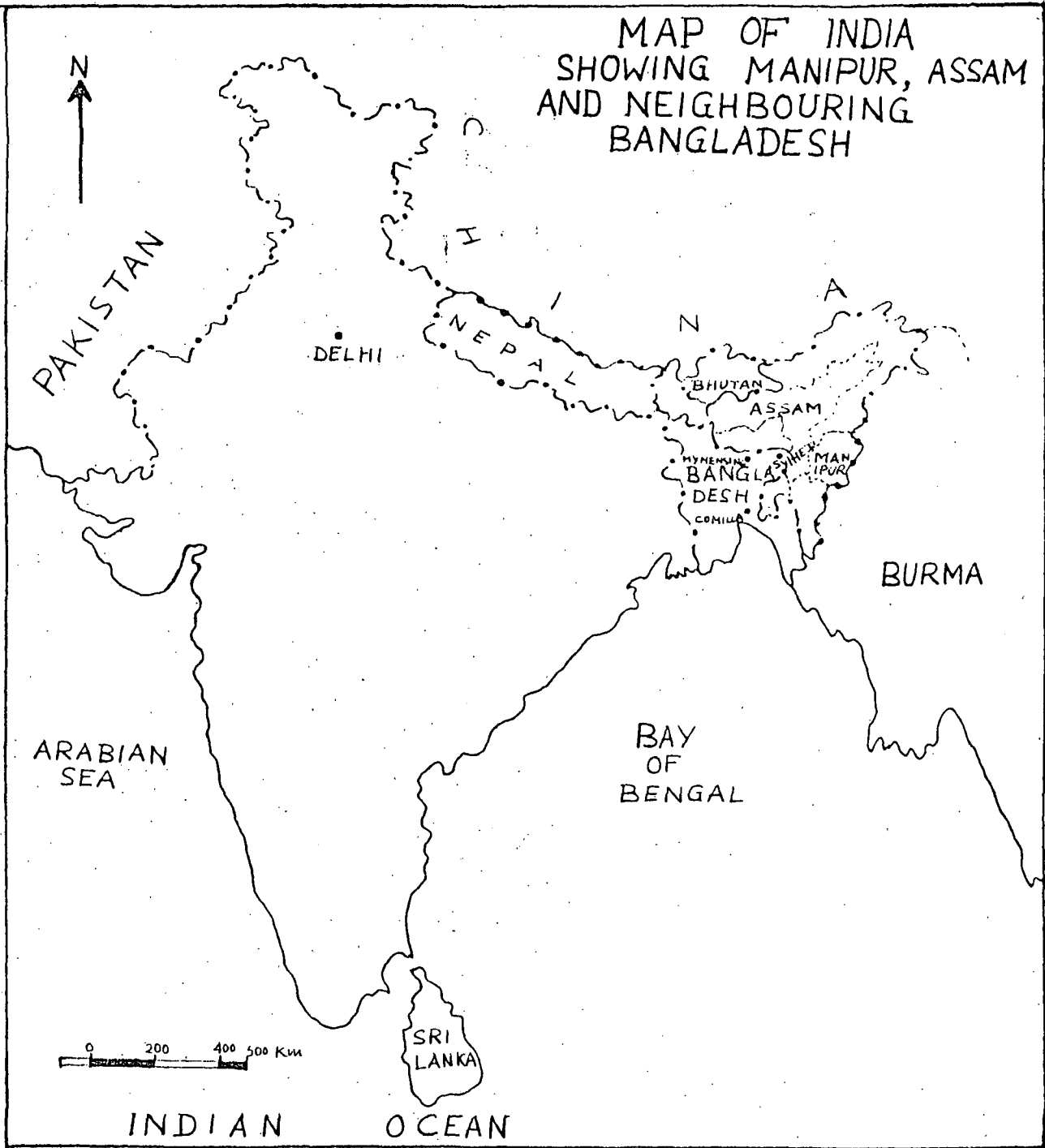
## List of Maps

1. Map of India - Showing Manipur, Assam and Neighbouring Bangla Desh
2. Map of Manipur
3. Map of Cachar District - Showing Bhakatpur and Kabirgram
4. Map of Bhakatpur, Cachar, Assam
5. Map of Kabirgram, Cachar, Assam

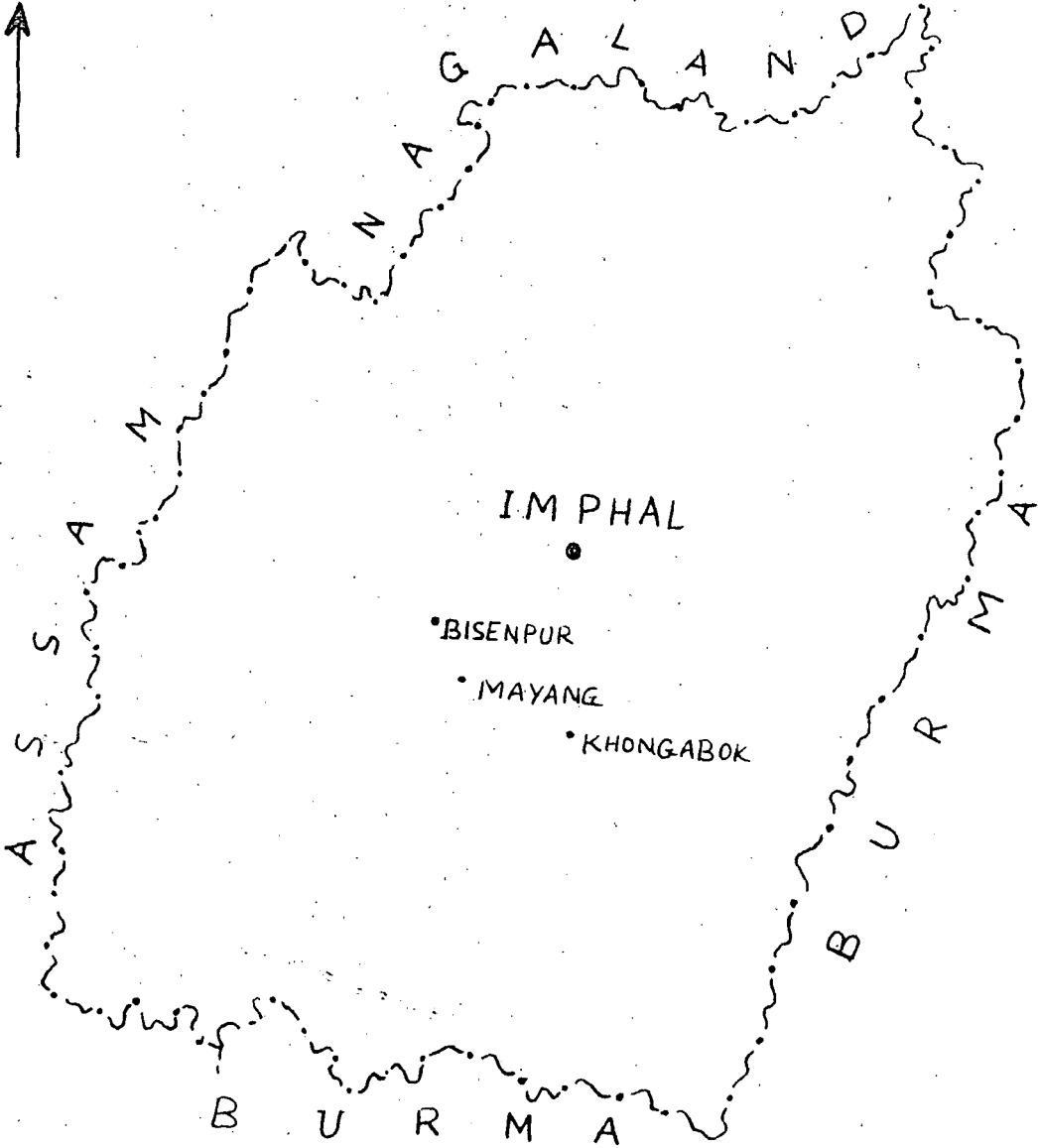
## List of Tables

	Page
1. The Male-Female sex ratio between 1951-1986 in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram	96
2. Marital condition in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram	98
3. Age at Marriage	100
4. Level of Literacy	100
5. Economy, modes of subsistence	102
6. Number of families depending on both agriculture and other occupations	104
7. Number of families absolutely depending on occupations other than agriculture	105
8. Types of family	157

MAP OF INDIA  
SHOWING MANIPUR, ASSAM  
AND NEIGHBOURING  
BANGLADESH



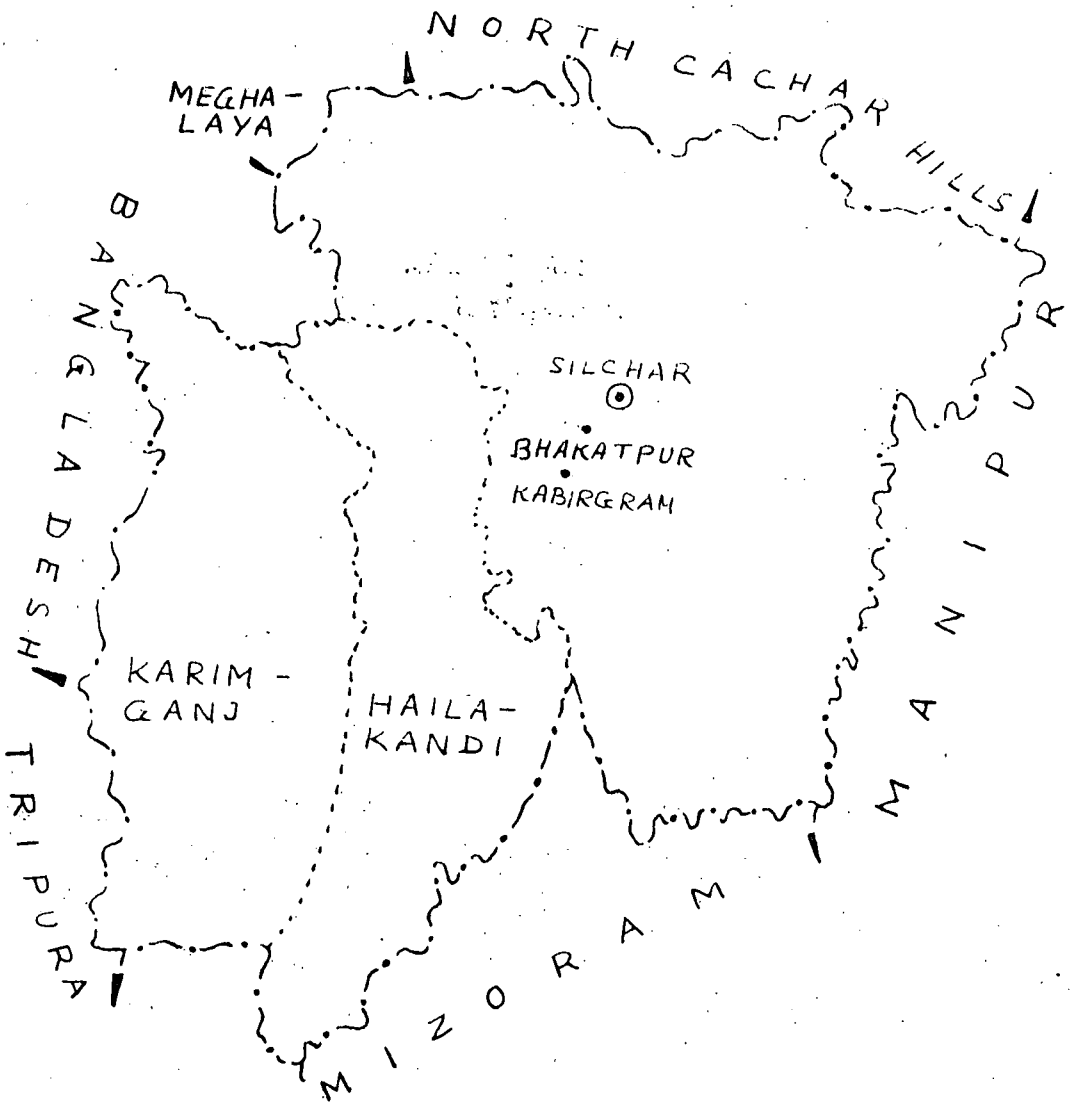
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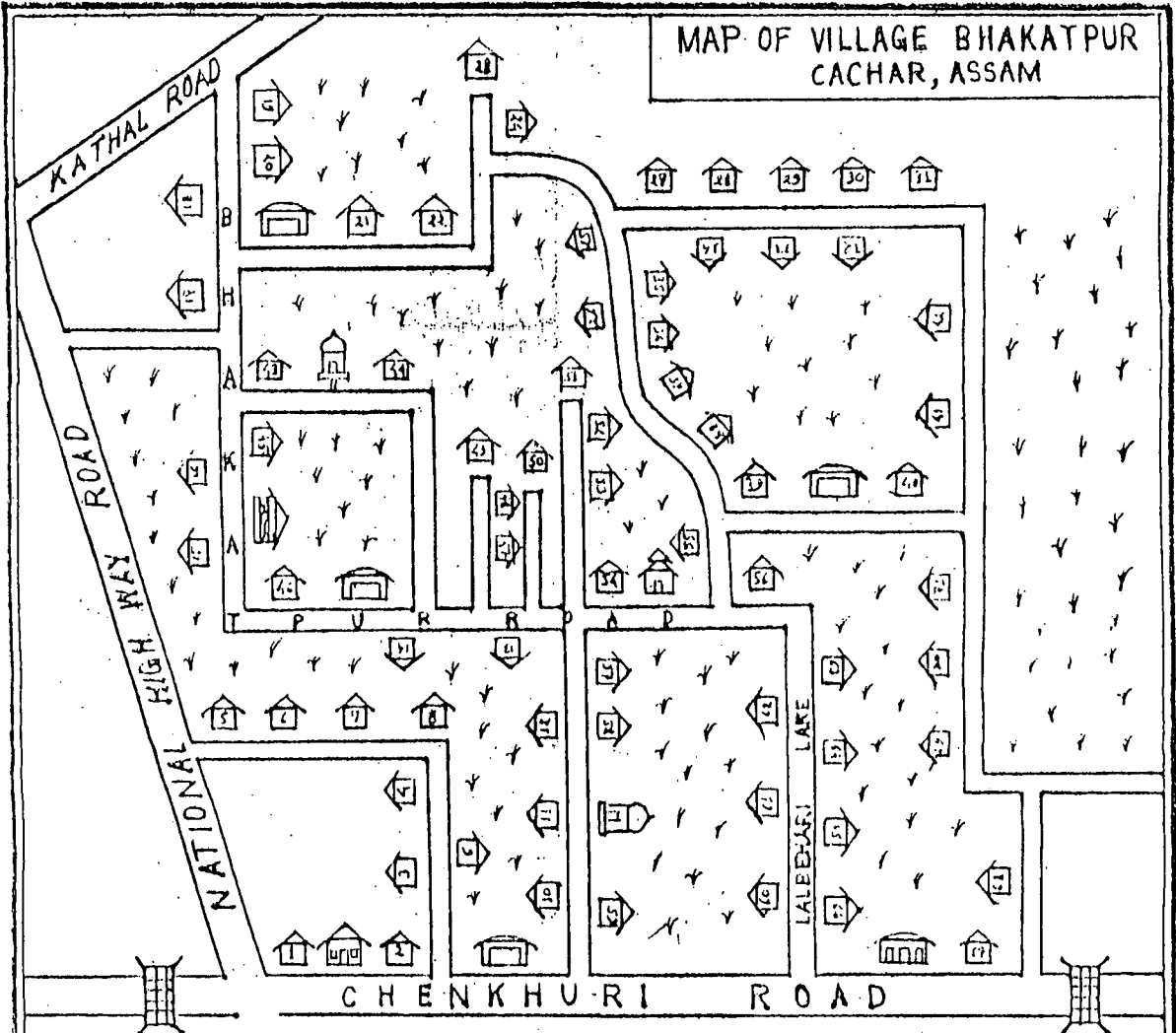
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











MAP OF VILLAGE BHAKATPUR  
CACHAR, ASSAM



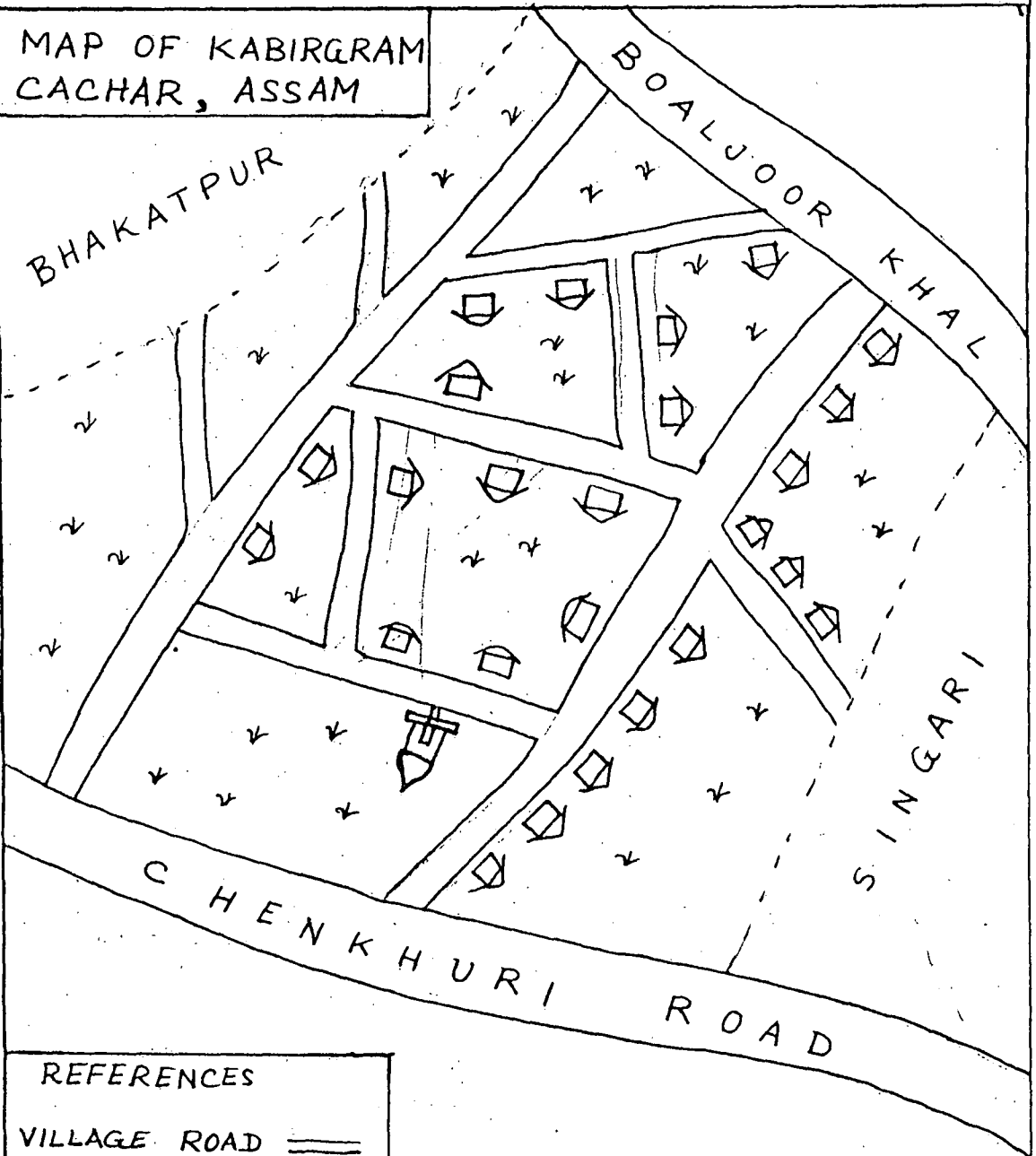
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
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- CLUB 
- MUSIC SCHOOL 
- BRIDGE 
- PADDY FIELD 

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MAP OF KABIRGRAM  
CACHAR, ASSAM



REFERENCES

VILLAGE ROAD	==
HOUSE	
TEMPLE	
PADDY FIELD	v



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CHAPTER I

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INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the Bishmupriya. North-East India is a multi-ethnic region, and the Bishmupriya is one of the prominent groups of the region. Members of this ethnic group prefer to be referred to as 'Bishmupriya Manipuri' at least on formal occasions. Cachar district of Assam, areas around Agartala town in Tripura, and Comilla and Sylhet districts in Bangladesh have a substantial and prominent concentration today.

In October, 1983, the Government of Assam took the decision to include the Bishmupriya Manipuri language as one of the mediums of instruction in the primary stage of education in Cachar and Karimganj districts. In February 1985, the Government of Tripura also took a similar decision, i.e., to recognize Bishmupriya Manipuri as one of the mediums of instruction at the primary level. The decision of the Government of Assam to provide recognition to Bishmupriya Manipuri language as medium of instruction sparked off a severe controversy on the justification to recognize Bishmupriya as a 'Manipuri' language. The Government of Manipur "expressed their resentment on the decision of the Government of Assam and raised objection" that "the Manipuri language is one and

only language that has been accepted as state language of Manipur from the time of Maharajas of Manipur. And therefore, there can be a language spoken by the Bishmupriyas as 'Bishmupriya' language but there can never be a 'Bishmupriya Manipuri language' ... The Bishmupriya language is not a constituent part of the Manipuri language, as such, it can not claim the use of the word "Manipuri" as "Bishmupriya Manipuri language ...".

The Government of Manipur objected to suffixing the word "Manipuri" after "Bishmupriya" as, according to them the 'Bishmupriya are not Manipuris'.

Again, the decision taken by the Government of Assam to introduce Bishmupriya Manipuri Language at the primary stage of Education as a medium of instruction in the districts of Cachar and Karimganj, was warmly welcomed by the Bishmupriya ... 'It may be recalled at this stage that Mr. G.A. Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India mentioned the number of Bishmupriya Manipuri speaking population of 23,500 of whom there were 1000 speakers in Manipur and the remaining 22,500 speakers in Cachar and Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) as recorded in 1891. With due regards to such a population of high cultural heritage the Bangladesh Government have already recognised the Bishmupriya Manipuri and provided broadcasting facilities

in this language at the Radio Bangladesh, Sylhet and have taken up adequate measures for their material and cultural development. The Government of Tripura also have recognised the Bishmupriya Manipuri language, published a Fortnightly journal in this language and have taken up other measures for implementation of introduction of the language and for safeguard of their other interests. It is, therefore, clear that the aforesaid Governments have always been treating the Bishmupriyas as a major section of Manipuris. ... From this point of view, the opinion of Government of Manipur may be considered quite irrelevant and the Government of Manipur can not, however, act as the guardian of the Bishmupriya Manipuri speaking population of Assam and Tripura<sup>1</sup>.

This controversy provides the cue for the present study.

The Bishmupriya situation offers a challenging opportunity for anthropologists and other social scientists for ethnographic and comparative study of an ethnic group with the intention to study its social history and dynamics of ethnicity.

The attempt to write about the Bishmupriya presents some crucial questions which emerge from the above referred controversy on suffixing 'Manipuri' to the name of the

Bishmupriya. The questions are: (i) the social history of the Bishmupriya, and (ii) ethnography of the Bishmupriya now inhabiting Cachar district of Assam.

The focus on the social history of the Bishmupriya is with the intention to trace the origin of distinctive identity of the community, the Bishmupriya. There are two questions related with this: (a) the history of the origin of the Bishmupriya Manipur as a distinct ethnic group, and (b) the process associated with the continuity and maintenance of this identity. In relation to the first part of this question we will have to take our attention to Manipur, the original abode of the Bishmupriya.

The second part of the study is devoted to an ethnographic study of the Bishmupriya in Cachar district of Assam. This has been made with the intention (a) to identify the salient social and cultural characteristics of the Bishmupriya, and (b) how these have 'functioned' (served) as basis of maintaining their distinct identity in Assam.

So far very little written information is available on the Bishmupriya. Much has been to be done to reconstruct their history of origin (in Manipur) and their migration (to their present abodes in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh). This was one of the reasons that the present study is of a

rather exploratory depending mainly on ethnography and reconstruction/compilation of available historical references. The main thrust of the present study thus is to compile sufficient ethnographic information on the Bishmapriya. It is expected that this will help to outline the social, cultural and historical contexts of 'politics of ethnicity' among the Bishmapriya.

In Chapter IV, I have tried to compile information relating to 'the people (the Bishmapriya) and their land'. This contains discussion, the distribution of the Bishmapriya, their demographic characteristics and distribution, and their geographical distribution.

Chapter IV deals with 'The Bishmapriya Identity - Historical Survey'. A review of this history takes our attention, for obvious reasons, to Manipur the original abode of the Bishmapriya.

The Bishmapriya, on their part, make two claims: First, that they are (the original inhabitants of Manipur, and not the Meitei.) The Bishmapriya claim that "Manipur is an ancient Aryan land ruled by Indo-Aryan people for several centuries, and that the Bishmapriya are the Indo-Aryan people and the first cultured ruling race of Manipur, while the Meitei are the Mongolian people and later immigrants to Manipur".

The Meitei, the main inhabitants of Imphal valley, in Manipur, are followers of Vaishnav' sect of Hinduism. The second claim of the Bishmupriya relates to this. They claim that, compared to the Meitei, they are the 'original and true 'Vaishnava'. Reference to mythology and historical evidences is cited by the Bishmupriya to impress their claim. It is interesting to note that both the Maitei as well as the Bishmupriya trace their origin to Babrubahan, the son of Chittrangada by the third Pandava, Arjuna, of the Mahabharata episodes. The question of the origin of the Bishmupriya has its share of myth as well as history.

They have an interesting history of migration to their present abodes outside Manipur. In Chapter III, I have tried to present an exploratory overview of migration of the Bishmupriya from Manipur to their present abodes in parts of Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh.

Besides origin and migration this chapter also deals with language and literature and their cultural forms - dance and music.

The Bishmupriya language is of the Indo-Aryan group, whereas that of the Meitei is of Tibeto-Burman group. The Bishmupriya language may have a number of Meitei words, but it is nearer to the Bengali and Assamese language, with

which it shares many words. Through the study of their language and literature it is possible to trace out the origin of distinct identity and the process associated with continuity and maintenance of this identity.

Ordinarily one gets acquainted with the Manipuris through the famous Manipuri dance and music. Much attention has been given to trace out the myth of origin of dance and music and the mode of performance to know about their social history.

Before we proceed to the substantive parts of study of the Bishmupriya, it will be useful to make a concise but brief discussion on conceptual clarification and theoretical discussion. So, in the chapter II, I have tried to put the relevance of the conceptual frameworks presented with reference to the present study. The theoretical and conceptual review has been made with the hope that these will suggest the appropriate indicators for the study of the Bishmupriya phenomena.

Chapter VI deals with the 'Ethnographic study of the Bishmupriya in Assam'. The main crux of the conflict between the Bishmupriya and the Meitei has been more heightened and pronounced outside Manipur. In terms of cultural and social traits, the dividing line between these two ethnic groups is rather very thin. The cultural and social

difference between the Bishmupriya and the Meitei is occasional rather than frequent. The only difference is that what is occasional in practical terms, has been made pronounced and prominent in Assam while in Manipur it has the tendency of levelling.

In the study attempt has been made to identify salient social and cultural characteristics of the Bishmupriya and how these have functioned to maintain distinct identity. The study also compares the socio-cultural traits of the Bishmupriya with the Meitei on the one hand, and with the Bengali on the other. This has been undertaken with the intention to outline the pattern of culture-transfer and culture-accommodation as revealed by the Bishmupriya in context of two situations, (i) historically, in the context of Manipur and (ii) contemporary in the context of Cachar district of Assam.

The point relating to method of study which needs mention is about the source of data and the method of data collection.

Much data of the present study is from secondary published material and interview of 'knowledgeable Bishmupriya'. Not much precise, and systematic information is available about this ethnic group. The more substantial part of writing on this community is by public leaders and

scholars from this community; such as M.L. Choudhury's 'Manipurer Itihas', D. Datta's 'Assamer Itihas', M.K. Sinha's 'Manipurer Frachin Itihas', L. Sinha's 'Manipuri RasLeela', S. Sinha's 'Manipurer Itihas', K.P. Sinha's 'Prabandha Mala'. All of these are either in Bengali or in Bishmupriya Manipuri language (Bengali Script). The Indian historian R.M. Nath's 'The Background of Assamese Culture' has produced useful book in English. The writings in English are mostly in the form of 'Let History and Facts Speak about Manipuris'.

Data have also been collected by intensive ethnographic study of two Bishmupriya villages. In Cachar district there are 16 villages which have a substantial Bishmupriya population. Some of these are inhabited by Bishmupriya only. I have classified these as 'Bishmupriya villages' and 'mixed villages'. For the present study we have selected one 'Bishmupriya' and one 'mixed' village. Ethnographic data on the socio-cultural and economic aspects of life of the Bishmupriya has been obtained from these villages. For the sake of comparison, some town dwelling Bishmupriya, those from Silchar, were also interviewed. I visited each house in 'Bishmupriya village' 'mixed village', i.e. in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram, respectively. The full census of population of all households in two villages were taken. For Silchar town, a sample of

50 households were selected out of 108 households. The sample was further selected in such a way that it contained the people from different economic categories.

The data on life cycle and annual cycle were collected by personal as well as group interview. In this type of interview, the interviewer exercises no control, provides no direction and has no brief or pre-determined set of questions to ask. I merely engaged the interviewee about his experiences and feelings.

Most of the villagers do not keep personal documents of their feelings, moods, reactions, etc. to their social milieu. So, I took case history to collect detailed information about the particular events and to show the variation.

I then drew genealogical tables because genealogical knowledge plays an important role among people who can often trace back several generations and identify a large number of collaterals by name. Through this method I knew about the marital relationships as well as their locations.

In the field I directly observed whatever practicable. I attended Bishmupriya festivals and marriage ceremony to observe their behaviour during these occasions. It gave me an opportunity to check on their narration and to note discrepancies between narration and actual performance.

In all cases, for accuracy I collected information from several persons on the same topic. I also collected information from the above mentioned three places with a view to cross-checking or for noting variations, if any, on the same topic.

I must admit that it will only be a third person who will be in a position to judge how far I have succeeded in being objective in presenting my data on the Bishnupriya with whom I have been living from my childhood, from whom I received hospitality, frankness and love.

As mentioned earlier, the present study is with a limited purpose. It is towards part-fulfilment of the M.Phil course. It is the product of nearly six months of field study during 1986 for a dissertation which is one of the requirements besides written courses, for M.Phil evaluation. The results of the present study have provided very strong stimulus to accept the challenge to study "social history" vis-a-vis dynamics of ethnicity.

Chapter - II

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CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND THEORETICAL  
DISCUSSIONS

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## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

The Bishmapriya situation offers a challenging opportunity for anthropologists and social scientists for ethnographic and comparative study of an ethnic group with the intention to study its social history and dynamics of ethnicity.

The relevance of the conceptual frameworks may be presented with reference to the present study.

'Community' and 'ethnic group' are two terms which possibly an anthropologist, and so also other social scientist will like to use to refer to a phenomena like the 'Bishmapriya'. The two terms are not mutually exclusive, they are rather overlapping in many senses. They represent two different levels of perception by the social scientist. A community is a permanent aggregate of persons and is defined as "a collectivity of persons who share a common culture and reside in a relatively limited space or locality... some writers use the terms society and community synonymously as and when they speak of the national community". (Kimball, Young et al. 1962). An ethnic group can be defined as a community which shares common (i) biological, (ii) social-cultural and (iii) historical traits. Ethnic identity is the

conscious realization part of a community's ideology. The two terms have been conceived in two different contexts and with different perception of the reality. Hence the distinction should be taken as not only of semantic value but also of operational value. Ethnicity, as mentioned above, needs to be taken as an 'ideology'. This ideology is quite often within the wider context of political nationalism.

Now, what is 'social history' and 'how to study social history'? These are two questions on which much learned work has been produced. Social anthropologists, political scientists, and historians have devoted their attention to this. While conducting the present study some of the main works on this, specially with reference to India, had been consulted. It will be useful to make a critical review of the different views on the above mentioned context.

For the present, in view of our operational needs, we have considered the views by different scholars, and adopted the following simple sequence of argument to define social history and to determine the strategy to study it. We have this strategy helpful in the study of the Bishrupriya as outlined above.

Social history in the most simple terms can be defined as the history of a society. In operational terms such a definition of social history can have two possible

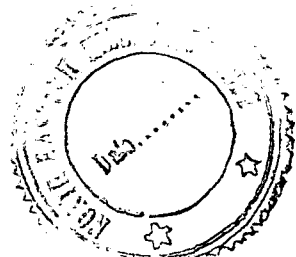
dimensions - (i) the history of the origin of the community and (ii) the 'social aspect' of the history of the society. In the second context of the definition of social history, 'Social' is conceived as distinct from 'economic', 'political' and 'religious' history of the community. These distinctions, as mentioned earlier, are more operational rather than theoretical. Each of these four aspects, viz., social, economic, political and religious, are (i) intimately inter-linked, and thus (ii) any phenomena in one of them has its influence on the remaining three. In the present study this stand relating to the definition of 'social history' has been taken as it is expected that this will help in discription and analysis of 'dynamics of ethnicity' among the Bishnupriya.

Refering back to the language controversy mentioned earlier, the dispute was in regard to adding the suffix 'Manipuri' to the name of Bishnupriya. There are two opposing views on this. There is the view of the Bishnupriya who justify this, and there is the view of the Meitei who context it.

The questions (a) social historian would like to address himself to will be: (i) how do the groups maintain their social identity, and, in the tone to explain this (ii) what indicate the distinct social identity. Barth (1969) "is critical of the traditional conception of ethnic boundaries which allows us to assume that boundary maintenance is

unproblematical and follows from the isolation which itemized characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers, spontaneous and organized enmity". Barth is critical of this traditional definition as, according to him such a perception leads us "to imagine each group developing its cultural and social form in relative isolation". There is some useful commentary on this traditional definition, as criticized by Barth above. The commentary is with specific reference to situations in north-east India. The Commentary is by E. Leach on the works of Hutton, Mills, Parry and others on the hilly peoples of north-east India. According to Leach, "in all these books it is taken as axiomatic that the group which speaks a distinct language or dialect is, by definition a separate tribe or tribal section. Each such section is then treated as a distinct cultural and ethnographic entity with a distinct history and separate continuity in time ... The Sema and the Angami (Nagas) are geographically adjacent, but they are not represented as interacting in any institutional sense. This whole approach seems to me to rest on false premises." Assuming, therefore, that geographic contact inevitably leads to constant interaction, Barth has reduced the ethnic groups into 'categories of ascription'. According to him 'ethnic group only persist as significant units if they

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simply marked differences in behaviour, i.e., persisting cultural differences'.

A close look at the above mentioned debate helps to locate the indicators in terms of which the phenomena of emergence of ethnic identity, and its continuity, can be studied. In the case of the Bishrupriya, we need to identify the 'categories of ascription' with the Bishrupriya which distinguish them from the Meitei. In more precise terms, in terms of which the Bishrupriya claim to be different from the Meitei but at the same time claim to be Manipuri and the true, rather original, representatives of Vaishnavism in Manipur.

Referring back to the cue to the present study, the recognition of Bishrupriya as a language for medium of instruction in Cachar district of Assam. This situation represents an example of 'identity crisis', a culmination of the situation. It is mentioned that "in the process of political development an identity crisis occurs when a community finds that what it had once unquestionably accepted as the physical and psychological definition of its collective self are no longer acceptable under new historic conditions" (Pye, 1971). One of the forms of identity crisis with ethnic groups.

The controversy relating to the identity of the Bishnupriya as 'Manipuri' can be viewed from this perspective. It will be interesting to note that the crisis is only with the Bishnupriya living outside Manipur. The Bishnupriya now residing in Manipur have either to a great extent merged, or subdued their distinct identity vis-a-vis the Meitei identity. Moreover, there does not apparently exist any situation of crisis of ethnic identity for the Bishnupriya now in Manipur, as by the very fact of their living in Manipur, they are 'Manipuri'.

It is often argued (Pye, op cit.) that "there are two basic ways in which identity crisis based upon ethnic or subnational groups, can be resolved, either by assimilation or by accomodation based upon some degree of mutual respect and toleration."

Karl Deutsch (1953) has suggested six dynamic factors that appear to determine the rate of assimilation: degree of similarity of communication habits; level of learning capacity on the one side and the teaching capacity on the other; the frequency of contacts; the material rewards and penalties; the values and desires of both groups; and finally the existence of any social and political symbols and actual barriers to assimilation. On the basis of these considerations it would seem that relatively few of the "identity crises in the currently developing world are likely

to be resolved by assimilation. Resolution by accommodation requires not only a degree of tolerance but a belief that the common support of nationhood is more beneficial to each group involved than is their separate and competitive existence. This too is a troublesome question".

The controversy apart, the aforementioned analysis provides a framework for the study of dynamics of ethnicity among the Bishrupriya. Besides the above two approaches, we need to search for an 'approach' which will answer yet another questions, the genesis of ethnic identities. The above two approaches, by Barth and by Pye, focus attention on (i) attributes (Barth) and (ii) process of interaction (Pye, Deutsch). One, a survey of relevant literature on the question of emergence of ethnic identities it has been found that social scientists dealing with this question have identified three possible reasons for the emergence of ethnic identities. These possible reasons can be: (i) manipulation of economic and political resources. According to this explanation, it is interpreted that in a particular territory, at a particular point of time, a social group (community), with some distinctive identity characteristics, may attempt to manipulate the situation for its own economic and political interests.

(ii) There are others who argue that the rise of ethnicity takes place in situations where social mobility is difficult. They argue that the rise of tribal identities in India has been because the Hindu society does not have any provision for according social status to the tribals, as a result of which primordial collectivities have assumed pronounced ethnic identities.

(iii) There is a third category of explanation. This interprets the rise of ethnic identities as the outcome of 'process of survival'. The threat to 'survival' for a community arises when there is change in the context of the living in the community. This explanation defines change in terms of change consequent to rise of education, political awareness, technology, communication, and all that goes along with these. The 'survival theory' considers the earlier to explanations as 'too restricted', Perhaps they are. In fact we need to examine each of these three, in combination and with necessary modification.

The sequence of events, such as recognition of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language as one of mediums of instruction in primary level of education in Cachar district and to bring in daily 15-minutes programme in Bishnupriya from AIR, Silchar, and recognition of the Bishnupriya as one of the OBC

(other backward classes) in Cachar district by the Government of Assam, suggest that to a great extent the process of emergence of district identity of a Bishrupriya community may have its origin at another point in the history of this community, but it became heightened and reinforced through process of 'manipulation of economic and political resources'.

The theoretical and conceptual review has been made because these suggest the appropriate indicators for the study of the Bishrupriya.

Chapter - III

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THE SOCIAL IDENTITY - A HISTORICAL SURVEY

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## THE BISHNUPRIYA IDENTITY - A HISTORICAL SURVEY

## I

There is deep controversy between the Meitei and the Bishnupriya on the use of the suffix 'Manipuri' along with the name 'Bishnupriya'. The controversy is quite entangled and demands to be understood in its proper historical and contemporary perspective.

As mentioned earlier, the Bishnupriya is a community the origin of which in its present form is traced to Manipur. As at present we find the Bishnupriya inhabiting Manipur as well as some places outside it, mainly the Cachar district of Assam and parts of Tripura and Bangladesh. These Bishnupriya who are outside Manipur give their full name as 'Bishnupriya Manipuri'. The Meitei object to the Bishnupriya using the 'suffix' Manipuri along with their name.

There are two situations. It will be interesting to note the contrast between them. One situation refers to the Bishnupriya in Manipur today. This refers to the Bishnupriya in the place where the identity of the Bishnupriya in the present form emerged. This is the Imphal valley of Manipur, where the Meitei form the major population group.

The other situation relates to the Bishnupriya presently inhabiting territories outside Manipur (the Cachar district of Assam and parts of Tripura and Bangladesh). In each of these territories the size of Meitei and Bishnupriya population is more or less equal.

The Meitei object to the use of the designation 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' by the Bishnupriya residing outside Manipur. The Meitei feel that the use of the 'suffix' Manipuri by these Bishnupriya, i. e. those living in Cachar district of Assam and in parts of Tripura and Bangladesh, gives the impression that the Bishnupriya represent the 'Manipuri' community. The Meitei want to avoid any such situation which should give the 'wrong' impression that the Bishnupriya represent (all it may mean) the 'Manipuri' community. To strongly emphasize this apprehension, the Meitei seem to go a step further to prove that the Bishnupriya is not a community indogenous to Manipur, even those living in Manipur today are 'non-locals'.

Any study on the social history of the Bishnupriya requires a close look on some of the questions, such as whether the Bishnupriya is a community with its origin in Manipur ? What is its history ? In the present study we will attempt to review the available historical and mythological references commonly cited by each, viz. the Bishnupriya and the Meitei.

The question of the origin of the Bishmupriya has its share of myth as well as history. There is the myth that the origin of the Bishmupriya can be traced back to the days of Mahabharata. This is commonly referred to as the "Babrubahana legend". This version of the origin of the Bishmupriya is strongly put forward by the vocal leaders among the Bishmupriya presently living in Cachar district of Assam. Some of the leading names in this connection are M.K. Sinha, S. Sinha and L.B. Sinha. Each of these has written on the origin of the Bishmupriya, as well on the culture of their community.

There is a strong belief among the people of Manipur that the history of Manipur can be traced back to the Manipur mentioned in Mahabharata. This view is to a great extent shared by both the Meitei as well as the Bishmupriya. The latter, however, are perhaps the more vocal advocates of the similarity.

According to them, "Arjuna, third Pandava of the Mahabharata at the closing time of visiting pilgrimages towards the eastern side of India entered Manipur and married Chitrangada (daughter of Chitravahana). Arjuna got a son named Babhrubahana by Chitrangada and offered him to Chitravahana according to the promise made at the time of marriage. After doing this he left Manipur for Hastinapur and reached there ultimately. A few years after Arjuna again

came to Manipur during the time of his roaming with the sacrificial horse and fought with his son Babhrubahana and was severely defeated by the latter. However, Arjuna was saved ultimately and he invited his son to be present in the Aswamedha at Hastinapur. Accordingly, Babhrubahana attended the ceremony and returned to Manipur with 'Vishnu-murti' offered by Yuddhisthira. Babhrubahana then placed Vishnu image in Manipur and erected a temple over it. In accordance with the name of Vishnu, the temple is known as Vishnupuri and the place Vishnupur, which became the capital of Manipur. In this way, Babhrubahana began to rule Manipur with the regular worship of the 'Vishnu-murti' and the descendants coming from the royal family of the Kshatriya King Babhrubahana have been known as Bishnupriya Manipuri since the epic age as they have been worshipping the Vishnu image as keen devotees since that time."

To sum up the version, it stands thus:

Firstly, Manipur of Mahabharata is identical with modern Manipur of eastern India.

Secondly, King Babhrubahana of the epic age is the progenitor or the ancestor of the Bishnupriya sect of Manipuri. He brought the Vishnu image to Manipur from Hastinapur and built a temple over it. The place where the temple was erected is called 'Bihmpur', recently named as

Bishempur. The temple is known as 'Bishnupuri' temple.

Thirdly, the term 'Bishnupriya' has been associated with this sect of Manipuri since the epic age as they have been worshipping the God 'Vishnu' as the keen devotees since that time.

## II

Besides the mythological interpretation of their origin, as forwarded by the Bishnupriya, it is possible to locate a number of interpretations based on historical evidences. It will be interesting to note that interpretations of this category are forwarded by both the Bishnupriya as well as by others. It may be recalled that the Bishnupriya strongly advocate the claim that they are as much original inhabitants of Manipur as the Meitei. In this connection the Bishnupriya further claim that they represent the true and original followers of 'vaishnav-ism' in Manipur and the Meitei are the later 'Vaishnav' followers. In other words, the Bishnupriya claim a superior position for themselves as compared to the Meitei as they are 'the true vaishnava' in Manipur.

It will thus be interesting, in this connection, to review the versions as forwarded by (1) the Bishnupriya, and (ii) the Meitei. In this Section we will review some of the

historical references on (a) the origin of the Bishnupriya as an ethnic group, and (b) on the origin of Vaishnavism in Manipur with special reference to the preceding question.

The Bishnupriya claim that "Manipur is an ancient Aryan land ruled by Indo-Aryan people for several centuries, and that the Bishnupriya Manipuris are the Indo-Aryan people and the first cultured ruling race of Manipur, while the Meitei are the Mongolian people and the later immigrants to Manipur."

Hodson and some British administrator-scholars who preceded him traced the origin of the Meitei to some of the Naga tribes inhabiting the valley and the neighbouring areas. There is a mention in one of these writings that "since their conversion to Hinduism, the Meiteis have claimed themselves a Hindoo descent." This claim, in his report of the Eastern Frontier, Captain Pemberton rejects, and says "we may safely conclude them to be descendants from a Tartar Colony from China." (reference, Hodson, 6).

According to a Meitei scholar, "The original people of Manipur belong to the Tibeto-Mongolite group. The latest analysis of the Manipur Hindus, however, has shown some considerably amount of mixed blood among them. The entry of the Brahmins into the Manipur valley bring the last 500 years was the principal factor accounting for the

mixed blood. The immigrants were mostly males. They became Meitei Brahmins, married Meitei girls. .... The history and the cultural growth of Manipur will have to be studied and understood in the light of (these) circumstances .... There are many modern scholars especially in Manipur who claim that the Manipur Valley civilization is ancient in the true sense of the word. The author, however, would not like to share any false belief in a conception of the past history of Manipur which is the outcome of false pride now entertained by many in this respect." (Tombi Singh, 1975, 49).

Coming to the reference of the Bishrupriya, the Meitei argue that "the emergence of this community (the Bishrupriya) in the context of the recent history of Manipur must have been consequent upon the contacts between the kings of Manipur and other communities, especially the eastern zone, comprising of Assam and Bengal." (Tombi Singh, 1975, 100).

R.M. Nath, has produced a scholarly treatise on the 'Background of Assamese Culture'. According to him, "It is quite reasonable to surmise that the Austric Khachais (Khasis) who have submitted to the influence of the Bodo and the Asura culture and stayed in the plains of Kamrup, what that country was over-run by those races, gradually turned into a mixed race with mixed culture and language. At a later time due to a fresh political turmoil in Kamrup instead

of migrating to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills where they were socially banned by the orthodox batch of their race, they migrated further eastwards and settled in the valley of the wide Laktak lake or Khala and were even known as the Khalachais. King Khongtekcha established an alliance with the powerful Emperor of Kamrup of the Mlechha dynasty and requested to send an army. At his request an army of Kamrup came and settled in Manipur. This people mixing with the Khalachais controlled the affairs of the state for several generations. The head quarters were at Bishrupur, so named after the tutelary deity Vishnu. Their language developed into a mixed dialect separate from prevalent in Manipur and they were designated by separate name 'Bishrupuris' now pronounced as 'Bishrupriyas' to distinguish them from the Meithei who came afterwards."

In summing up the version and in arranging the different points of it into a few lines for the convenience of our discussion, the version stands thus:

Firstly, when the Bodos and the Asuras over-ran the country, 'Kamrup' the Austric Khachais came from the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills and settled in the plains of Kamrup, and they mixing with Bodo and the Asuras formed a mixed race with a mixed language and culture.

Secondly, they (the Austric Khachais) at a later time due to fresh political turmoil in Kamrup instead of

migrating to the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills from where they were socially banned by the orthodox batch of their race migrated further eastwards and settled in the valley of the wide Lake Loktak.

Thirdly, they were known as 'Khalachais' as they were living in the valley of wide Khal.

Fourthly, King Khongtekcha of Manipur requisitioned a Kamrupi army by establishing an alliance with the then Emperor of the Mlechha dynasty of Kamrup and this army mixing with the Khalachais (those who were living in the valley of Loktak Lake) formed a mixed dialect separate from that prevalent in Manipur.

Lastly, they (the mixed race) were designated by a separate name 'Bishmupurias' now pronounced as 'Bishmupriyas' to distinguish themselves from the Meitei.

In 'Assam District Gazette, Vol.9, Part III', B.C. Allen wrote, "The Bishmupriya Manipuri almost form a separate caste and are said to be the descendants of 120 Hindu families of different castes, who were brought into valley by Garib Nowaj in the later part of eighteenth century to teach the indigenous inhabitants of the valley the customs of Hindus. They intermixed with the people of the country, but after a time the Meitheis came to the conclusion that the new comers were of inferior stock and they are now regarded with certain measure of contempt. Both parties style themselves Kshatriyas and in Manipur intermarriage with one

another is allowed".

When we analyse the version into pieces for the convenience of our discussion, it stands thus:

Firstly, the Bishrupriya are said to be the descendants of 120 Hindu families who belonged to the different castes.

Secondly, these Hindu families were brought into Manipur by Garib Nowaj in the later half of the 18th century A. D..

Thirdly, Garib Nowaj brought them to teach the natives of the country the principles of Hinduism.

Fourthly, both the parties the Meithei and the Bishrupriya style or call themselves Kshatriyas and inter-marriage between them is allowed in Manipur.

According to some of Bishrupriya leaders, "the Bishrupriyas are Manipuris who came to Manipur from Laksmipur (in Cachar) with a Salogram (Vishnu-image) called 'Vishnu' which was thought to be possessed of peculiar sanctity and which was thought to be carried to Cachar from Manipur by Marjit earlier. The party that brought it back crossed the hills first and stopped at Bishrupur where the path descends from the Laimathol Hills into the plain. They were then sent to Ningthoukhong (situated in Manipur) and the duty of

providing grass for the Raja's stable entrusted to them."

When the version is analysed into pieces, it stands thus:

Firstly, the Bishmupriyas are Manipuris who from Laksmipur of Cachar to Bishmupur of Manipur carried and brought the Vishnu-murti, which Marjit took with him in his flight to Cachar earlier.

Secondly, from Bishmupur they were sent to Ningthoukhong where they were employed as grass-cutters for Raja's stable.

In "G.A. Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India", E. Gait wrote, "The Bishmupriya are the descendants of some low-caste Bengalee Hindu who were brought captive by some king of Manipur, and Bishmupriya is a language of those captives".

According to Prof. N. Tombi Singh, "It is possible that some kings might have brought some of them (Bishmupriya) and allowed to settle in Manipur. The installation of Bishnu temple five hundred years ago could be one of such occasions. The story has it that the king Kiyamba was in frantic search of men from across the western border to help in preparation of Kshir (rice cooked in milk with sugar and tasty ingredients) for the Vishnu duty, received as a present from the king of Siam. For the Vishnu temple and the

deity these people might have been brought. It appears that their number increased in Manipur even after the king had shifted his palace to the north-eastern part of the valley. In the history of Manipur they are not mentioned anywhere as of any significance till the time of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra who is reported to have married a maiden of this community, thereby leading to birth of his son who later on became to be known as Kalaraja. The Rajkumar families in Ningthoukhong trace their origin to Kalaraja. In the course of time the community left Manipur in large numbers during the time of mass evacuation into Cachar, Tripura and Sylhet during Manipur-Burmese wars. The descendants of Kalaraja stuck on to the motherland along with some of their relatives. They have now been completely absorbed in the Manipuri community leaving no trace of any distinctive whatsoever. The population which left Manipur in the exodus towards the west also included Manipur Muslims and the community now known as the Bishmupriyas."

In accordance with the version of Dr. K.P. Sinha, an eminent Bishmupriya scholar and Researcher, there existed in Manipur a Kingdom named 'Bishmupur Kingdom' during 14th-15th Century. People of 'Bishmupur' were designated as 'Bishmupuria'. The term 'Bishmupriya' has mutated from 'Bishmupuria' and is now in much vogue.

## III

Criticism

'Babhrubahana legend' when examined with keen discernment is fraught with severe defects:

First, there are reasons to doubt whether the present Manipur is that of the epic. In the 'Mahabharata' by Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, the name 'Manipur' occurs in two different places. The first is in the 'Adiparva', i.e. on the occasion when Arjuna goes to the forest, and the second, in the 'Aswamedha' parva, the occasion of Arjuna's roaming with the sacrificial horse.

In the 'Adiparva' of the Mahabharata, five brothers of Pandava had to go to the forest for twelve years. They first went to Gangadwara (modern Haridwar in Uttar Pradesh) and with many Brahmins well-versed in the Vedas took shelter there for a few days to perform the Tarpana ceremony for his fore-fathers. One day when Arjuna got down into the water of the Ganges and took his bath, after performing the aforesaid ceremony, Ulupi, the daughter of Nag-raj, Ananta, caught and brought him to her residence and requested him to marry her. Arjuna did the same and returned to his dwelling place on the bank of the Ganges. With the Brahmins he then went to Hiranyavindhu, one of the holy places situated on the foot of the Himalayas. After ablution in Hiranya Vindhya, he

descended from the Himalayas, proceeded towards the east and entered 'Anga' (modern Bhagalpur) 'Vanga' (a large part of Central and Southern and eastern Bengal), and Kalinga (modern Orissa), respectively. The important thing which needs to be mentioned here and demands attention is that the upholders, like M.K. Sinha, Sena Sinha, and Lalbabu Sinha have not referred in their writings about Arjuna's marriage with Ulupi, and when Arjuna stayed on the bank of the Ganges, at Haridwar. Such an escapement from mentioning this important incident is probably due to the reason that if they mention Arjuna's marriage with Ulupi in between Indraprastha and Gangadwara when Arjuna stayed for a few days, their Manipur of the present day with Ulupi's paternal house like modern Nagaland which being far away from the basin of the Ganges lies on the eastern border of India, cannot be identified with Manipur of Mahabharata. Again, Mr. M.K. Sinha has made a remark most probably to confine Ulupi's paternal land in modern Nagaland that the Nagas did never advance towards the west of India from east Bengal. But it is a fact that though at present there is no state known as Nagaland governed by the Nagas in the North, middle and South India, yet in the remote past there was the Nagas ruling in different parts of North, middle and South India. Now, if Arjuna married Ulupi-Naga during his stay on the bank of the Ganges in North India, as the author of the Epic refers to then this Naga daughter Ulupi might have been the daughter of one of the

Naga kings who ruled over North India centuries before Christ.

Another most interesting fact which may be mentioned here that Pandit Lalbabu Sinha has mentioned "Arjuna's marriage with Ulupi on the way to Manipur after leaving Kalinga when the former stayed on the bank of a river in modern Sylhet district". But the original Epic written by Krishna Dwapayana Vyasa describes the performance of this marriage ceremony between Arjuna and Ulupi at Gangadwara, and does not present anything about it as stated by Pandit Lalbabu Sinha. So, such description made by the above Pandit is nothing but an artificially created fact and it is so to say a tendency to bring Arjuna towards modern Manipur of east India to identify it with Manipur of the Mahabharata. Having been completed the visit of all the tirthas in Anga, Banga and Kalinga, Arjuna crossed Kalinga and some other regions, proceeded along the sea-coast slowly seeing the scenery of the Mountain Mahendra and reached Manipur where he married Chitrangada and got a son named Babhrubahana. Here the course followed by Arjuna after his departure from Kalinga to the entrance of Manipur seems not towards the east of India, but towards the south of it. It is seen that after crossing Kalinga and some other regions Arjuna seeing the scenery of Mahendra Parvata proceeded slowly along the sea-coast and reached Manipur. Here there is no reference to

Arjuna's going and turning towards the east from the time of crossing Kalinga to the entrance of Manipur.

From this above account, it may, therefore, be said that the mountain Mahendra of the Epic age includes the whole Eastern Ghat and that as Arjuna entered Manipur along with the sea-coast seeing the scenery of Mahendra Parvata, Manipur of Mahabharata may lie in the sea coast of modern Tamil Nadu.

Any remarks made by any person should not be taken for granted without scrutiny. It cannot be said that, these remarks are true simply because B.C. Allen has said so. According to B.C. Allen, the Bishmupriya were brought to Manipur in the later part of the 18th Century (during the reign of Gharib Nowaj). But during the later part of the 18th century, Gharib Nowaj was already succeeded by his grandson, 'Bhagyachandra'. So, this view should not be taken for granted.

The view given by some of the Bishmupriya leaders that 'the Bishmupriya entered Manipur during the reign of Marjit which was thought to be carried to Cachar from Manipur by Marjit earlier' is too hollow to deserve any consideration. Marjit first came to Cachar in the first part of the 19th Century (most probably between 1802 A.D. - 1803 A.D.), again the Bishmupriya entered Manipur during the first part of the

19th Century (between 1813 A.D. to 1819 A.D), with their fully developed language. Bishmupriya Manipuri language is quite different from that of the Meitei. Bishmupriya language is of Indo-Aryan group, whereas that of Meitei is of Tibeto-Burman group. The Meitei speaking people stayed in Cachar only 12 to 18 years, so it is not possible for a whole community to learn an entirely foreign language within such a short period, specially in the absence of any political or economic pressure.

Secondly, according to view mentioned above, the Bishmupriya were originally Meithei speaking people. But this cannot be supported because facial features, complexion, etc. of these people are quite distinct from those of the Meitei.

According to Prof. Tombi Singh, the Bishmupriya could be formed from the illegitimate issues of some Meithei king.

As against this view, the following arguments may be put forward. Such a view cannot be accepted because in the world history there is no such records evidencing the evolution of a vast ethnic group from the illegitimate issues. Moreover, such a view stands against the civilized taste and temperament.

The opinion asserted by Dr. K.P. Sinha is not

acceptable on the ground that there is no documentary or historical record as to the existence of 'Bishmupur Kingdom'.

R.M. Nath's and E. Gaits' versions may be taken for granted with scrutiny. However, both of these remarks are partially correct.

The Bishmupriya may be the descendants of some low-caste Bengali Hindus because culturally and linguistically they have some similarities with the Bengalis. Again, similarities also exist between the Bishmupriya and the Kamrupi of the 14th century.

#### IV

##### Migration

Originally from Manipur, the Bishmupriya are now found also in parts of Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh (refer Map on distribution).

The Bishmupriya were originally confined only to the surroundings of Lake Loktak in Manipur. The principal localities where these people were living are now known as Khangabok, Khuman, Mayon and Bishenpur.

A review of history takes our attention to causes of such migration which is closely inter-linked with social history of the Bishmupriya.

The settlement of the Manipuri (both the Bishmupriya and the Meitei) now Bengali areas in Bangladesh dates as far back as the eighteenth century. Manipur's contact with the mainstream of Indian culture and religion started through the erstwhile East Bengal, now Bangla Desh. The higher education after British conquest of Manipur was received mainly through the educational institutions in Dacca and Sylhet by the forerunners of modern education in Manipur. This accounts for the Manipuri population in Bangla Desh. They are concentrated more or less in districts of Sylhet, Mymensingh and Comilla.

The settlement of the Bishmupriya in Nabadwip is accounted for only by the deep interest they took in religious affairs and the incessant regular flow of Manipuri pilgrims to these sacred places.

Causes of migration of the Bishmupriya as well as of the Meitei in Cachar have been ascertained from historical records. Two causes may be assigned to migration, namely, internal conflict among the princes of Manipur and repeated attacks by the Burmese. Internal conflict had been the major cause of migration during the first part of the 18th century while Burmese aggression became the cause of migration during the period from 1797 A.D. to 1826 A.D.

The history of the internal conflict has been documented in "Cacharer Itibritta by Upendra Chandra Guha,

according to which a grave situation engulfed Manipur after the demise of 'Pamhaiba', the king of Manipur. The other name of Pamhaiba was Gharib Nowaj (1714 A.D. - 1754 A.D.) who succeeded the throne after killing his father but he was also killed by his son 'Jitsai'. Pamhaiba had many sons but there are no record of exact number. However, he had either eleven or more than eleven sons as there is a record of his eleventh son named Dharsai. Amongst all the sons, names of Shamsai, Jitsai, Bharatsai and Dharsai have been recorded in the book titled 'Cacharer Itibritta' indicated above. It may be assumed that his other sons either did not live long or have any political participation. 'Shamsai' was killed in 1754 A.D. by his brother Jitsai who was in turn driven away in 1761 A.D. by other brothers and took refuge in 'Jaintia'. 'Bharatsai' ruled during 1761 A.D. to 1762 A.D. Nothing is mentioned as regards whether Dharsai enjoyed the throne or not. It may be inferred that both Bharatsai and Dharsai had good relation with each other. Internal conflict extended upto the reign of grandsons and great grandsons of Gharib Nowaj. Gurasham and Jaisingh were the two sons of Shamsai (Grandson of Gharib Nowaj). Gurasham reigned between 1762 A.D. and 1763 A.D. He was physically handicapped and his younger brother Jaisingh used to assist him in administration. There is a clear record of Burmese aggression (1763 A.D.) during the reign of Gurasham. However, this aggression could not

eliminate the rule of the Manipuri Princes. Jaisingh succeeded Gurusham and ruled till 1798 A.D. when his eldest son 'Rabindra Chandra' succeeded him and reigned till 1800 A.D. He was killed by his second brother Madhuchandra who in turn was killed by his younger brother Marjit. Marjit enjoyed the throne till 1819 A.D. when Manipur faced one more Burmese aggression. Marjit fled away as result of this aggression and took refuge in Cachar.

The princes of Manipur were highly ambitious for knightly powers. Therefore, history of Manipur has recorded innumerable instances of patricide and fratricide. Internal conflicts raised ugly head paving the way for aggression by the Burmese. Internal conflict initiated migration and migration took crucial shape due to Burmese aggression. Influx to Cachar took place for obvious reasons. Cachar is very close to Manipur and shares a common border.

The following informations recorded from authentic record such as 'Cachar under the British Rule' by J.B. Bhattacharja, may be presented regarding migration of the Bishmupriya and the Meitei, due to Burmese aggression during the last part of the 18th century.

During the reign of Jai Singh in Manipur, i.e. in 1797 A.D. the Burmese invaded Manipur. The result of the fight was unfavourable to the Manipuris who had to retreat,

the valley again being occupied after a series of sanguinary fights, all in favour of the Burmese. Jai Singh was forced to fly to Cachar, from whence he made his way to Assam.

During this occupation of Manipur, the Burmese established a descendant of the former Moirang Rajas on the throne, named Kelemba. This raja reigned under the protection of Burma for three years. Jai Singh then returning from Assam; on his arrival Kelemba at once fled to Burma, and Jai Singh resumed his rule. Kelemba's brothers again, a year after this, invaded Manipur, and forced Jai Singh again to fly towards Cachar. Jai Singh resigned the raj to his eldest son, Rabino or Labino Chandra. Rabino Chandra only held the raj three years when he was killed by orders of his younger brother, Madhu Chandra. After three years Madhu Chandra was driven out by Chourjit Singh, and proceeding to Cachar, obtained aid from the raja of that place, whose daughter he had married. With the men and arms thus obtained, he immediately returned to Manipur, and fell in a sanguinary engagement, fought at the western base of the hills, in which the Cachar force was routed after fighting for two days.

Chourjit Singh did not enjoy his tenure of power for any length of time unmolested, for another brother, named Marjit, commenced intriguing against him. A series of fights took place, ending in the defeat of Marjit, who fled to Cachar.

Marjit in his flight took with him a celebrated hockey pony, which the Cachar Raja's brother, Govind Chandra, coveting, attempted to induce Marjit to part with it. Failing in this, he forcibly seized it, an act which was afterwards to get him into serious trouble, for Marjit never forgave him. Seeing the hopelessness of expecting any aid under the circumstances from the Cachar Raja, Marjit betook himself by sea to Bangun, and there asked for aid from the Burmese king, to enable him to gain a footing in Manipur. This aid was afforded him, and he succeeded in expelling Chourjit, who fled to Cachar.

About four years after the flight of Chourjit, Marjit determined upon invading Cachar to revenge himself for the loss of his pony, Govind Chandra, who had taken it, having succeeded his brother as Raja. The force of the Manipuris numbered no fewer, according to an old survivor of the force, than 10,000 men. Entering the territory of the Cachar Raja, an engagement was fought at a place called Rongpur, on the right bank of the Barak, and nearly opposite to the present station of Cachar, in which the Cachar Raja, who had only about 1,000 men well armed with muskets, had to retreat. Next day the Manipuris crossed the river, and sacked and burned the raja's palace. The Raja had meanwhile retreated to Hilakandi to the south-west.

Leaving one thousand men to garrison Cachar, which he placed in charge of his brother, Chourjit, and putting another and younger brother, Gambhir Singh, in possession of certain other portions of the district, he, with the remaining of his force, returned to Manipur.

For a period of three years peace was uninterrupted in Manipur, but during this interval Marjit Singh appears to have meditated throwing off the yoke of Burmese supremacy at the first opportunity. A change of kings occurring in Burma, the new ruler sent a message to Marjit, demanding his presence as a feudatory. Marjit, after consulting with his officers, determined upon refusing to obey, and replied to that effect. The result was another invasion of the Burmese in 1819. The Manipuris resisted for seven days, but were at last overcome, and Marjit fled to Cachar. During this invasion the Burmese, great number of the inhabitants fled the country and sought safety in the adjoining districts of Cachar and Silhet, swelling the Manipuri colonies in those districts, which were at this time gradually forming from the aggregation of the people who had settled down after flying from the Burmese.

When Marjit fled to Cachar, that country was still in the possession of the two brothers, Chourjit and Gambhir Singh, for, although the Cachar Raja had attempted to

dislodge the brothers, he had failed and was then residing on the borders of the Silhet District in the British provinces.

The Burmese remained meantime in possession of Manipur. A prince of the name of Jagu Singh, a son-in-law of Gharib Newaj was made nominally Raja. In Cachar, during the interval mentioned above, four Manipuri princes resided there, Chourjit, Marjit, Gambhir Singh and a younger brother, Biswanath Singh. Chourjit Singh assumed to be raja and resided at Sunai Mukh to the south of the district. Marjit took up his residence to the south-west, in Hallakandi. Gambhir Singh and Biswanath Singh in Kalyne and Bikrampur, near Badarpur. Cachar thus remained a prey to the depredations of the fugitive Manipuri princes. From the time when the Manipuris are repeatedly attacked by the Burmese and the period when Cachar was occupied by the Manipuri princes, most of the Manipuri (both Meitei and the Bishnupriya) were compelled to migrate to Cachar of Assam, Tripura.

**Chapter - IV**

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**THE BISHNUPRIYA IDENTITY - REVIEW OF  
INDICATORS**

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## THE SOCIAL IDENTITY - REVIEW OF INDICATORS

There has been a great controversy between the Bishmupriya and the Meitei on the use of the nomenclature 'Bishmupriya Manipuri' to identify the Bishmupriya and their language (this has been mentioned earlier).

The Meitei feel about themselves that they only constitute the real Manipuri as they are the people inhabiting the land of Manipur from centuries even before Christ. According to the Meitei, the Bishmupriya are the descendants of some Bengalees who entered the land only a few centuries back. Accordingly, the Meiteis call the Bishmupriya 'Mayang's, i. e., 'foreigners' or 'westerners' and hold that the Bishmupriya should not use the term 'Manipuri' either before or after the term 'Bishmupriya', to identify themselves and their language. Coming to the reference of Bishmupriya Manipuri language, the Meitei argue that the Bishmupriya <sup>are</sup> not Manipuris because "they have a dialect absolutely strange to the Manipuri language (i. e. Meitei language) in structure and original character. It look like more deformed Bengali than Manipuri". (Tombi Singh, 1975, p.100).

It should be noted that the Bishnupriya also, quite contrary to the view of the Meitei, hold that 'mere similarities of a few elements are not sufficient to prove that Bishnupriya Manipuri language is a dialect of one or the other language.

The present chapter discusses about:

### I. Language

According to Grierson, "The Bishnupriya language is of Indo-Aryan group". Here we discuss about the presence of characteristics of Bengali and Assamese languages in Bishnupriya language as well as about the existence of the Bishnupriya in Manipur during the first part of the 20th Century; the view of the Bishnupriya to prove that Bishnupriya language is not dialect of other language.

### II. Literature

It contains the nature of growth and development of Bishnupriya literature which also prove the existence of the Bishnupriya during the 16th Century as well as their distinct identity.

### III. Cultural forms -- A) Dance, B) Music, C) Food, D) Dress and Ornaments.

Here I have discussed about the Bishnupriya culture

forms through which they have maintained their distinct identity.

### I. Language

According to Grierson, "The Bishnupriya language is of Indo-Aryan group" (this has been mentioned).

Works of both Indian and European scholars bear testimonies to the presence of characteristics of both Assamese and Bengali languages in Bishnupriya Manipuri language. To support this position a few quotations may be put here:

"A tribe known as Mayang speaks a Mongrel form of Assamese known by the same name. They are also known as Bishnupriya Manipuri. The language possesses characteristics of both languages (Assamese and Bengali), but at the same time differs widely from both" ('Linguistic Survey of India' Vol. V, Part I, G.A. Grierson, 1903).

Again another more quotation may be mentioned here:

"Mayang, one of the languages spoken in the Polyglot state of Manipur, may, however, be classed as a dialect of the language (Assamese)" ('Imperial Gazetteer of India' Vol. I, 1907).

The similarities between Bishnupriya Manipuri language with Bengali and Assam language are prominent. Efforts were made by some people to prove that Bishnupriya is an offshoot of the Bengali or Assamese language. According to the Bishnupriya, 'this claim is utterly unfounded'.

On this point, the opinion of K.P. Sinha (Bishnupriya teacher) must be put forward:

"Here similarities of a few elements are not sufficient to prove that Bishnupriya Manipuri is a dialect of one or the other language. In reality, the similarities occur from the commonness of the origin of these languages, 'Magadhi Prakrta' being their common origin."

Secondly, as there are similarities, so there are remarkable dissimilarities. The distinctive features of Bishnupriya Manipuri language are as follows:

a) The difference in verbal forms according to difference in gender distinguishes Bishnupriya Manipuri language from Modern Bengali and Assamese. For example, ta jarga = he goes, tei jeiriga = she goes, ti karar = you (male) are doing, ti karauri = you (female) are doing, ta gesilga = he went, tei gesiliga = she went.

b) The difference in verbal forms according to difference in number vanished from Bengali and Assamese before the 10th century A.D. while Bishrupriya Manipuri language retains this character. For example,

mi karauri = I am doing, ami kariya = we are doing,  
ti kartei = Thou wilt do, tumi kartaray = you will do,  
ta karesil = he did, tana karesila = they did, and so on.

c) Bishrupriya language has a few case affixes of its own, e.g., the 3rd case-ending: -la = with (morela = with me), the 5th case ending: -ta (ranta = from - moranta = from me).

d) Bishrupriya language has developed a complete -t form for the future tense, which are not found in Bengali and Assamese languages. For example, mi kartau = I shall do, ta kartai = he will do, etc.

e) For the third person singular, Bishrupriya language has two forms -- masculine and feminine; for example, ta = he, tei = she.

f) The vocabulary of Bishrupriya language includes more than 8,000 words which occur neither in Bengali nor in Assamese.

No work has yet been done to represent the vocabulary of Bishrupriya language. Mr. K.P. Sinha has,

however, compiled a dictionary of this language, which now exists in the form of manuscript. In this dictionary, about 30,000 words of this language have been entered. Of them, from a rough calculation, 'tatsamas' (Sanskrit) number approximately 10,000; tadbhavas (i. e. words derived from Sanskrit) found in other language, such as, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese and others, approximately 8,000; 'tadbhavas' peculiar to Bishmupriya approximately 2000, Meitei approximately 3,5000, Perse-Arabic approximately 2,000, English approximately 700 and words obscure origin, approximately 1,300. The other words of Bishmupriya language are hybrid words formed by the combination of words derived from Sanskrit and Meitei.

Let us try to examine the nature of development of Bishmupriya Manipuri literature.

## II. Literature

Actual literary culture of the Bishmupriya Manipuri language began during the second quarter of this century. No written document of the Bishmupriya literature prior to this period has yet been found. There are, however, some rudiments of folk literature of this language, which are older in origin and are handed down through oral tradition. These elements of Bishmupriya literature originated during the period from the middle of the 16th century to the last quarter of the 20th century.

According to Mr. K.P. Sinha's, "Bishmupriya Manipuri Bhashafattar Ruprekha", the history of Bishmupriya literature can broadly be divided into two periods:

- 1) Ancient or Folk Bishmupriya Manipuri literature (from the middle of the 16th century to the last quarter of the 20th century), and
- 2) Modern Bishmupriya literature (from the 2nd quarter of the 20th century onwards).

The Ancient or Folk literature of Bishmupriya is represented by folk-stories, folk songs, folk rhymes and proverbs. Among the folk stories, those relating to Apan or 'fool'; those relating to imaginary kings and queens, princes and princesses and those relating to the seven daughters of 'Sarahal' or 'Sararel' are most important of the folk songs, the most important are the 'Rain-Invoking Song' and the Madai-Saratel Song. The Rain-Invoking Song represents a non-vaisnavite early religion with 'Fakhanpa' or 'Pahanpa' and 'Saratel' as the most prominent gods. The language of the song is also archaic and is replete with words of Tibeto-Burman origin. Moreover, this song depicts a horrible and long-standing famine caused by draught. Such a famine occurred in Manipur during the 1st quarter of the 16th century.

The Madai-Saralei song represents a religious and cultural conflict in the Bishmupriya society. Saralei represents a society which is against the practice of taking meat and wine. The language of this song is clearly understandable. From these and other facts, it is said that it was composed during the middle of the 18th century, i.e. after the propagation of the Bengal Vaisnavism in Manipur."

The Modern Bishmupriya literature may be divided into two stages or, into two types: (a) Early and (b) Late.

The Bishmupriya literature of the Early Modern period is marked by devotion to God and Love for the Bishmupriya language and culture. The Bishmupriya literature of the Late Modern period is marked by the loves and feelings, hopes and desires and joys and sorrows of the writers.

The Early Modern Bishmupriya literature was initiated during the second quarter of this century by four writers, namely, Leikhomsena Sinha of Singari, Madan Mohan Sharma of Sanicchara, Amusena Sinha of Ciparsangan and Gokulananda Gitswami of Ratacchara. Leikhomsena Sinha is the author of a drama entitled 'Manipur Bijoy'. Madan Mohan Sharma is the author of a number of 'Kirtana' - type of works, namely, 'Balipinda', 'Harishchandra', 'Subal Milon'

'Tilottama', 'Basak', 'Sudana Bipra', etc.. Amusema Sinha also wrote a number of 'Kirtana' - type of works based on the 'Ramayana', namely, 'Angada-Raybar', 'Saktisel', 'Taranisen Badh', 'Nagapas', 'Mahiraban Bedh', etc.. Gokulananda Gitiswami produced different types of works.

He composed

- a) a few 'Kirtana' - type of works, namely, 'Nauka-Bilas', 'Basak', 'Mathur', etc.,
- b) a number of songs relating to social information,
- c) a few poems, and
- d) two dramas, namely, 'Matrimangal Gitabhinay' and 'Samaj Sanskar'.

Of those four writers, Gokulananda Gitiswami is the most popular because of his depth of feeling and refined taste as revealed in the 'Kirtana's and songs relating to social reformation. Durgacharan Sinha of Patharkandi wrote a drama named 'Babhrubahan' which was staged during the thirties of this century.

There are some living writers who are even now following the Early Modern trend. They are, Krishnadhan Sinha, Gardharaj Sinha, Rohini Rajkumar and Gaur Mohan Sinha. Rohini Raj Kumar has, of course, written some poems of late modern type also.

A branch of modern Bishnupriya poetic literature, namely, Vaisnava 'Padavali', which is to be included in the Early Modern type, deserves special mention. At present, a keen endeavour is being made by some 'Padakartas' or writers of 'Padavali's to present the Radha-Krisna-Lila in Bishnupriya language. The most remarkable of these 'Padakarta's are Gostha Bihar Sinha, Charmani Sinha, Senarup Sinha, Kartik Chandra Sinha, Bijay Sinha, Sudhanva Sinha, Birenira Sinha, Gadai Sinha and Braja Kumar Sinha.

In the Late Modern Bishnupriya literature, there are a number of poets, dramatists, short-story writers, novelists and essayists. Of the dramatists, the most popular are:

- 1) Golopsena Sinha, the writer of 'Manipur Vijay' and 'Futra Paricay',
- 2) Asvini Kumar Sinha, the writer of 'Harischandra', 'Sabitri-Satyabani', 'Pratyabartan', etc.,
- 3) Indra Kumar Sinha, the writer of 'Haribala E-hari', 'Kailase Lailat', 'Jarasandha', 'Sensas', etc.,
- 4) Sudhava Sinha, the writer of a number of comical dramas and founder of a dramatic association called 'Fagiram',

- 5) Birendra Sinha, the writer of 'Kalantik Dakat', 'Mrur Kathay Ghar Na Bhagiyo', etc.,
- 6) Debadatta Sinha, the writer of 'Sumati', and
- 7) Chandra Kanta Sinha, the writer of Barunir Kriti and 'Bhriya O Puloma'.

Almost all the dramas are successful and reveal the refined taste of the writers.

Short-story writers are very small in number. The most successful short-story writer is Brajendra Kumar Sinha, the writer of stories like 'Sikadeini', Uttara, Leimatol Belihan Hamanir Pare, etc. After him, mention may be made of Indra Kumar Sinha, the writer of Postaphis, Dhala Cithi, Chabi, Hunar Arini etc. All these short stories bear testimonies to the minute observation, deep feeling and refined taste of the writers. Of the younger generation, Shyamananda Sinha, the writer of 'Aja-Babulok (a collection of stories) and Smriti Kumar Sinha, the writer of stories like Kauhan, Kethakpi Gat-nei Phul, etc. are the successful short-story writers.

Essayists are also very small in number. The few essayists found are

- 1) Kali Prasad Sinha, the writer of a number of essays on social problems and Bishrupriya linguistics, and

- 2) Brajendra Kumar Sinha, the writer of a number of valuable essays on Chanda or metre and grammar.

After them, the name of Barun Kumar Sinha, the writer of a few essays of literary criticism may be mentioned. Srimati Kumkum Sinha, the writer of 'Soviet Dese Mi' deserves special mention as the only successful writer of 'accounts of travel'.

Among novelists, Nangkupi, the writer of 'Macuhama Nan Temuwalan' and Srimati Kumar Sinha, the writer of 'Jaya' are worthy of reference.

Poets of this period are numerous. Of them, the most successful ones are:

- 1) Madan Mohan Mukhopadhyay, the writer of 'Tenna Kakak', 'Thaiga', etc.
- 2) Senarup Sinha, the author of 'Satanir Khauran' and a number of Padavalis of high rate,
- 3) Brajendra Kumar Sinha, the author of 'Lehao Fulgare', 'Elar Khuttol', etc.,
- 4) Dhananjay Rajkumar, the translator of 'Omar Khaiyam' and
- 5) Chandra Kanta Sinha, the translator of Kalidasa's 'Megheduta', and

- 6) Kali Prasad Sinha, the author of 'Elar Mala' and 'Kavita-Mala'.

Moreover, the names of Chandra Mohan Sinha, the author of 'Cinkheir Ela' and 'Bhut Bhabisyata Leha'; Gopinath Sinha, the author of 'Ninsin Arati' and 'Kanak Methel'; Nil Madhav Mukherjee, the author of 'Surar Nilan'; Harekrishna Mukherjee, the author of 'Meirik', Shyamananda Sinha, the author of 'Kanak Matau'; Bimal Sinha, the author of 'Aparajita' are worthy of reference.

III. Culture Forms - (A) Dance, (B) Music, (C) Food,  
(D) Dress and Ornaments

A. Dance: Manipuri, both the Bishrupriya and the Meitei, today is best introduced through their dances. The dances of Manipur are part and parcel of Manipuri culture, having a distinct individuality which was built up during the course of several centuries and carries the stamp of contributions from small kingdoms and principalities.

The history of the development of Bishrupriya dances and music may be divided into two parts. The first part covers the period preceding the entry of Hindu cult into Manipur while the second will cover the Hindu period.

The folk dances of the Bishrupriya fall in the first part whereas the classical dances, such as Rasleela, etc. are

originated during the Hindu period.

The dances performed by the Bishrupriya have been broadly divided into two groups: (a) Folk dance and (b) Classical dance. Each of these two types of dances has its own importance and glory.

(a) Folk dance:

The most interesting folk dance of the Bishrupriya is 'Varan-dahani nritya'. The song sung during the performance of this dance is called 'Varan-dahani-ela' or rain calling song. The purpose of such dance and song is to incur pleasure of 'Indra' - God of rain.

Myth of Origin:

Long long ago Manipur have been occupied by several tribes, the principal of which, were named Khumul, Luang, Moirang and Meithei. A Khumul king was defeated by a Moirang king several times. Once more the Khumul king wanted to try his fortune and proposed in his ministerial council to attack the Moirang kingdom. His younger brother Chamei objected to this, wherefor the enraged king insulted him and ousted him from the meeting hall. Chamei, thus insulted, left the kingdom alone. Seeing him thus leaving, a maid-servant (beti) followed him with a few clothes for him. When the prince noticed her, he asked her to go back.

But as they were by then far from human habitation, it was not possible for her to go back. The prince, followed by the maid-servant, reached the 'Kabru hill' where he was cordially received by the Kukis. After a span of time, Chamei had an issue through the maid-servant. Gradually, three years passed away. During the period, there was no rain in the Khumal kingdom, as a result of which, a severe famine came upon the land.

Astrologers say that rainlessness has been caused by 'Pahanpa' (God), who is angry because of the insult shown to Chamei by the king. They advised the people to bring Chamei and 'Beti' back to the kingdom. Beti is being brought and when she reaches the vast field, she is welcomed with various auspicious things and consequently she proceeds gorgeously like the God of Wealth (Kuvera).

Chamei is hesitating to come. The women are abusing him and the angry old persons tell them to welcome him with coal and sand instead of incense. It is his good luck, they say, that though he is very poor, 'Pahanpa' has not punished him.

Rain is coming gradually. The women are glad and are proposing to dance with their hair locked and with flowers in their ears.

The folk dance of the Bishnupriya as narrated above is the most renowned ancient folkdance. From the reign of Moirang king this folkdance has been handed down through oral tradition. It is believed that this dance is endowed with the power of calling forth rain. Accordingly, in times of drought both man and woman folks assemble in the dry field in a circle at dead of night and sing the divine song accompanied by dance with a view to calling forth rain.

b) Classical dance

When the Bishnupriya and the Meitei in Manipur embraced Hinduism on a mass scale, a new and rich tradition of Nat Sankirtan and Ras Dances sprang up in Manipur.

The Ras dance is the most widely known classical dance of the Bishnupriya. It is original in composition and sophisticated in presentation. All the Ras Leelas of Manipur are dance-dramas which have the Vaishnavite religious theme of the life and love story of Radha and Krishna as their central and one continuous subject matter. They are based on the various episodes in the life of child Krishna. There are six important Ras Leelas and almost everyone of them is celebrated seasonally on a particular day of particular month of the year. They are

(1) Maharas, (2) Vasantras, (3) Kunjaras, (4) Nityaras, (5) Goparas and (6) Udukhalras. The first four narrate the amorous play of Krishna with Radha and the Gopis and the last two which are also known as 'Rakhalras' depict his adventures and pranks with the Gopas.

### Origin

King Bhagyachandra who reigned in Manipur from 1763 to 1798 A.D. is regarded as the original creator of the Ras Leela dance of Manipur and three specific Ras composition, viz., Maharas, Vasantras and Kunjaras. He was a great devotee of Sri Krishna. During his reign, Pramanand Thakur, the follower of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu came to Manipur from NBengal. Under his influence, the king adopted Gaudiya Vaisnavism as the state religion which eventually replaced the Ramandi faith that had been the religion of the state since the time of king Garib Nowaj, in the beginning of the 18th century.

King Bhagyachandra was a scholar and an artist. It is said that once the king had a dream in which Sri Krishna appeared and asked him to carve out His image from a certain jack-fruit tree then growing on the Kaina Hill, about 18 miles to the south-east of Imphal and to worship the image. Accordingly the king went to this hill, located the tree and an image resembling Lord Krishna who

appeared in his dream was carved out of the wood under his keen supervision. This image was then installed with due ceremony, in the specially erected temple of Govindji at his palace at Imphal. On the day of the consecration ceremony, Shri Krishna again appeared before the king in a vision when he was in a trance and asked him to institute the Ras dance as a ritual offering to this honour; the Lord then divulged the secret of the mystic art by demonstrating it before the king. Thus, the famous Ras dance of Manipur took shape. It may, however, be mentioned here that the Ras dance is not an altogether new form of dance. It is believed that, at the instance of the king, some Gurus of Manipur merely recomposed and rechoreographed a new dance-form from the then existing traditional dance-forms of Manipur. In the first Ras Leela performed in 1769 A.D., Princess Lairoibi, daughter of king Bhagyachandra, acted the part of Shrimati Radika. Since that time, a special annexure known as Ras Mandav, has been erected in front of every Vaishnava temple in Manipur for holding the Ras Leela festivals.

As has been pointed out above, Bhagyachandra is credited with having created Maharas, Kunjras and Vasantras. During the reign of Maharaja Gambhir Singh (1825-1834 A.D.) Gostha or Goparas was composed, and during Maharaja Chandra Kirti Singh's rule Nitya Ras was performed.

Since then the traditional Gurus of Manipur have been perpetuating and innovating the sequences and composition.

"Rajarshe Bhagyachandra delineated his attitudes concerning the Ras Leela as follows: "About one thing, however, everyone of us has to be very careful. Our whole traditional dances are considered rituals performed for the satisfaction of God. In this Ras Leela the dances are performed by God and his beloved Gopis without any audience. It has a different footnoting altogether. The total effect of the dances and the dialogues and the music must be in consonance with the real spirit of Raas. In composing the dances, the choreography, the basic poses of the eyes and the movements of the different limbs of the body, care has to be taken so that the lower aspects of human emotions are not aroused in the audience.

The following suggestions were approved:

- a) The faces of the Gopis have to be veiled;
- b) The participants will avoid communication even through the gestures of the eyes with the audience;
- c) The enclosure to be named the Raas Mandal will be closed to the non-participants in the Raas;
- d) Movements of the lower part of the body should be much restricted;
- e) The costume covering the lower part must be quite thick but graceful and artistic;

- f) The movements of the hands and the upper part of the body too should be within strict rules and only suggestive of the relevant ideas sought to be expressed by the Gopis in their play with Sri Govindji'.

The expert took due note of the basic ideas explained by the king Bhagyachandra and worked hard to produce the best in their own spheres".

#### Mode of Performance of Classical Dance (Ras-Leela)

Usually a Ras-Leela is performed in a Ras Mandav, a big structure built in front of a Vaishnav temple. It is also held, now-a-days, in a special 'mandav' built for the purpose at a suitable place. A circular stage with four entrances prepared with bamboo and wooden strips, placed in the heart of the 'mandav'. This stage is nicely decorated with flowers, creepers, leaves and paper-cut designs. Tame birds like parrots are also placed there. Occasionally a bower made of artificial flowers and flora is raised in the mandav and stuffed birds are kept there to create a sense of reality. Petals of multi-coloured flowers with or without vermilion are showered, off and on, on the participants from above during the performance of the Ras Leela. There are traditional texts lying down specific rules with regard to dimension of the stage, auditorium, decor and arrangement of seats.

The classical music that provides the ground work of the dance-drama has a subtle melody of its own. Devotional songs written in Sanskrit, Brajabali and Bengali by Vaishnava poets of Bengal are beautifully set to traditional tunes and incorporated in the sequences of the Ras Leela. As these songs are not understood, word for word, by the majority of the people, modern public opinion is in favour of adopting the Manipuri version of these sensitive lyrics.

#### Variations in performance

Generally, the sequences of the story of a Ras Leela are strictly observed. There is, however, room for one to interpret the emotional content of the story in one's own way by varying the composition of dance and music pieces. Thus with the passage of time minor variations have been introduced in the performance of a Ras Leela according to the different schools of Gurus. Apart from this kind of variation, there exists a disparity of another nature between the Ras Leelas performed at the palace and outside the palace.

In the Ras Leela performed at the palace there are no persons taking the parts of Radha and Krishna, for, the images of Radha and Krishna are taken out from the temple and they are deemed to be the characters participating in

the Ras Leela. But in all the Ras Leelas performed at Venues other than the Ras Mandav of Sri Govindaji at the palace the parts of Radha and Krishna are played, respectively, by a girl and a boy or by two girls. Thus in any event, the Vaishnav audience avail themselves of the opportunity of witnessing the dance of these two deities. It may be pointed out that in the first Ras Leela instituted by Bhagyachandra at the mandav of Shri Govindaji his own daughter acted the part of Radha, because at that time the image of Radha had not yet been carved. The image of Radha which is now in the temple of Shri Govindaji was a later addition.

(1) Maha Ras

On the occasion of Vastraharan, i. e., stealing of garments of the Gopis by Shri Krishna, Krishna promised to give the Gopis the pleasure of his company on a certain full-moon night. In order to fulfil this promise, Shri Krishna went to Vrindaban and played on his flute on the full-moon night of 'Kartika'. Being spellbound by the enchanting tune of the flute, Radha and the Gopis quit their work and set out to meet Krishna. Their mental thirst was quenched only when they saw Krishna and out of joy then performed 'ras' with him. When the Gopis became too self-conscious and thought themselves to be much more

fortunate than other women, Krishna disappeared with Radha in order to curb the pride of the Gopis.

Next, it was the turn of Radha to suffer the pang of separation. Krishna deserted her too, because she considered herself to be more fortunate than the Gopis. The Gopis became restless and enquired, in vain, of the whereabouts of Krishna, to the trees, the birds and the animals. Instead they found Radha in agony and searching for her Lord. The tears of sorrow washed away their pride and Krishna reappeared on the scene not as one person but as many. There were as many Krishnas as Radha and the Gopis. Thereafter they danced in joy and performed 'ras' in cosmic harmony, Krishna, then bid them good-bye.

## 2) Vasant Ras

On the full-moon night of Baisakh, Krishna, Radha and the Gopis assembled to celebrate Holi, the spring festival of colours. During the celebration of the festival, Chandrabali managed to steal away into the heart of Krishna with the result that he began to pay exclusive attention to her. To Radha who had long dedicated herself to Krishna, this was an unpardonable offence. She cast away the blue veil that was a token of her love for Krishna. Out of umbrage and jealousy, she left the scene and took refuge sullenly in a bower with a few close friends. But

the lovelorn Radha could not erase the memory of Krishna from her mind, although he was out of her sight.

When Krishna found Radha without her veil he realised his mistake and left Chandrabali for Radha. He implored, in vain, the trees, the birds and the animals to find out Radha. When at last he approached her, she refused to see him. But her anger ebbed away gradually at the sincere and repeated apology of Krishna. Thus she was reconciled with him and they performed 'ras' together with the Gopis.

### 3) Kunj Ras

It is the first Ras Leela performed in Manipur at the newly constructed Ras Mandav of the palace on the day of the consecration ceremony of Shri Govindaji. 'Kunj' means a bower. On the night of 'Aswin' Krishna, who longed to revel all night in the company of Radha and Gopis, came to the heart of a bower of Vrindaban and played on his flute making a clarion call. Enchanted by the magic of his flute, Radha and Gopis left their houses to meet him.

In the case of a performance at Mandav of Shri Govindaji at the palace there is no Krishna Abhisar, i.e., coming to Krishna to meet Radha and the Gopis, as there is no character of Krishna. This holds good in the case of

other Ras Leelas as well, which are performed at the palace.

#### 4) Nitya Ras

It has been observed already that all the Ras Leelas other than Nitya Ras are performed on specific days of specific season. Nitya Ras has no such specified time for its performance; it can be performed on any day of the year. The theme of this 'Ras' is comparatively simple. In this Ras Leela, there is no separation, no sense of anger and fear, and the stream of happiness flows ceaselessly through its course. Radha and the Gopis secretly set out to meet Krishna. They find him and dance in ecstasy and perform 'ras'.

#### 5) Gostha Ras

This festival is performed on the eight day of Kartika. Narad visited the palace of Nanda and taught Balram and Krishna how to milk the cow and also how to breed the cattle. The two princes worshipped the saint who gave them blessings, and left the palace. At the request of the shepherd boys the king and the queen sent Balaram and Krishna with them to tend the cattle. In the grazing ground, they joyfully danced and played with a ball. When

demons 'Dhemukasur' and 'Bakasur' came and frightened the boys Balaram and Krishna killed them respectively. After destroying the evil spirits, they returned to their respective homes with the cattle. The festival is celebrated to commemorate this occasion.

#### 6) Udukhol Ras

This festival is performed in October-November. It shows a small slice of the life of child Krishna. Krishna grew up as an uncontrollable child full of mischief. He and his friends stole butter and curd and ate them up. They also teased the Gopis who came and complained to mother Yasoda. The mother tied her child to the 'Udukhol', a wooden mortar for pounding rice as a punitive measure. But the unruly Krishna escaped by dragging away the Udukhol. Thus he set himself free. 'Udukhol' ras is performed to commemorate this occasion.

The orchestra of dancing consists of 'Mridang' or 'Khol', Manjira and flute. Sometimes the dance is also accompanied by a chorus of 4 to 6 lady singers. The band of khol players is known as 'Dhumen' and they occasionally number from 15 to 40, sit usually in the north-western corner of the Ras-Mandal.

It may be mentioned here that the Bishrupriya dance remained mostly unknown to the rest of India till it was brought to the lime light by Rabindranath Tagore who felt the greatest charma and deepest pathos of the Bishrupriya dance and music from Sylhet, Cachar and Tripura. Mr. Tagore was so much impressed by this that he spared no time to introduce the teaching of Bishrupriya Manipuri dance in his Viswabharati at Santiniketan in the early part of this century and gain popularity throughout India. The dance masters of this society, who were recruited in Santiniketan are Senaruk Sinha, Muhi Sinha, Nileswar Mukherjee, etc. Guru Bipin Sinha, the Bishrupriya dance master has given a philip in spreading the classical dance of the Bishrupriya Manipuri all over the world, specially in Burma, Japan and Europe.

#### B. Music

Unlike the music of the rest of India, Bishruppiya music has developed mainly as an accompaniment for the dance.

The history of the Bishrupriya music before the 16th or 17th century is shrouded in darkness and, practically no document has yet been found regarding the music of the Bishrupriya of that time. The music of the Bishrupriya from the middle of the 18th century onwards, is, however, clearly mentioned in the historical works of both the Indian and the

western scholars.

The neo-Vaishnava movement, which started in the middle of the 18th century in Manipur, brought in its train a wide culture of music.

The vaishnava music of the Bishmupriya is rich and remarkable in its tone and variety, and was reformed in Manipur in such a way that it expressed itself as a distinctive culture of the Bishmupriya. It greatly helped the new religion to spread like wild fire.

The devotional song known as 'Kirtana' is the most important among the Bishmupriya. It is sung either by an individual or by a group of people. It contains the quintessence of the cult of 'Bhakti'. There is no Bishmupriya home which does not recite a couple of verses from the 'Kirtana' on religious and festive occasions or in case of ailment of a family member.

The Bishmupriya musical tune called 'raga' comprising four sounds of 'tai', 're', 'na' and 'to' by which Kirtana are started.

It is remarkable that a traditional song which is invariably sung by the Bishmupriya is known as 'Khechuri Pali'. The 'Khechuri Pali' have been borrowed from Sankardevas! 'Kirtana-Ghosa'.

The music of the Bishnupriya is provided by some kinds of instruments like 'pung', 'drum', 'flute', 'conch', 'shells' and a trumpet like 'horn'. 'Israj', 'tanboura' also give the main melody and other instrument like 'cymbol' provide and additional rhythmic effect.

### C. Food

Besides dance and music, food is one of the important culture-forms in terms of which, we need to study Bishnupriya identity.

The principal food items of the Bishnupriya consist of rice, dal, bvegetables and fish. Apparently, this is not markedly different from the standard menu of the Meitei or the Bengali.

Food habit of the Bishnupriya has undergone a change after their conversion to Vaishnavism. Originally, the Bishnupriya were meat eaters. After adopting Vashnavism, their food habits changed. Meat eating is prohibited under Vaishnavism.

The early Bishnupriya consumed liquor. After adopting Vaishnavism, meat and liquor were abandoned. Interestingly, meat-taking and liquor-drinking are, now, considered as social offences and very much looked down upon.

(a) Items and time of eating

Their food-habit should, enecessarily, be viewed from three angles of vision as far as the standard of food items in poor, middle class and rich families is concerned.

A middle-class family can afford a square meal of moderate standard. Their 'prata rash' (breakfast) consists of either bread or beaten, or rice or puffed rice with tea. They also take rice with dal, vegetables and fish.

The most general and common 'madhya-bhoj' (lunch) comprises dal, fried vegetables such as potato, bringal, pumkin, etc., fried fish and fish curry. 'Naisha-bhoj' (Dinner) consists of food-items as that of 'madhya-bhoj'.

The poor families cannot afford to have such menu (as described above) which is too costly to them. Therefore, their menu is much curtailed. The simplest menu of 'prata-rash' (breakfast) to such families consists of puffed rice or beaten rice with tea. In the morning they also take boiled rice and dry-fish of different preparations. Very often, several dry fishes (quantity depending on the number of family members) are kept on the surface of boiled rice contained in a pot. The vapour generated from boiled rice melts and softens the dry-fishes which get disseminated throughout the whole quantity of rice and this rice is

distributed to each member of the family. Boiled rice soaked in water in the previous night (rice in the process of fermentation) constitutes a good 'prata rash' for the farmers who take this rice with dry-fish preparation before going out to cultivation. They consider this rice as source of their energy for working in the field.

The 'madhya-bhoj' of poor families consists of rice, dal, vegetables. Once or twice in a week, they can afford a meal with a menu consisting of fish, vegetables, etc.

The rice families maintain a good standard of their diets. They take a 'prata rash' consisting of egg, bread and butter, parota with vegetable curry, etc. Their 'madhya bhoj' and 'naisha bhoj' consists of rice, dal, different vegetable preparation, various fish preparation, milk and curry.

In religious and social ceremonies menu consists of impressive palatable items such as ghee, fried vegetables, dal, fried fish, fish curries, curd, sweetened rice, etc.

The method of preparation of food items are fundamentally similar to that of the Bengalee except that they use chilli in relatively large quantity and that paraboiled rice is much preferred by them. 'Kshir' (rice cooked in milk with sugar and tasty ingredients) is used in special occasion.

There is a traditional or conventional pattern in serving the different items of a menu. Initially ghee with fried vegetables is served. Then comes dal and fried vegetables. This is followed by vegetable curries. Next in the turn of fish-items consequent to which tomato sauce is served. 'Kshir' constitutes the next item. This indicates the conclusion of 'madhya-bhoj' or 'naisha-bhoj'.

#### D. Dress and Ornaments

Dress and ornaments (particularly of women) of the Bishmupriya indicate their distinct identity.

The dress of the men does not differ materially from that of the Bengalee and consists of the 'dhuti' and a 'koorta' or shirt. In winter, they wear 'chaddar' (a piece of cloth) or coat, generally having high collars. Shoes are seldom worn.

The principal garment for women is of two kinds. Ordinary type of garment is called 'amaluri' or 'Lanau' a single coloured coarse cloth with laces on both sides lengthwise, while the other type of garment, the more gorgeous one, is called 'telaphuti' or 'caksabi' which is also a coarse cloth with lengthwise stripes and embroidered on both sides lengthwise.

'Analuri' or 'Lanau' is folded round the body, under the armpits and tucked in by the hand at the side of the body. In length it reaches the ground, but as this would be inconvenient in walking, it is hitched up about half way to knee, and tucked in again at the waist. 'Analuri' or 'Lanau' is made in cotton and the commoner patterns are red, green, blue, yellow. At the top and bottom of the garment is a broad margin, on which geometrical figures or patterns of various kinds are sewn by hand with silk or cotton thread of various colours. Over the 'analuri' or 'lanau' is worn a white sheet, which is folded in the usual manner, the face, however, being left uncovered. This sheet is known as 'In-na-phi'. In the cold season a short jacket with long sleeves is worn. The material is usually velvet or satin, black, green, blue being the favourite colours.

Female children, until puberty, wear 'analuri' or 'lanau' round the waist, the upper part of the body being bare.

The religious festivals afford an opportunity for special garment such as 'telaphuti' or 'caksabi'.

In 'Ras dance' the costume of the players, musicians and chorus girls is extremely beautiful and rich in colour.

The female dancers wear a tight velvet bodice, the short sleeves of which are ornamented with a two-inch band of gold thread embroidery, an extravagantly full skirt which swings above the ankles in great graceful curves, and convolutions of its endless yards. This skirt is of green and dark red silk bordered round the hem with a wide band of sequins; and tiny round, oval and square pieces of coloured mirrors are sewn in scattered profusion over the whole stuff of this attractive garment.

A broad strip of white cloth is bound tightly about the waist to accentuate its fragile slimness above the widely swirling folds of the skirt. Tucked into the waistband of the skirt and worn over it is a veil of the finest gauze-like material striped with bands of narrow silver ribbon. The sight of all this splendour is in itself a feast of beauty, particularly when in rhythmic movements, the silver and the sequins and the bits of mirror catch and reflect sparkling light in all directions.

The head-dress of the girl dancers consists of a small conical cap of velvet trimmed with a narrow band of pearls at the edge of having a spray of pearls hanging from the peak.

Krishna himself wears a yellow silk 'dhoti', secured at the waist by a silk scarf with long tasselled ends. The

upper part of the body is free from clothing, but plentifully adorned with necklaces, armlets and bangles. The head-dress is richly jewelled crown surmounted by a tuft of peacock feathers, emblem of Krishna.

As regards the dress of males, 'dhuti' and 'koorta' were not very familiar to the people before the reign of King Gharib Nowaj, small apparels were used by them in general. After the advent of Vaishnavism of Sri Chaitanya, 'dhuti' and 'koorta' became the principal dress of the males.

As regards the female dress, upto the first part of the 20th century, unmarried girls used to wear two pieces of garments. The principal garment hung from the waist and the second was used to tighten the breast. The married women used one piece of cloth hung from the breast and another piece of cloth from the head over the back. Towards the first quarter of the 20th century, the piece of cloth used by unmarried girls to tighten their breasts was replaced by the blouse, and the married women also began to use blouses in addition. During this time, the blouse of 'khermaci' or velvet ornamented by dots of lime and later on, by 'camaki', a kind of fine tin-plates, was very popular. At the next stage, i.e. during the forties of the 20th century, unmarried girls began to use 'caddar' in addition.

### Ornaments

The principal ornaments of women are 'heikuru' 'liksai', 'pundarei', 'thapak', nacika, 'Jhamka' or 'Camel', etc. 'Heikuru' 'liksai', 'pundarei', 'thapak' are meant for the neck, 'nacika' for the nose, 'Jhamka' or 'Camel' for the ear, and wristlets of big size, for the wrist. Men do not wear ornaments except ring. All these ornaments are made of gold.

### Summary

The foregoing discussion reveals that the Bishnupriya Manipuri language is different from the Meitei language. The Bishnupriya Manipuri language is of Indo-Aryan group, whereas, that of the Meitei is of Tibeto-Burman group. However, the Bishnupriya Manipuri language has drawn sustenance by assimilating words from the Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman language. Moreover, Bengali language had exerted the largest influence on the growth and formation of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language.

It can be remarked that, though not wide in range, the Bishnupriya literature has by now developed a considerably high standard. Despite its short history about thirty-five or forty years, it can stand comparison with the literature of neighbouring languages.

In the discussion of culture forms such as dance, music, food, dress and ornaments, it becomes clear that there is no significant difference between the Bishnupriya and the Meitei except folk dance. I have discussed at length the nature of the development of the Bishnupriya folk dances during the pre-Hindu period in Manipur. The folk dance of the Bishnupriya, namely, 'Varan-dahani nritya' is not practised by the Meitei. On the other hand, the Meitei folk dance presented in the course of a 'Lai Haraoba festival is not practised by the Bishnupriya.

Moreover, Rain-invoking song is the oldest folk song of the Bishnupriya. Meaning of the song, reveals that the song was composed probably in the 16th century which supports the earliest existence of the Bishnupriya in Manipur.

'Ras-Leela' and 'Kirtana', -the greatest features of the Bishnupriya culture, have got equal prominence in both the Bishnupriya and Meitei. Members of these two ethnic groups feel proud for this.

As regards the food, dress and ornaments there is no significant difference between the Bishnupriya and the Meitei; they are differed from Bengali particularly in respect of dress. The traditional dress of the Bengali women is 'saree' whereas that of the Bishnupriya is 'analuri' or 'lanau'.

In conclusion, it may be said that through these features (as described above), the Bishnupriya has maintained their distinct identity.

Chapter - V

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THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND

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## THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND

In this chapter attempt has been made to survey the distribution of the Bishnupriya and some related demographic characteristics. Material in this, focuses attention on the Bishnupriya at two levels. At the macro-level, in terms of their distribution in north-east India and the neighbouring country of Bangladesh, and at micro-level, through analysis of information obtained by survey of two Bishnupriya villages of Cachar about the land and their demographic characteristics.

### I. Distribution

As we may be acquainted by now, the Bishnupriya originally is a community from Manipur. In Bishenpur district, the areas surrounding the 'Lok-tak' lake in Imphal valley are identified as the original place of the Bishnupriya. Formerly Bishenpur was the capital of Manipur and the Bishnupriya were concentrated in Bishenpur (formerly known as Bishnupur). In the history of Manipur, during the 17th and 18th century, the Bishnupriya migrated to other places particularly to Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh.

Two causes may be assigned to the out-migration of the Bishnupriya from Manipur. One of the causes of their out-migration has been the internal conflict between the princes of Manipur, and the second cause has been the repeated attacks of the Burmese on the Manipur kings.

In the 18th century (1709-1748 A.D.) during the reign of Gharib Nowaj, many internal conflicts started. Gharib Nowaj had a number of sons. There are no record of the exact number of sons of Gharib Nowaj. Amongst the sons, the names of Shamsai, Titsai, Bharatsai and Dharsai have been recorded. Shamsai was killed by his brother Jitsai who was in turn driven away by his other brother Bharatsai who was also killed by his another brother. These were conflicts on the succession to the throne. Royal palace conflicts, however, continued even after Gharib Nowaj. The period of reign by Bhaya Chandra, the grandson of Gharib Nowaj, was full with internal conflicts. These internal conflicts in the royal palace led to migration to places outside Manipur. For nearly thirty-nine years between 1709 A.D. to 1748 A.D., which were the period of reign by Charib Nowaj, his son king Bharatsai and grandson Bhagyachandra, many princes migrated to neighbouring Cachar in Assam and then to further places like Tripura and Sylhet district. During these migrations along with the prince his followers also migrated.

The continuous conflicts in the royal palace, for nearly fifty years was one of the prominent reasons for the migration of people from Manipur to places outside. These migrations were occasions when many people from the Manipur valley moved to neighbouring Cachar and settled there. These marked the beginning of rise of Meitei and Bishnupriya settlements in Cachar and other neighbouring places.

During the reign of Bhagyachandra (i.e. 1797 A.D.) the Burmese invaded Manipur. The result of the fight was unfavourable to the Manipuri. Bhagyachandra was forced to fly to Cachar; from Cachar he made his way to Assam where the Ahom king received Bhagyachandra and his queen with affection and honour and Bhagyachandra married the daughter of Cachar Raja.

The Burmese again invaded during the reign of Marjit. The result of the invasion was unfavourable to the people of valley in Manipur. During this invasion, Marjit with a great number of the inhabitants of the valley of Manipur fled to Cachar.

We thus find that due to internal conflict among the princes of Manipur, and the repeated attacks by the Burmese, the Manipuri were compelled to migrate to Assam particularly in Cachar.

There is another feature which needs mention. This also relates to the out-migration of the Meitei and Bishnupriya from Manipur during the 18th century after the conquest of the British. The people from the valley of Manipur developed the urge to seek education. This took them to Bengal, all that was between Nabadweep and Cachar. Nabadweep was the centre of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

As a result of the above mentioned sequence of events related with the history of the Bishnupriya, today the Bishnupriya inhabit quite a number of areas outside Manipur. According to one rough estimation made in 1966 (K.P. Sinha) there are about 90,000 Bishnupriya in India and about 45,000 in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, they are concentrated more or less in the districts of Sylhet, Mymensing and Comilla (refer on map on distribution). In India, they are concentrated in parts of Assam, Manipur and Tripura.

In Assam, they are concentrated in Cachar district. The other places of Assam which deserve mention are those in Lakhimpur, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang.

According to the census of 1951, the total population of Manipuri/Meitei in Assam is 89,144. According to the 1961 census the population figures of the Bishnupriya and the Meitei are 15,055 and 88,962 respectively which

become 33,591 and 87,279 according to 1971 census.

The census of 1951 was community based, and thus all the Bishnupriya were recorded as Manipuri. The census of 1961 was language based, and thus the Bishnupriya recorded themselves on basis of their language. This forms one of the main arguments of the Bishnupriya to press their case for a distinct identity but within the wider Manipuri identity. It is interesting to note that the population figures of 1971 provided an opportunity to the Bishnupriya to claim their distinct identity at a totally new level.

In Assam, out of the total Bishnupriya population of 33,591, the major bulk, i. e. 33,440, are in Cachar. So the Bishnupriya speaking people constitute 99.6 percent of the total population of Assam. It is interesting to note that between the rural and urban areas of Cachar district, there is a distinct difference in the size of the Bishnupriya speaking people. Out of the total population of 33,440, only 183 Bishnupriya are living in urban areas.

The Bishnupriya in Cachar are concentrated in sixteen villages, namely, Bhakatpur, Kabirgram, Singari, Nayagan, Chenkhure, Kalinjar, Dutpatil, Machughat, Bhubaneswar Nagar, Mohanpur, Narsingpur, Bhatirgram, Hatirhar, Rajnagar,

Santipur, Sayadpur. Twelve villages are "Bishmupriya villages" and the remaining four villages are 'mixed villages', i.e., in these four villages, besides Bishmupriya there are a few Bengalis also. Kabirgram, Noyagram, Dutpatil and Narsingpur are mixed villages. In this study we will present an ethnographic profile of Kabirgram (a mixed village) and Bhakatpur (a Bishmupriya village).

## II. Bhakatpur and Kabirgram - the two villages

Bhakatpur is situated at a distance of 3 kms. to the south-west of Silchar town of Cachar district. This village is bounded by Chenkhuri Road on the North-west, Kathal Road on the north-east, National Highway Road on the north-west and Kabirgram village on the south-east.

Situated at a distance of 5 kms. is the village of Kabirgram, lying to the south-west of Silchar town of Cachar district. This village is bounded by Chenkhuri Road on the south-west, Bhakatpur village on the north-west, Singari village on the south-east and Boaljoor Khal on the north-east.

Bhakat pur is a large village covering a total area of 2046 acres with a population of 392, Kabirgram, the mixed village, is smaller in size, with 618 acres and has a population of 150.

No historical records relating to the actual founding of these two villages are available. The old people in these two villages, however, have some information regarding the past history of their respective villages. It has been passed on to them by their forefathers.

The village 'Bhakatpur' is inhabited by the Bishnupriya who migrated to this land nearly 200 years back. So far as the nomenclature of 'Bhakatpur' is concerned, the few of the migrants were extraordinarily devoted to God. First of all they constructed temples of God 'Radhakrishna', and it has been found that in every household there was a separate room where each and every member of the family worshipped God, because the people were religious minded so the village was named as 'Bhaktapur' (the place of devotees). After few years the word 'Bhaktapur' has been modified into 'Bhakatpur'.

The village 'Kabirgram' was initially inhabited by the low-caste Bengali (Hindu) people. Most of them were fishermen by profession. These Bengali people found Kabirgram as their most suitable habitat because 'Kabirgram' contains a good number of natural fisheries. The word 'Kabir' means 'of the poet'. The 'Kabirgram' was named after a Bengali poet of that fishermen group whose name is not now known to the people nor there is any record of it.

The Bishnupriya bought the land from above mentioned Bengali and settled there.

The village Bhakatpur itself is not built according to a definite plan. A wide main street 'Bhakatpur Road' lies in the centre of the village. Residential houses are built on both sides of the road. Majority of the dwelling houses of this village lies in the southeastern side of the main road, i.e. 'Chenkhuri Road'. The houses of the village are arranged in row wise. Every household possesses land enough to build a house leaving a space of ten or more feet around the house. The households generally build their houses, not exactly in the centre of the plot of land but a little in the rear portion of the house is greater than the space behind the house. The arrangement is done for the sake of convenience only, because after the day-break the inmates of the house perform their day to day work in front of the house. There are many narrow lanes passing through the village in all directions. Houses of this village are arranged close to these lanes.

In the main settlement of the village Kabirgram, two parallel streets run approximately north-west. Two short lanes connect them at the two extremes of the settlement and a third one connects them through the centre of the village. The houses are arranged in row-wise on both sides of the street.

Settlement

The houses are of three types. They are as follows:

- (a) Mud huts with thatched roofs
- (b) Mud-walled houses with tin roofs
- (c) Brick-walled houses with tin roofs.

The majority of villagers live in houses with mud walls and tin roofs. All the houses face eastward, in which direction they have a large open verandah. In this verandah the family sits during the day, and in it the work of the household is carried on, except cooking, which is performed inside. In the southside of the verandah is the seat of honour. Here a mat or cloth is laid for the head of the family, upon which no one intrudes. The rooms of Bishmupriya typical houses are only three. The rooms are not provided with a bright sunlight as there are few windows in the typical houses of the Bishmupriya.

In front of the main house there is a clear courtyard. In many cases the courtyard is well-washed and kept clean. But at the harvesting season, this area is used for thrashing area. Just at the middle of the courtyard a 'Tulsi' is planted.

At the sides of the main house there are cattle sheds, bullock-sheds, The kitchen is separated from the main house.

A small granary is built usually near the house and food supplies for the year are kept here. Like most of the Bengalis, who have no common granary for the whole village community, the Bishmupriya have no common granary for the whole village community, the Bishmupriya have a separate granary for each house. Commonly, a small kitchen garden is attached to the house to grow vegetables, the people may convert it into a small field to grow crops like dal, maize, etc. on a small scale.

The garden is enclosed either by bamboo or wooden fencing to protect the growth against their domestic animals like cow, goat, etc.

The houses of both the villages are generally scattered throughout the village.

Generally the house is built with the joint labour of the members of the village who help one another in building a house for every household of the community. Sometimes remuneration in cash or kind is required to be paid for the labour.

### Water Source

No water facilities have been extended to the area by the government. There are no common source of water within the villages. Nevertheless, the village is not thrust into

acute water crisis because there are ponds in every households.

### Educational Institutions

There are two L.P. schools in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram. There are no High School in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram. One High School is situated at Chenkhuri. From this high school Many good students were produced. This school leads this village towards advancement and amelioration of the condition of the villagers. This school was named after the name of Late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Besides these, one music school is situated in the Bhakatpur. About 30 students of both Bhakatpur and Kabirgram are trained in music in this school.

### Religious Place

There are two temples or prayer houses present in Bhakatpur. In Kabirgram, there is only one temple. The villagers perform their religious functions in these temples.

### Post Office

There is a post office in Bhakatpur which is situated at the south of the village. There is no post office in Kabirgram.

Police Station

There is no police station in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram. Rangirkhari Police-station of Silchar serves as the Police Station for all villagers of Bhakatpur and Kabirgram.

Shop, Market and Club

There are three shops in Bhakatpur and two shops in Kabirgram. Most of the shops are place at Chenkhuri Road from which the villagers get their daily requirements. These shops are owned by the Bishmupriya of those two villages.

There is no market place inside the village. The villagers come to Silchar or Chenkhuri for marketing.

There are two village clubs, one in Bhakatpur and one in Kabirgram. The administration of the club is regulated by a committee consisting of a President, Secretary and some other members. Each member contributes a sum of money fixed by the general body from time to time as club-fee monthly. The primary functions of the club are to develop art and literature and the condition of the village by constructing roads clearing nasty things of ponds, etc.

Cremation ground

The Bishmupriya cremate the dead body on the bank of a river or near water place. As there is no river in the

villages, there is a particular place used as a cremation ground which is near to the entrance of the village Bhakatpur.

In Kabirgram, cremation ground is situated towards the south-east of the village.

### III. The Two Villages - Salient Characteristics

In this Section and the next chapter we will make an attempt to outline some salient, demographic and ethnographic characteristics of Bishnupriya villages. For this purpose we have selected two villages, Kabirgram and Bhakatpur. Both the villages are located near to Silchar town. Due to some constraints a more representative village could not be selected. The present study, in many ways, is a preparatory investigation, hence the results of this can be taken as base for a more detailed investigation proposed to be taken for the doctoral research. The information and analysis in this Section and the following chapter are the 'micro-level' analysis mentioned earlier. Bhakatpur is a 'pure' Bishmupriya village, while Kabirgram is a 'mixed' village. The information on these two villages is on basis of 'field work' conducted during 1986.

In Bhakatpur, there are 73 families with a population of 392, comprising of 235 males (60%) and 157 females (40%).

In Kabirgram, there are total 25 families. This is a 'mixed village' inhabited by 20 Bishnupriya villages and 5 Bengali families. The population distribution is as follows: 20 Bishnupriya families with total population of 150, and 5 Bengali families with total population of 35. In terms of some of the gross demographic characteristics. There is hardly any apparent difference between the Bishnupriya and the Bengali in these two villages. Sex ratio and average family size, in terms of both these characteristics there is no difference between the two communities. The average family size among the Bishnupriya in Kabirgram is 7.5 while it is 7 among the Bengali. Similarly, while the sex ratio among the Bishnupriya is 57:43, it is 54:46 among the Bengali.

In the two villages, the male-female sex-ratio between 1951-1986 is:

Table 1

	Bhakatpur	Kabirgram (per 100 males)	
	(per 100 males)	Bishnupriya	Bengali
1951	116	118	116
1961	106	111	108
1971	95	99	101
1986	66	73	75

Source: For figures of 1951 to 1971 Census of 1961 and 1971. Figures for 1986 are from village census conducted by the author during her field work.

It may be noted from the above table that the percentage of female population has gradually declined from 1951 onwards. Till 1961, the number of females was more than that of the males, in 1971 the number of females has declined. In 1986, the number of female has declined considerably. The causes associated with this decline, and the biological and social implications of this are some of the important areas which need to be investigated in depth.

The reason for the disparity in the sex-ratio and the steady decline in the sex-ratio are not quite clear. However, some preliminary investigations, it will appear that a number of factors are responsible in this connection.

Marriage is an important institution among the Bishnupriya, obviously. The figures relating the marital condition of inhabitants of the two villages reveal some characteristics which demand mention. We find that in the two villages, while the Bishnupriya in the age-group of 16 to 20 years are mostly unmarried. Many among the Bengali in Kabirgram are married (married - 2 M, 1 F; Unmarried - 2 M, 2 F). There is only one exception, in Bhakatpur, while one

Table 2

## Marital condition in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram

	Bhakatpur				Kabirgram							
	Unmarried		Married		Bishmupriya				Bengali			
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
0-10	40	63	-	-	26	10	-	-	5	5	-	-
11-15	12	26	-	-	20	9	-	-	4	3	-	-
16-20	8	30	-	1	7	8	-	1	2	2	2	1
21-25	13	16	1	11	-	6	4	3	1	-	3	4
26-30	9	8	12	20	-	5	8	5	-	-	2	1
31-35	2	-	13	11	-	-	10	8	-	-	-	-
36-40	-	-	9	15	-	-	6	4	-	-	-	-
41-45	-	-	9	7	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-
46-50	-	-	5	10	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	-
51-55	-	-	10	5	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	-
56-60	-	-	5	7	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-
61+	-	-	9	5	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-

Source: Village Census conducted by the author in 1986.

girl gets married.

Another feature which shares our attention is that while in both the Bishnupriya and Bengali community, boys and girls get married by the time they attain the age of 21 years, in Bhakatpur as well as in Kabirgram there are some who are still unmarried even much after this age. It may be noted from the table that in Bhakatpur there were 2 males in the age-group 31 to 35 years who were unmarried. Similarly, in Kabirgram, there were 11 girls in age-groups 21 to 30 years who were still unmarried. These figures suggested to investigate the reasons for these boys and girls in the two villages to have remained unmarried.

The usual trend was that among the Bishnupriya, in both the villages, the boys and girls would usually get married after they attained the age of 21 years.

By and large, in relation to other feature, there is hardly any difference from characteristics revealed from the two villages. The total size of available Bengali population in Kabirgram is so small that it will not be advisable to derive any conclusions about them.

It will be evident from table 3 that by and large Bishnupriya women get married between the age group 16-20 yrs. This supports the figures from the foregoing table.

Table 3

## Age at Marriage

Age at marriage	Percentage of total married women	
	Bhakatpur	Kabirgram
6 - 10 yrs	2%	7%
11 - 15 yrs	20%	25%
16 - 20 yrs	34%	30%
21 - 25 yrs	31%	20%
26 - 30 yrs	8%	10%
31 - 35 yrs	5%	8%

Source: Village census conducted by the author during field work.

Table 4

## Level of Literacy

Educational Standard	Bhakatpur		Kabirgram	
	Percentage of total Population		Percentage of total Bishnupriya population	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Illiterate	76.4	86.7	78.3	85
Literate	1.3	2.7	3.3	6.3
Primary	3.2	5.6	6.2	6.5
Middle School	3.8	2.0	3.6%	1.1
High School	7.2	0.5	8.1	1.1
Intermediate	7.6	2.5	.5	-
Graduate	.5	-	-	-

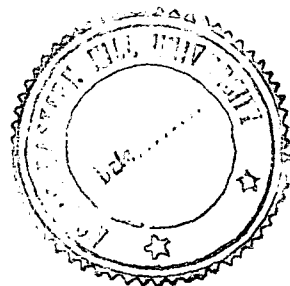
The above table reveals that the percentage of illiterates is fairly high in both the villages.

In Bhakatpur, the percentage of literate males and females are 23.6% and 13.3% while that of Kabirgram are 21.7% and 15% respectively.

According to 1961 census conducted by Gaonburah, the percentage of literate males and females in Bhakatpur are 15.6% and 8.8%, whereas in Kabirgram these are 14.2% and 6.3% respectively.

Although the number of the illeterates is larger than that of the literates, yet the tempo, at which education is spreading in Bishnupriya villages, clearly indicates that, by and by, the literates will outnumber the illiterates.

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Economy

The economy of Bishmupriya villages in Cachar, depends mainly on agriculture. In this section we attempt to briefly examine the salient characteristics of the economy of Bhakatpur and Kabirgram. Both the villages are located near Silchar town, and this for obvious reasons has influenced the economy of the two villages. Employment in neighbouring Silchar has attracted many males in the two villages.

Modes of subsistence of the villagers in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram are presented below:

Table 5

## Economy, Modes of Subsistence

Mode of subsistence	Bhakatpur Number of Families	Kabirgram Number of Families	
		Bishmu- priya	Bengali
Agriculture	44 (60%)	13 (62%)	3 (60%)
Partly agriculture and partly other occupa- tions	18 (25%)	4 (22%)	1 (25%)
Occupations other than agriculture	11 (15%)	3 (16%)	1 (22%)
Total	73 (100%)	20 (100%)	5 (100%)

Source: Field work conducted by the author in  
1986.

The table presented shows that more than half of the total number of families in both Bhakatpur and Kabirgram depend completely on agriculture. 60% of the total number of families and in Kabirgram, 62% Bishrupriya family and 60% of the total number of Bengali family depend on agriculture.

The percentage of family depend mainly on agriculture, but are supported by other occupations in Bhakatpur (25%). In Kabirgram 22% families depend on agriculture mainly, but have some other secondary source of income also.

There are 15% of the total families in Bhakatpur depend on occupation other than agriculture. The percentage of that type of Bishrupriya family in Kabirgram is 16% and Bengali family is 20%.

The other occupations may be classified into various types.

The number of families in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram, which depend 'partly on agriculture and partly on other occupations' are as follows:

Table 6

Number of families depending on both agriculture and other occupations

Types of other occupation	Bhakatpur Number of families	Kabirgram	
		Bishnu-priya	Bengali
Government employment	8 (44.4%)	2 (50%)	1 (100%)
Teaching	3 (16.2%)	1 (25%)	
Priest	2 (11.2%)	1 (25%)	
Trade	1 (5.6%)		
Labourer	4 (22.2%)		

Source : Fieldwork conducted by the author in 1986.

The above table shows the number of families depend 'partly on agriculture and government employment' as fairly large in both the villages.

In Bhakatpur, the number of families which depend partly on agriculture and partly on teaching and labourer are quite encouraging.

In Kabirgram, among the Bishbupriya families which depend partly on agriculture and other occupation, half of the total number of families depend on agriculture and teaching and half depend on agriculture and priesthood.

There is no Bengali families in Kabirgram which depend partly on agriculture and on other occupations besides agriculture and government employment.

Table 7

Number of families absolutely depend on occupations other than agriculture

Occupations	Bhakatpur Number of families	Kabirgram Number of families	
		Bishbupriya	Bengali
Government employment	6 (54.5%)	1 (33.3)	x
Teaching	1 (9.1%)	1 (33.3)	x
Priest	1 (9.1%)	1 (33.3)	x
Trade	2 (18.2%)		
Labourer	1 (9.1%)		1 (100%)

Source: Field work conducted by the author in 1986.

The above table reveals that in Bhakatpur large number of families depend absolutely on government employment. The number of families which depend on trading are also encouraging.

In Kabirgram, the number of Bishnupriya families which depend absolutely on government employment, teaching and priesthood are same.

It is interesting to note that none of the Bengali family absolutely depends on other occupation beside labourer.

The above discussion helps to infer that the villagers are now tending to be absorbed largely in government employment and trade that may be available to them within and outside the village.

a) Land

The net area of Bhakatpur and Kabirgram village is 2046 acres and 618 acres respectively. Out of this, the total area of cultivable land in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram come to 1455 acres and 408 acres respectively. In Bhakatpur 1455 acres of land are distributed among 62 families, and 408 acres are distributed among 21 families in Kabirgram.

In all 1455 acres are under cultivation in the valley, 1,206 acres are classéed as 'dry land', locally known as

'Danga', for this area is irrigated entirely by the rains; and 249 acres are classed as 'wet land', locally known as 'sol', as extra irrigation is available. Although the dry land occupies a proportionately wider area, it is less productive than the wet land.

In 1985-86, out of the total village land revenue of Rs. 3114.00, only Rs. 1084.00 were derived as revenue on dry land, and the rest came from wet land.

The wet land is further classified into 'abi', 'tabi', and 'do fasla' land. In the abi land seeds are sown in the rainy season (June to July) and harvested in mid- or late winter (November to January). This type of land occupies 98 acres and yields a revenue of Rs. 630/- per year. In the tabi land sowing is done in winter (October to November) and the crops are harvested in summer (April to May). Tabi land covers 120 acres in the village and yields a revenue of Rs. 1150/- per year. Finally 31 acres are classed as dofasla or two crop land. As the name suggests, crops are sown and harvested on this land thrice every year. Notwithstanding its small area this land yields a revenue of Rs. 250/-. All this wet land is irrigated by channels from 'Boaljoor Khal'.

**b) The Agricultural Year**

In late summer (the end of May) the agriculturists keep their fields clear for ploughing. Invariably there is some rainfall during this period which softens the ground and makes it possible for them to start ploughing.

About this time they go to the Brahmin to fix an auspicious day for planting vegetables in their field. Some astrological and superstitious beliefs also guide farming operations in the village. The priest, after consulting fixes an auspicious day for sowing seeds and plants. Thursday and Saturday are considered inauspicious, hence sowing is not done on these days.

Beds are kept ready well in advance, and on the appropriate day suggested by the priest seeds are sown. In the rainy season almost everyone grows some vegetables and these are in most cases the only vegetables regularly eaten in any part of the year. The favourites among these vegetables are: bean, gourd, bringals, etc.

When more showers have fallen, a late variety of rice is sown in carefully made beds to be transplanted into regular fields later. In the first two weeks of June operations started in late May are continued. Light showers at this time are further utilized to complete the ploughing.

Sowing of millet is also continued. Late varieties of paddy are now directly sown into the fields. In the second half of June the rainfall is generally regular and satisfactory. During this time people must complete their sowing millet. Ground-nut, linseed and other oil seeds are also sown during this period. All these crops are grown on dry land as they do not require any extra irrigation. For a month and a half after this the sowing paddy is continued. A month after the sowing, weeds are removed from the fields. Labour is usually hired for weeding the wet fields, but in the fields on dry land this is done with a forked plough designed specially for this purpose. After the weeding they proceed to manure the fields. Many people use an artificial fertilizer which they buy from the Agricultural Department of the Assam State Government.

The harvesting of millet, as well as the other first crops, has to be completed by October to early November. This is the busiest season for most cultivators. Between the harvesting of these crops and the sowing of 'rabi' crops such as gram, castor etc, the interval must be as short as possible.

With the advent of winter the 'rabi crops', i.e. gram, castor, chillies, mustard, onions, garlic and other varieties of oil seeds are sown. All these are dry land crops. With the exception of chillies, onions, garlic, which

are irrigated roughly once in a week, the other crops do not require any irrigation. Most of these crops are ready for harvesting in three to five months. With the completion of the sowing of these crops, the agriculturists sow the second crop of paddy. Fields are flooded with water from the irrigation tank. For the second crops an early variety of paddy is generally chosen. The crop ripens in three to four months. When the harvesting is over, the farmers get a brief spell of rest and leisure.

If we work out the average for the different items of expenditure incurred in agricultural activities, we find that the expenditure on seeds is the most important factor, accounting for nearly 60½% of the total amount spent. The other important items of expenditure are land revenue - 20%, wages for hired labour - 10%, maintenance of hire of plough and cattle, manure and land improvement account for only about 10% of the sum spent in both villages of Bhakatpur and Kabirgram.

Those who have no land, as well as those who have very little land, are left with the alternatives of either working as whole-time agricultural labourers or of cultivating land taking on lease (Bagi). Persons choosing the second alternative, either pay the owner of the land a fixed sum of money every year, or they give him a quarter or one-

third of the produce. Generally, only inferior quality land can generally be had on lease. With hard work and financial investment this land can be improved, but unfortunately this is impeded by several factors. If, the same person continues to hold the bagi for certain fields for a number of years, according to law he acquires semi-proprietary rights over them. The landlord does not want this to happen, and so with a view to safe-guarding his own interests he leases out his land to different persons in different years. A short-lease is naturally not conducive to land improvement, for the persons cultivating the land does not risk any investment in it. If he does improve it, in one of the following years the landlord may lease it out to someone else who offers to pay more than the person who improved the land.

The land belongs to the family, and normally the head of the family exercises control over it. On the death of the father, the land and other agricultural property - such as tools, implements and livestock - are distributed equally among the brothers. In very special cases, with the consent of all the brothers, a widowed sister is also given a small share. But this is a gratuity rather than a rightful share.

c) Equipments

It is hoped that every cultivator would have a minimum of agricultural tools and equipments of his own, but, unfortunately this is not so. The well-to-do families are definitely in possession of almost all important tools and implements, but those that are poor marriage their work by borrowing them from others or paying the necessary charges especially for the plough. Among, the indispensable tools which must be kept by each family or cultivators are axe, sickle, plough, etc. The axe is used for removing useless plants and cutting woods, the sickle for reaping paddy and wheat plants, plough for cultivating land.

It will be evident from the foregoing analysis that agriculture, land-based activities, is the main source of subsistence for majority of the families in both the villages. This notwithstanding, there is variation between the families on basis of the amount of agriculture land possessed by each family.

d) Size of landholding

The population or family of the village has been divided into four-broad categories like A, B, C, D. Those who possesses land between 80-100 acres are A category, whereas those who have it between 20-80 acres are of B

category. Similarly, persons or families possessing 1-20 acres of land find themselves in the category of C, whereas the rest between 0-1 acres are under the category of D.

In Bhakatpur, the percentage of A categories of people is 6% whereas the percentage of B, C and D, categories of people are 17%, 50% and 27% respectively.

In Kabirgram among the Bishnupriya the percentage of categories of people is 5%. The percentage of those who are of B, C, D categories, are 10%, 57% and 28% respectively. There is no A category of family among the Bengali of that village whereas the percentage of B, C, D categories of family are 20%, 45% and 35%, respectively.

In both the village the percentage of B and C categories are highest and that of A category is lowest.

The economy of the village is only partially self-sufficient. Besides agriculture most of the villagers have to depend on service or other professions.

### Political Organisation

The political organization of the Bishnupriya in Cachar deserves special mention. More correctly, this aspect of Bishnupriya society demands close attention and analytical understanding. This is not because the description of

political organization forms one of the aspects included in ethnographic description made by anthropologists. This notwithstanding, we can identify some special reasons for close attention to the pattern of political organization of the Bishrupriya in Cachar.

"Political organization has been defined structurally by reference to institutions that regulate the use of force (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940; Weber, 1922; Almond, 1960) and functionally with reference to social cooperation and leadership (Schapera, 1956; Mair, 1962). Political organization can be described in terms of the process of decision-making found in a given population (Easton, 1953; 1957; Macridis, 1955). All these schemes identify political organization with discrete social units, 'societies' or 'political communities', within which force is controlled or excluded, and valid decision-making is directed and cooperation obtained".

The political organization of any community performs two important functions. Firstly, and more obviously, it organises the distribution and use of power and authority at different levels within the society. Secondly, the political organization of a community, more importantly, helps in the maintenance and continuity of social identity of the community. The political organization of any community comprises of structured as well as non-structured social systems and processes.

Political organization is crucial in the social system of the Bishrupriya in Cachar. It helps towards maintaining the distinct social identity of the community in Cachar. As we have noted earlier, for its survival and continuity in the context of Cachar, the Bishrupriya community has to strive hard. This is possible through two levels of political organization.

The Bishrupriya in Cachar is a community rather discretely dispersed, in villages (16) and in the town of Silchar. The political organization of this community has to be visualized at two levels, at the village level and at the district level. Political organization at village level is structured and on same pattern as that in villages of the Bengali inhabiting Cachar. The Bengali is the major community in Cachar.

Each of the sixteen Bishrupriya villages have their respective village council, locally known as gaon-panchayat. The gaon-panchayat consists of nine members including the president locally known as 'Gaon-burah' or 'Murabbi' or 'Adhyaksha' and vice-president, locally known as 'Upadhyaksha'. One of the panchayat member has been entrusted with the charge to look after the accounts.

Bhakatpur is subdivided into five wards, electing nine panchayat members in total. Election of members to

the panchayat is held on ward basis through adult franchise, obviously.

Kabirgram is a small village. There is a common village panchayat between Kabirgram and its neighbouring village Singari. The total population of Kabirgram is only 188 between 25 families. The neighbouring village of Singari has a to be population of 287 among 67 families. Like the village panchayat of Bhakatpur, the common panchayat of Kabirgram, Singari has also five wards. Out of these there are two wards in Kabirgram and three wards in Singari.

At present, the chief of the village panchayat, the Murabbi, is a resident of Kabirgram.

In each village panchayat, one seat is reserved for a female member. But neither the panchayat of Kabirgram, nor of Bhakatpur is represented by a female nominee. The reason is obvious. The women have not yet become liberated to take active share in socio-political activities.

According to rules, the term of office of the Gaon-panchayat members is 5 years. We find that the last election in Bhakatpur was held in April 1977, and in May 1976 in Kabirgram. The gaon-panchayat constituted then still continues. Elections for both these village panchayats is long overdue. This is not unique for these two villages.

Panchayat elections in Assam is long overdue.

According to rules, every adult legible to be a voter is also legible to be a member of the Gaon panchayat. Informally, however, the social considerations associated with the legibility to membership of gaon-panchayat is based on combination of economic status, education, reputation of personal integrity such as honesty, justice, and such other personal qualities which qualify him to make a good spokesman of the village, through qualities as to articulate his ideas, communicate effectively with officials etc. 'Family background' is another quality which is held in high esteem. This refers to the reputation of the family to which a person belongs. Age is an important consideration when electing a gaon-burah. There is always a preference to have an elderly member or atleast a middle-aged member as the gaon-burah. This notwithstanding, it is interesting to note that the present gaon-burah of Bhakatpur is a youngman of 30 years of age. This is an exception.

The traditional gaon-panchayat aims at fulfilling several important functions and obligations, such as (1) civic services, which includes construction, repair, maintenance, cleansing and lighting of public streets, sanitation, etc. (2) social services, like regulating places for the disposal of dead bodies; establishing and maintaining

primary schools; constructing, repair and maintenance of public wells, tanks, ponds, etc. (3) medical services, specially during emergency or for preventing actions, and 4) Development activities like assisting the development of agriculture, etc.

Besides the above mentioned functions of the gaon-panchayat, one of its important, rather prominent activities is to (1) settle and decide minor disputes between its constituents, 2) to act as custodian and watchdog of social customs and traditions.

When mentioning about gaon-panchayat (village council) we have to understand this in terms of (i) traditional and (ii) statutory, village councils.

The villagers think it more convenient and advisable to settle the case with the help of village panchayat rather than taking the help of district court. There are several forces which act behind the influence and validity of the decision of gaon-panchayat. The majority of the villagers understand the decision of panchayat members, which is earliest available to them and less expensive. Moreover, the feeling of patriotism forces the villagers to keep the news of the conflict inside the village and to be settled by the panchayat members. Besides, any disobedience or disagree-

ment with the decision of the village elders indicates some form of decrease in the social influence of the members on the villagers. This aspect of interpretation aside, there is another crucial dimension involved. An average villager may sometimes find himself in need to seek financial help from one of the members. This often defers them from disagreeing with the members.

Among the Bishrupriya most of the disputes arise on the issues of property, domestic quarrels within the family and extra-marital and pre-marital irregularities. But to a Bishrupriya all these happen to be matters of settlement between the offended and the offender.

However, disputes arise when somebody's stray cattle damages the crops, or somebody injures or kills a cow or buffalo. In such cases the gaon-panchayat acts as an intermediary only. But the compensation to be paid by the offender to the aggrieved party is a matter to be decided upon by themselves. If a man refuses to pay compensation, the aggrieved party has no way left other than going to the Civil Court of the District Council.

Criminal offences were unknown in the memory of the older generation of Bhakatpur and Kabirgram. But in these villages thefts have occurred several times in recent years. Bachhu was detected to have stolen a cow from a

neighbouring village. This matter was not reported to the police authorities since the offender agreed to compensate for the cow.

The present panchayat is unable to undertake any development activity - even repairs of road for want of support from the active leaders of the village.

The village panchayat has a money-fund to meet the different expenses. This fund has been formed by the financial grants from the District Council.

Notwithstanding what had been the extent of powers and the role of the village-panchayat the point of particular interest that deserves worth-mention here is that, the authoritative role of the panchayat is no more considered a sine-quantum today. A great infringement in the exercise of power by the panchayat may be visualized as a recent trend. Arbitration by, or intervention of the panchayat in the matter of disputes or litigation is no more sought. Contrarily, they would prefer to proceed to the court of law for justice and settlement in the matters having legal implications or prima-facie importance. Obviously, the power of the panchayat has been relegated to the matters of minor or the least importance. Such a situation has cropped up due to the growth and gradual

evolution of a good number of socio-political organizations with dynamic and modern outlook. These organizations are definitely suited to changed circumstances and have a foreseeable capability to keep pace with time and needs. These organizations have generated in them a spirit of national-consciousness and rejuvenated them to rise to the clarion call of awakening. It may be emphasized once again that the people have lost their confidence in the panchayat which does not fight for a national strategy. But these socio-political organizations, on the demand of the situation, stand on the same platform and, under one banner spearhead different socio-cultural and socio-political movements, otherwise may be called a renaissance which has boosted up in every individual a strong awareness as to their legal and constitutional status as the Bishnupriya. To them, the crux of the problem is that their socio-cultural identity endowed with enriched heritage should be upheld, esteemed and recognised as per with those of others. These socio-political organizations are the only effective organs which can make a rational and positive approach to achieve this.

The socio-political organizations existing at the District level include Surma valley Manipuri Association, Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Sahitya Parishad - aiming at

developing the Bishnuppiya literature, Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha - a religious organization, Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Samskriti Parishad - a cultural organization, Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Bhasha Parishad - aiming at achieving legal and constitutional recognition to the language, Manipuri Bishnupriya Andolan Parishad - it organizes Satyagraha and movements to fulfil different demands, Bishnupriya Manipuri Seven Point Demand Action Committee - it stewards the movement for the charter of demands, Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Students' Union and Bishnupriya Andolan Parishad - these organizations cooperate with other organizations.

The organizations noted above, act severally and jointly to achieve and foster the growth and development of different ideals contributing to the distinct identity of the Bishnupriya in the mainstream of Indian national life. The Assam Franchise Committee's order entitling the Bishnupriya and the Meitei of Manipur, Assam, Tripura etc. as tribal people. The Bishnupriya sharply reacted to it. The Surma Valley Manipur Association of Cachar adduced historical documents to substantiate their claim that the Bishnupriya and the Meitei are caste-Hindus. Consequently, the government of India conceded to their such demand and withdrew the said order. In 1968, all of the above mentioned organizations collectively launched 'Satyagraha' to achieve

the following charter of Demands.

1. Immediate implementation of introduction of Bishnupriya Manipuri language as a medium of instruction in the primary stage of education in Assam and Tripura.
2. Broadcast of cultural programmes in Bishnupriya Manipuri at the AIR station, Gauhati.
3. Financial assistance to the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Sahitya Paráshad.
4. Proper representation in the central and state legislatures by way of Reservation or Nomination.
5. Reservation of special quota in government and semi-government services.
6. Financial assistance to all students of this linguistic minority irrespective of Divisions.
7. Correction of census of 1961.

In 1983, the Bishnupriya achieved a statutory recognition to their language from the government of Assam which recognised the Bishnupriya Manipuri language as one of the medium of instruction in the primary stage of education in Cachar. The Tripura-Government upheld and honoured the decision of the Government of Assam and enforced similar recognition to the Bishnupriya Manipuri language. Since

1975, daily 15-minutes Bishnupriya Manipuri Programme from AIR, Silchar was being broadcast.

Over and above, the Assam Government has already awarded a legal sanction by including Bishnupriya within other Backward class, thereby entitling them to special privileges.

It may be argued that the collective efforts exercised by different Bishnupriya organizations to achieve their ideals are gaining momentum with the progress of time. It appears that the governments, both at the central and the state, are no more oblivious to this community and rightly take cognizance of their demands. It is reasonable to expect that long-drawn grievances of this community will come to an end and their demands long-over due will be materialised.

Chapter - VI

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THE BISHNUPRIYA IN CACHAR - AN  
ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE

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## THE BISHNUPRIYA IN CACHAR -- AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The main crux of the conflict between the Bishmupriya and the Meitei has been more hightened and pronounced outside Manipur. In terms of cultural and social traits, the dividing line between these two ethnic groups is rather very thin. The cultural and social difference between the Bishmupriya and the Meitei is occasional rather than frequent. As far as the pronounced difference between the Bishmupriya and the Meitei is concerned what is pronounced and prominent in Assam, it has the tendency of levelling in Manipur. Caste system is one such aspect.

In this chapter we will try to present an ethnographic profile of the Bishmurpriya in Cachar. This has been made with the intention (a) to identify the salient social and cultural characteristics of the Bishmupriya, and (b) how these have 'functioned' (served) as basis of maintaining their distinct identity in Assam vis-a-vis the Meitei there.

In this chapter we attempt to examine the broad ethnographic profile in terms of

- A. Social institutions, such as,
  - I. The caste and clan system

II. Marriage and Family

III. Kinship and kinship behaviour

IV. Status of Bishnupriya women.

B. Religious beliefs and practices.

A. Social institutions:

We will try to understand about the salient characteristics of Bishnupriya society in terms of some of its social institutions such as caste system; marriage and family; kinship and kinship behaviour and status of Bishnupriya women.

I. The Caste and Clan System:

The Caste System:

The Bishnupriya today have only two castes, Brahmin and Kshatriya. The Bengali, like other Hindu community, compared to this, are divided into four castes, namely, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. Like the Bishnupriya, the Meitei also have two castes.

In Bhakatpur, the ratio of Brahmin and Kshatriya is 55: 337; whereas in Kabirgram, among the Bishnupriya the ratio of those two castes is 16:134.

The Bishnupriya are endogamous and observe the rule of interdining. The Brahmins do not take some items of food such as cooked rice, dal, etc. from Kshatriya but Kshatriya

take all the item from Brahmin. The same feature is found among the Meitei and the Bengali.

The caste system among the Bishmupriya has undergone a change over period of time. A review of it will be needed to understand this. Details of this has been presented earlier. This refers to the social background of the Bishmupriya community. History tells us beyond doubt that the Bishmupriya in Manipur are the descendants of Bengali migrants. There are two opinions about the caste composition of these early Bengali migrants who later formed the Bishmupriya community. According to one opinion the early Bengali migrants, were mostly low caste. Accordingly, to another opinion, these migrants comprised of castes from the four Varnas, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. The controversy between these two opinions notwithstanding, there is sufficient evidence to rely that the early Bishmupriya comprised of four caste groups. So before the advent of Vaishnavism of Sri Chaitanya, there were four castes, namely, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra among the Bishmupriya and the Meitei. Among the non-Brahmin castes, there were cultivators, goldsmiths, utensil-makers and others. The teaching of Sri Chaitanya differed in several important respects. His most radical form was in his disregard of caste, which went even as far as allowing outcastes to eat with Brahmins, provided they were devotees of 'Vishnu'. Later

followers of Chaitanya were not so liberal, and caste reestablished itself among them after His death but caste was reestablished in a peculiar form, i. e. all except the Brahmin began to identify themselves as Kshatriya and now, the Kshatriya and the Brahmin are the only two castes among the Bishnupriya and the Meitei. They have no 'dhobi' castes, no 'barber' caste, no cobblers and no scavengers. Each household managed of its own. Now under the pressure of modernization 'dhobis' and barbers have come to Bishnupriya village but I never came across a barbar or a 'dhobi' of Bishnupriya origin. They are all outsiders.

Traditionally, each caste has a specific occupation over which it exercises a monopoly sanctioned formally by law, norms and values of the villagers. Priesthood is considered the highest occupation. But now-a-days all the members of caste may not follow the cast occupation.

Among Brahmin only 4 persons are priest in Bhakatpur i. e. 7.4% of total Brahmin population and in Kabirgram only 2 persons are priest, i. e. 12.5%.

#### Clan system:

The Bishnupriya are divided into nine exogamous clans, namely, Madhukalya, Atreya, Agniras, Kasyap, Bharadwaj,

Sandilya, Vyagra and Gautam. 'Clan' is termed as gotra by the Bishmupriya.

The clans are based on an assumption of common origin - the members of the clan regarding themselves to be the descendants of a common ancestor and thus avoiding marital relations with the members of their own clan-group. Wherein marriage within the caste group is made compulsory, the members of the different clans of the ethnic group are required to marry strictly outside their own clan. Since the clan members regard themselves to be of the common blood, any marriage within one's own clan would be tantamount to marriage within one's own family, thus causing the breach of incest taboo, and hence restricted by the rule of clan-exogamy. The rule of clan-exogamy is as strict in nature as the rule of caste endogamy. Caste endogamy and clan exogamy thus go together in Bishmupriya society as in all societies, and are in no way contradictory to each other.

These nine clans (as mentioned above) are found among the Bengali.

As to clan there exist some differences between the Bishmupriya and the Meitei. The Meiteis are divided into seven clans, such as, 'Ningthouja,' 'Khumul', 'Luang', 'Angam', 'Moirang', 'Ngangba' and 'Chongloi'.

Clan is termed as gotra by the Bishrupriya, while it is termed as Salei by the Meitei.

According to the Bishrupriya, every clan is named after a particular sage, for instance, the members of Kashyap and Bharadwaj clan regard themselves as descendants of Kashyap and Bharadwaj sage respectively.

According to the Meitei, the originator of the seven Saleis is Gooroo (the most excellent spirit). The seven saleis were brought forth from the different limbs of the Gooroo, i. e.

- 1) Ningthouja was born from the left eye.
- 2) Angom from the right eye.
- 3) Chengloi from the right ear.
- 4) Ngangba from the left ear.
- 5) Looang from the right nostril.
- 6) Khooman from the left nostril.
- 7) Moirang from the teeth.

Each of these saleis consists of a number of sub-groups called 'Yumnaks', the number varying from one hundred and fifteen in the Ningthaja, or Royal clan, to seventeen in the Khabananba.

The further discussion on clan and lineage has been done later.

## II. Marriage and Family

### Marriage

Marriage for obvious reasons, in an inseparable aspect of the social life of a Bishnupriya. Biya is the Bishnupriya word for marriage. In Bengali it is termed as Bibaha or Biya, while in Meitei, Luhongba is the word for marriage.

The rules and rituals of marriage among the Bishnupriya have their own distinctive features. These, in fact, reveal an interesting pattern of culture adoption. We may well recall about the Bishnupriya that originally this is a community which has its origin in Manipur. As a community from Manipur, where it had active interaction with the Meitei, there was considerable culture exchange between the Bishnupriya and the Meitei. As migrants to Cachar, the Bishnupriya have been in active culture interaction with the Bengali. These two experiences have had their impact on the cultural trait of the Bishnupriya. On occasions they reveal cultural traits borrowed from the Meitei as well as the Bengali.

In rules and rituals of marriage, there is an interesting pattern of similarity or difference between those found among the Bishnupriya, and those as found among the Bengali and the Meitei.

All the three communities, i. e., the Bishnupriya, the Bengali and the Meitei follow the prajapatya form of marriage. Under this form of marriage, the selection of mates is made by the parents. Like all communities, these three strictly follow clan exogamy. The Bishnupriya are divided into nine clans: 'Madhukalya', 'Atreya', 'Agniras', 'Kasyap', 'Bharadwaj', 'Kausik', 'Sandilya', 'Vyagra' and 'Gautam'. The Meitei are divided into seven clans, namely, 'Ningthouja', 'Angam', 'Chengloi', 'Ngangba', 'Luang', 'Khumal', 'Moirang'.

Along with the rule of clan exogamy, the Bishnupriya follow the restriction of avoiding marriage within  Sapinda. A Bishnupriya boy cannot marry a girl who is considered his Sapinda, i. e., within the 7th degree in the line of ascent from the father and the 5th degree in the line of ascent from the mother. This is a rule of marriage which the Bishnupriya share with the Hindu Bengali.

It is interesting to note that the Bishnupriya like the Beshnupriya like the Bengali and the Meitei use horoscope for purpose of settling marriage. Before settling any marriage, the parents of both the boy and the girl will consult an astrologer and ask him to match the horoscope of the boy and the girl. If the horoscopes do not properly match, the marriage is not settled.

A prominent point of difference between Bishnupriya and the Meitei is the reference to the genealogy at time of marriage. Among the Bishnupriya, on account of father in respect of genealogy is very important. A man cannot marry a girl of his father's clan. Among the Meitei, an account of mother in respect of genealogy is very important and a lack of it is taken to be a very important draw back.

While the Bishnupriya seem to share many traits with the Bengali, the ritual solemnizing marriage among the Bishnupriya is same as among the Meitei. Marriage among the Bishnupriya is solemnized by a Kirtana. Marriage among the Meitei is also solemnized by Kirtana. Compared to this, marriage among the Bengali is solemnized by the traditional Hindu system, the Sapta-Pradakshin, the seven rounds of the solemn fire. (Details of marriage rituals have been discussed later).

We will note from the foregoing discussion that in relation to marriage the Bishnupriya have adopted some traits from the Meitei, while they have retained set of other traits the origin of which can be traced to the origin of the Bishnupriya from the Bengali. This point demands close and prominent attention.

The Bishnupriya share structural characteristics with the Bengali. Both the Bishnupriya and the Bengali are divided into nine gotras, and both strictly follow the rule of avoiding marriage within the Sapinda. All that the Bishnupriya have borrowed from the Meitei is the ritual solemnized marriage. Marriage among the Bishnupriya and the Meitei is solemnized by performing Kirtan.

Traditional marriage among the Bishnupriya, as mentioned above, are parent-settled, and are accompanied by elaborate rituals. These last for about five days. Besides the traditional, elaborate marriages, settled by parents, there is an increasing trend of self-settled marriages. Widow marriage is permitted among the Bishnupriya. There have been some cases of marriage by exchange.

We may classify the types of marriage into two broad categories,

- 1) Traditional form of marriage, and
- 2) Emerging pattern of marriage.

The traditional forms of marriage, again, comprise of (a) the parents settled, ritually elaborate marriages, and (b) widow marriage, and marriage by exchange, both of which involve minimum rituals. The emerging patterns of marriage are usually in the form of self-settled (mutually

settled) marriages. Such forms of marriage, in any case, involve elaborate rituals as in other traditional forms of marriage. It may be interesting to note that the Meitei have a form of marriage ritual, known as Keinakatpa. This type of marriage is obtained by exchange of garlands. This is not practised by the Bishnupriya.

1. Traditional marriage - parents' settled with elaborate rituals:

Traditional marriage, settled by parents with elaborate rituals, is the most beautiful type of marriage among the Bishnupriya. The feature of fundamental importance is the 'proposal' for the marriage and its acceptance. One conspicuous feature of the Bishnupriya is that the well-known and ever present fact of 'match-maker' is nowhere to be seen. This feature is common among the Bengali. Generally, among the Bishnupriya the proposal is moved by the parents of the bridegroom or by any person on his behalf. The proposal is conveyed to the parents of the bride. There are still people who can tell, if asked, the names of the fathers of all the marriageable boys or girls within the society, their social status, lineage etc.

The custom of seeing of the prospective bride for approval does not obtain in Bishnupriya which is prevalent

among the Bengali. The Bishnupriya bridegroom's party has got to make their choice on second hand information. The secondhand information is, in most cases, reliable.

After the parents have settled the preliminaries, the announcement of the forthcoming marriage takes place. The marriage ceremony is held at the bride's house. The acceptance of proposal is expressed after observance of certain formalities: 'A day is appointed for this purpose. On the appointed day the bridegroom's guardian accompanied by other relatives proceed to the bride's house. They take with them fried rice, sugarcakes, bettlenuts and other edibles. These are very nicely arranged on a banana leaf. Bride's guardian also invites their kits and kins and neighbours. All the invitees are very cordially welcome in the house of bride but it is the Bridegroom's guardian who has to entertain all the guests with sweetmeats and he has to bring sweetmeats according to the number of guests. The oldest person of bride's village also is an honourable guest in this occasion.

The aged person of bride's family or, in his absence, the father of the Bride asks the Bridegroom's guardian about the purpose of coming to the Bride's house. Having been so interogated, the guardian of the bridegroom now has to put up his proposal in presence of the persons assembled. Now is

the turn of the parents or guardians of the bride to accept the proposal. On that day, the parents or guardian of both the bride and groom consult with their relatives and village elders. If the proposal is in favour, they come to a final decision about the actual date of the formal marriage. Decision of the marriage having been so settled, the invited guests are entertained with the sweetmeats, bettlenuts, etc. brought by the bridegroom's party. The parents of the bride and bridegroom embrace each other, prostrate to one another and the function is finished. The bridegroom and bride are thus betrothed. This ceremony is called Waroipt. Waroipt ceremony is held as a mark of happiness of the coming actual marriage.

After this, Heiginp is held in the form of Waroipt ceremony. This ceremony is held one or two days ahead of the actual wedding day, the parent, or guardian of bride make budget for marriage with his relatives and neighbours in order to avoid errors and omission. The budget also guide him to incur expenditure within financial capacity. The edible things are distributed among the people gathered in the said function.

On the very day of the marriage ceremony, at the house of bride, a Samkirtan is started in the morning in the marriage pandel built on the courtyard of the bride's

residence. On the day of marriage the groom and the wedding party reach the bride's village after nightfall. It is worthwhile to mention here that before proceeding to the bride's house, the three or five or more female members of groom's family pray (Harikirtan) on sitting at the maindoor of the groom's house, to god for the couple's happiness.

Bridegroom and his party do not go straight to the house of the bride. On prior arrangement, they assemble in a different house in the village of the bride. They halt there until they are received by the bride's family. In this house some formalities are observed by younger sister of the bride. The formalities are described below:

'A crescentic disk made of banana leaf is placed on the circular dish of banana leaf. Holy lamp, puffed rice, sandal paste, flowers and mirror are nicely arranged on the crescentic banana leaf. The younger sister of the bride now picks up the dish and proceeds to the place where the bridegroom and his party are seated. She places the dish before the bridegroom, picks up a flower from the leaf-dish, soaks it in sandal paste, move it around the dish and then inserts the same on ear of the bridegroom. The bridegroom similarly picks up another flower from the dish, mixes sandal paste with it, and inserts the same in between the other ear of his own with the help of mirror. This is the manner how the

bridegroom expresses his willingness and acceptance to the invitation.

After this ceremony is over the bridegroom and the wedding guests proceed to the house of the bride, where a pandal with a stage in it has been made for them. All will have their seat on the stage after observance of certain traditional formalities.

A banana plant is placed on the way to the bride's house, near it a chair is placed. An opened umbrella is held by a man on the head of the Bridegroom. The bridegroom now sits on the chair. The younger brother of the bride or some other junior washes groom's feet with all honour. After finishing this job, he claims a pay for the job. Generally the groom's party do not agree to pay the big payment; as a result bargaining starts on. Such bargaining creates a jovial atmosphere. This ceremony is termed as Barar Jangdhana.

Bridegroom now proceeds to the stage but before entering the stage certain other formalities are observed:

On the entrance to the stage, there waits a party of three female members. One of them waits by carrying a pail of water, she is followed by another girl with bamboo lamp in her hand. Behind her, waits the mother of the

bride with a dish in her hand. The dish contains blissful things like fruits, puffed rice, sugarcake, bettlenuts and a ring. Mother of the bride now comes to the front of the 'que' keeping the two other girls behind her. At first she scattered puffed rice over the umbrella and then offers the edibles and ring which is termed as Bar nak Karani.

After observance of all these conventional formalities, the bridegroom and the guests now proceed to the stage and have their seats.

According to the traditionally laid down principle, all wedding guests have their seats arranged towards the north-east side of the stage. The seats placed towards the southern part of the pandel are kept reserved for the elders, pandits, Brahmins. The western side of the stage is meant for the girls and women of bride's family and other male members have their seats arranged towards the eastern part of the stage. The bridegroom prefers to take his seat amidst the wedding guests towards the north-eastern side. The seats at the centre are kept reserved for the songsters and musicians. They recite with melodious tune the prologue of Radhakrishna and sing songs pertaining to the 'journey of love' of Radha.

Now is the turn the bridegroom's party to send offerings to the bride. All the offerings are nicely

arranged on a metal dish. The offerings include ornaments, dress, toilets, etc. The dish containing the gifts is carried by female members of bride's party.

Now-a-days, a suitcase, containing the various gifts, is offered. The members of the bride's family attempt to find fault in the matter of offerings and put objections and counter objections in this regard. Such bargaining continues for a considerable long period. This is very interesting and is indeed enjoyable.

Now the Brahmin turns up to conduct the wedding ceremony. Brahmin reads out holy 'mantras' and incantations and the bridegroom repeats it. With all homage to his ancestors, the bridegroom takes an oath in the name of his ancestors that he accepts the bride as his life partner. The bride's father now bows before the groom.

The bridegroom takes his seat on a chair which is already placed facing the east. The bride is brought in and she sits on a mat near the groom. The priest then ties the left hand of the groom and the right hand of the bride with holy grass and on the joining hand of the two, relatives and other favourite individuals or persons of the bride after their presentations. As soon as the offerings is over the priest unfastens the tie and all the presentations are given

to the female guardian of the groom. This is termed as 'Danar-jinish-dena'.

The bride is then asked to move round the bridegroom three, five or seven times which is termed as Sat Khurum Bulani. In her such movement she is assisted by an elderly man or woman. At the end of the last round she offers two garlands made of flowers on the neck of the groom. She then sits down by the left side of the bridegroom and the latter taking a garland from his neck offers it on the neck of the bride. Brhamin now reads out 'mantras' and bless the couple with all his heart. The Brahmin then joins the scarf of the bridegroom with that of the bride by a small knot. The couple is given to understand that they are inseparable after they are wedded.

The couple is then led to the house-room where they sit on a mat or chair. The bride mate then releases the couple opening the knot and for this she is paid some money which is called 'Gathirdhandena'.

On that day or on the following day, the bridegroom and the wedding guests go back to the groom's house along with the bride. Mother-in-Law of the bride receives her very warmly. The bride is then asked to bow before the household deity and then before the superiors. She, while bowing before the superiors, offers new clothes. All the superiors bless

the bride from the core of their hearts.

After five days of the marriage the parents of the bride invite the bridegroom's men, women and friends and relatives including the married couple to dine together with the members of the bride's father in his house at a, so to say, grand feast of fish along with rice etc. This ceremony is termed as 'Pacharbhat Khana' or taking meat on the 5th day. This indicates that the two parties begin to live in harmony in all respects.

After the completion of it, the party returns to the residence of the groom and this marks the end of the marriage ceremony.

Exchange of gifts at wedding is customary among the Bishrupriya. The groom's father must pay for Warolpot ceremony, the transportation of wedding party, etc. The father of the bride must provide food for the groom's party.

The groom may receive ring, clothing from his mother-in-law and the bride gets ornaments clothing from his father-in-law.

All invitees of the bride and groom give clothing and ornaments to bride and groom. The father of bride also gives clothing to the relatives according to distance of relation.

A traditional marriage may be illustrated by a case study from Bhakatpur.

K.E, a resident of village Bhakatpur, Cachar described in detail the marriage of his daughter S.T. Wedding on the 16th Nov. 1986, with K.C, a resident of village Bhakatpur, Cachar, Assam.

K.E. told me, "when my daughter attained the age of 20 years, I became anxious to give her in marriage. Keeping a daughter unmarried particularly when she reached the age of marriage falls upon the prestige and dignity of the family". K.E. started rather frantically to search a suitable match for his daughter. He sought the help of his relatives in this to find a suitable groom for his daughter. He preferred to have a groom a boy from a point with substantial agricultural holding.

It was ultimately able to locate a suitable boy from Bhakatpur. The brother-in-law of K.E. helped him in this search.

On the 12th Nov. 1986, waripot ceremony was fixed up by negotiation with the groom's parents. On the appointed day, the groom's father accompanied by his younger brother, brother-in-law and six elderly persons came to bride's house at 9 A.M. They were cordially

welcomed. After a discussion over the issue, the headman of bride's village declared the consent of bride and other family members with respect to this marriage. Such consent having been obtained the bride's father entertained all the assembled guests with sweets. The date of the marriage ceremony was also fixed by mutual consent. Waroipt ceremony having thus been accomplished the groom's party went back to their home.

Next to this Heiginpot is held two days ahead of the actual wedding ceremony in the form of Waroipt ceremony. Bride's father invited the villagers and budget was made for marriage ceremony. The edible things are distributed among the people so gathered in the said function.

On the day of marriage, a 'Samkirtan' was started in the morning in the bride's house. Bridegroom and his party did not go straight to the house of the bride. They assembled in a different house in the village of the bride. The younger sister of the bride carried a dish, containing holy lamp, puffed rice, mirror, etc. to the place where the groom and his party were seated, she placed the dish before the groom. She picked up a flower from the dish and ringed it in sandal paste. She moved the flower around the dish three times and then placed the same on the right ear of the

groom. The groom took one more flower from the dish and soaked it in sandal paste. He then held the mirror before his face and placed the sandal pasted flower upon his left ear.

The groom and his party then proceeded to the house of the bride. The groom took his seat on the chair placed at the entrance to the pandal, which was constructed for marriage. The bride's younger brother washed groom's feet and claimed some money for the job. The groom's party agreed and gave him Rs. 50/-. The groom then proceeded to the stage where the bride's mother, mother's sister and aunty waited for him. The aunt holds a pail of water on her head. She was followed by bride's mother's sister who holds a bamboo lamp in her hand. Behind her stood the mother of the bride with a dish in her hand. The dish contained suspicious items like fruits, flowers, sugar cakes, betelnuts, golden ring, etc. The bride's mother then came to the front the queue and scattered puffed rice over the umbrella and offered a little sweets to the groom. She then puts the golden ring on the finger of the groom. All the wedding guests were seated towards the north side of the stage. The elders, pandits, Brahmins and persons of royal family took their seats towards the south part of the pandal. Girls and women of the bride's family had their seats towards the western side of the stage. Male members took their seats

towards the eastern side of the stage. Songsters and musicians were seated at the centre of the stage. The wedding guests seated around the pandel and the groom took his seat amidst the wedding guests towards the north-east side of the pandel.

The bride was brought in and she sat on a mat near the groom. The priest then ties the left hand of the groom and right hand of the bride with holy grass and on the joined hands of the two, relatives and other invitees and guests of the bride offered their presentations. As soon as the offering was over the priest unfastened the tie and all the presentations were given to a female guardians of the groom.

The bride then moved around the groom three times. She was assisted by her uncle. At the end of the last round she offered two garlands made of flowers on the neck of the groom. She then took her seat on the left side of the groom and the groom taking a garland from his neck offered it on the neck of the bride. Brahmin read out 'mantras' and bless the couple. The Brahmin joined the scarf of the groom with that of the bride.

The newly married couple was led to the interior room and they sat on a mat. One of the bride's friends then

unfastened the knot and for this she demanded money. Groom gave her Rs. 20/- and she was satisfied.

On that day the groom and the wedding guests went to groom's home with bride.

After five days of the marriage father of groom invited all his relatives to dine together with him. This ceremony is termed as 'Pacharbhat Khana'.

After the completion of it, the party returned to the residence of the groom.

K.E. said that his daughter now leads a happy conjugal life.

A marriage exchange may be illustrated by the following case-study.

K.S. was an agriculturist of Bhakatpur village. He is the father of two sons and two daughters. The eldest daughter has attained the age of marriage. She is very ugly and many proposals pertaining to her marriage could not be settled on this ground, so he was very much worried for his daughter's marriage. By this time his eldest son has attained the age of 21 years and he desired to get his son married. His son is a very active, hardworking youngman of excellent disposition. To his opinion, "My son's marriage

is a very easy matter to me, but that of my daughter is a big problem to me." Mr. K.S. said, 'Ultimately, I had to resolve a plan. I decided that I shall entertain proposal for son's marriage in exchange of my daughter's marriage'.

Few proposals for his son's marriage came but none could agree to marriage by exchange. Ultimately, a proposal came from village Singari, Cachar, for his son. Bride's father, K.J. liked K.S's son but failed to concede to the demand of marriage by exchange. K.S. added, 'Doubtless they liked my son very much but they could not make up their mind to accept my daughter for their son'. Ultimately, the matter took a different course. The son of K.J. agreed to accept his daughter on the ground that she was a girl of excellent qualities though she was ugly. It is on this ground the other party agreed provided the horoscopes gave positive indications. The horoscopes of both the sides were examined and these wonderfully coincided with each other's.

K.S. added, "so marriage by mutual exchange was ultimately settled after a long wait and thought. My son married daughter of K.J. and son of K.S. married by ugly daughter". The marriage was solemnized on 12 June 1982 and both the family have become so close to each other that their efforts have proved a good success. Moreover, both the couple are happy and gay.

A widow marriage may be illustrated by the following case-study.

S.D. was married S.R. twenty years ago according to Hindu custom. But his wife died after two years. After the death of S.R., S.D.'s relatives did not find a suitable girl, to give him as his wife. S.B., a girl of 15 years belonging to another village gave birth to an illegitimate child two years ago. It was not certain whether the man who was responsible for this would marry her, though she was keen enough to marry her. S.D.'s friends decided that S.B should be brought in as his wife. S.D. knowing about her illegitimate affair, agreed to marry her, because due to his age, it was not possible for him to get a young virgin girl as his wife.

Wedding took place and they are now living as husband and wife.

## 2. Emerging Pattern of Marriage

There are some instances of self-settled marriages appearing among the Bishnupriya in Cachar. Strictly speaking, these show a departure from the traditional form of parent-settled marriages. The following case study may be illustrated the general trend in relation to such marriages.

J.D. was a teacher of High School. His students and his fellow-men love him very much. Students love him for his excellent ability in teaching and his neighbours and his fellowmen love him for his amiable disposition and sociable nature.

J.D. had a great abhorrence for family life. The reason was obvious. He was born and brought up in a very cruel environment. He lost his mother when he was a baby of few months. He was brought up by his father who also passed away. All his kits and kins left him when he needed their help. J.D. always used to feel himself left alone in this world. This worldly place to him was a bad place, full of agony and worries. M.T. happened to be a student of J.D., she was under the guidance and supervision of J.D. in her studies for a good number of years. M.T. is a meritorious lady endowed with rare virtues of a woman. She developed a great sympathy for him. She was determined not to allow the precious life of J.D. to go ruined. She rightly felt that cruelties of this earthly life have metamorphosed a man of excellent caliber and have miserably hardened a soft mind like J.D.). M.T. with her all patience, love and regards, in due course of time, conquered the mind of J.D. by her love, affection and regards. She wonderfully invoked generosity and meekness in J.D. and both of them became very closed to each other. M.T. very successfully invoked in J.D.

a lovely regard for family life and its noblest values. J.D. was very much grateful to Miss M.T. for his radical changes of mind and outlook, and although M.T. was not a pretty lady, J.D. loved her very much for her prudence, skill and ingenuity and for her excellent sense of values.

Both of them have been married and their marriage is a social one. Their married life has become very successful in all aspects.

Yet another case of self-settled marriage is as follows:

S.S. is a government employee of Kabirgram village. His colleague V.N. is a beautiful lady. S.S. belong to Kabirgram and V.N. to Silchar. S.S. could impress upon V.N. by his good behaviour and qualities. As a result of this V.N. leaned towards V.N. and this made them very close to each other and bonded them with a tie of affinity and love. The boy wrote a letter to the girl where he put up the proposal of marriage. V.N. favourably respected the proposal and sent a reply to indicate her acceptance of the proposal. But it may be mentioned here that S.S.'s parents objected to his marriage with V.N. because they belong to the same clan. There being no other alternative, the girls eloped with S.S. to Gauhati and after two months they came back to Kabirgram. S.S.'s parents accepted them. Married couple lead a happy

conjugal life.

The termination of marriage by divorce is not a new thing. Few years ago, in Bishmupriya societies divorces were secured through mutual consent or by the will of one of the parties to the marriage. But now-a-days, the free and easy divorce of earlier day has tended to disappear, as more and more obstacles have been placed in the way of spouses seeking freedom; and divorce takes place in the court. The securing of a divorce requires careful compliance with numerous provisions of law.

Either of the parties may apply to court for dissolution of marriage by divorce on the following grounds, that the other party -

- 1) is living in adultery, or
- 2) has ceased to be a Hindy by conversion to another religion, or
- 3) has been suffering from a virulent and incurable form of leprosy for a period of not less than 3 years immediately preceeding presentation of the petition, or
- 4) has been suffering from venereal disease in a communible form for a period of 3 years immediately preceeding the presentation of the petition.

No petition for dissolution of marriage by divorce shall be entertained by court unless at least three years

have passed since the date of marriage. The court may, however, allow a petition for divorce to be presented even before the expiry of three years on the ground that the case is one of the exceptional hardship to the petitioner or of exceptional depravity on the part of the respondent. The procedure is that the application has to be presented in the court and the court in granting the order will take into consideration the interest of the children and also whether there is any reasonable possibility of reconciliation between the parties. The decree for divorce may also be made on condition that the decree shall not have any effect until after the expiry of three years of marriage. The court before passing a decree of divorce will make every endeavour to bring about a reconciliation between the parties. The decree for divorce may also be made on condition that the decree shall not have any effect until after the expiry of three years of marriage. The court before passing a decree of divorce will make every endeavour to bring about a reconciliation between the parties.

Divorce may be illustrated by the following case study.

S.M. was married to S.U. about 27 years ago. Both of them lived in Bhakatpur. S.M. was 31 years and S.U. 28 years at the time of marriage. The marriage between S.M. and S.U. was quite normal and the relatives of both consented to the marriage.

After marriage S.U. was living in the family of S.M. and five years after marriage a boy was born to the couple. The marital life of S.M. and S.U. was happy. But the relation of S.U. and her mother-in-law was not good. The mother-in-law accused her to laziness and failing in her duty. Actually S.U. tries her best to work hard for the family. From this the quarrel grew; until the mother-in-law called her relatives and asked S.M. and S.U. to separate. The relatives supported her demand because the matter mainly concerned her, and the relatives also did not like that S.M.'s mother should come again and again to complain against S.U. Ultimately, S.M. divorced S.U. according to Hindu law. The separation took place 6 years after the marriage.

### Family

The Bishnupriya refer to a family as Ghar, which literally means 'house'. As all the members of the households share a common hearth (chula), a family is often called as 'Ek chula', 'one hearth'.

Among the Bishnupriya, a family consists of a group of persons who are related by blood relationships between the parent and the children, between the brothers and their children and others united by a sex relationship such as the wives of the sons and the grandsons. The family is a perfect commensal group because there is no restrictions on accepting any food cooked by member of the family on the common hearth. The family utilises the land held in common for the entire group collectively. A member of the family working outside the village gives a part or the whole of his income to the common family fund. There is a division of labour on the basis of age and sex. The members help each other in quarrels, disputes and litigation.

The different types of families that are found among the Bishnupriya in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram are given in the following table.

The table<sup>8</sup> reveals that in Bhakatpur, the percentage of nuclear families, is 27.4%; whereas that of Bishnupriya families is 36% and Bengali families is 40% of the total number of family. The percentage of joint families is 69.9% in Bhakatpur and in Kabirgram, the percentage of Bishnupriya joint families is 60% and Bengali joint families is 36% respectively. There is no extended family, among the Bengali of Kabirgram. In Bhakatpur the percentage of extended families is 2.7% and in Kabirgram, the percentage is 5%.

So, it becomes clear that there is no significant difference in family type between these two differences. The number of joint family is greater in both Bhakatpur and Kabirgram.

Table 8

Types of Family

Types of Family	Bhakatpur		Kabirgram			
	No. of family	Percentage of total No. of family	No. of family		Percentage of total no. of family	
			Bishnu-priya	Benga-li	Bishnu-priya	Benga-li
Nuclear family	20	27.4	7	35	2	40
Joint family	51	69.9	12	60	3	60
Extended family	2	2.7	1	5		0

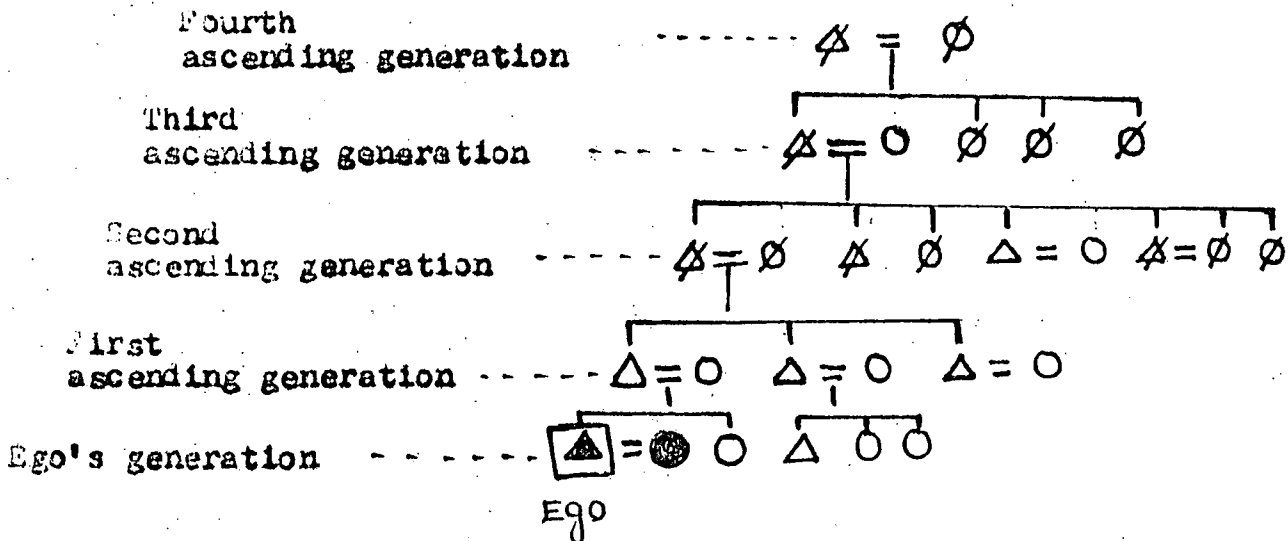
Source: Field work conducted by author in 1986.

While joint families are regarded as ideal, it is common for sons to separate from their parents within a few years of their marriage. Till about three to four decades ago, as I have heard from the villagers, joint family was the usual form of

Bishrupriya. The Bishrupriya prefer now to live in nuclear families. This will be shown in the following genealogy No. 1.

Genealogy No. 1

Name of the informant: S.K.  
Age - 41 yrs.



There are many reasons for the formation of nuclear family. The most important in these are the rise of money economy, diversification of occupations for the males, and diffusion of urban influence. In my study, most of those who are educated or lived in urban areas prefer to live in nuclear families.

It has been noticed that the newly married couple, initially may prefer to live in joint families, after few years

they would like to establish their own household.

In the survey, attempt was made to find about the procedure, rather who initiates the process for establishing new household by the new couple. Is it the parents of the boy or the girl, or is it the couple themselves. In the survey we found that out of the 20 female respondents in Bhakatpur, 15 reported that the parents-in-law initiated for the separation. The other 5 respondents said they separated after marriage from their parents and established their nuclear household because it was convenient for them. In Kabirgram, out of 10 female respondents, 4 respondents said that the parents-in-law are responsible for the separation. The rest 6 are separated according to their own convenience and formed nuclear household.

The following cases will illustrate how parents-in-law are responsible for separation.

(a) Thirty years old S.K. of Bhakatpur reported that she had to live in a joint family after her marriage and her mother-in-law was very unkind to her. While she was expecting her first child, she was not even given enough food to eat and was made to do heavy manual labour. She was fainted a number of times for eating food worth more than the output of her manual labour at home. She was extremely hurt and annoyed at

this kind of treatment and she shouted at them for being so unkind to her. And ultimately she with her husband leaves the house of parents-in-law and settles in a new house.

b) . . .

S.D. of Kabirgram village said that she was not clever at household jobs and she did not know how to finish them quickly and satisfactorily. The result was that all the time she feels broken and over burden with work and her mother-in-law criticised her for being inefficient and tardy. Consequently, S.D. with her husband, separated from her parents-in-law and established a nuclear family.

The domestic responsibilities are entirely borne by the housewife. Sometimes she can allocate a particular job to her daughter but she is supposed to plan and organise everything in that respect. Child rearing and training of the children, specially of daughters are done by the female head of the family. A girl of tender age is taught by her mother how to weave. Upto the age of five or six the boys are also socialised by their mother. After that period, most of the boys work as per direction of their fathers.

Unlike the mother, the father does not keep constant contact with the sons. In fact, men have no definite role for training their children. When the sons are 14 or 15 years of

age by virtue of their own interest they learn most of the agricultural activities. Then onward the father assigns them to different types of agricultural job. A father, however, takes extra care to develop a high moral sense in his children.

#### Division of Labour

A clear-cut division of labour is also noticed in a Bishnupriya family. A man is responsible for the heavy work relating to agriculture. In this sort of work he is always assisted by his adult sons. The female members of the family, on the other hand, do light jobs like sowing of seeds, weeding, harvesting of crops. Big commercial transactions, particularly with the wholesale dealers are always made by the male head of the family.

The women are responsible for pounding paddy, cooking, fetching water for the entire family. The male members render very little assistance in this respect. It is the duty of mother to feed her children and to keep them clean. The husband sometimes baby sits when his wife is too busy with household work. The wife also weaves cloth for her husband and children. In this way all individual members of a family cooperate in different activities and help running the family properly.

Weaving is an important work of the Bishnurpriya women. In fact, both the Bishnurpriya and the Meitei are

famous for their handloom industry. The product of these handloom is mainly for home consumption, and there is not much marketable surplus. The handloom products are varied and colourful. Usually the bed-sheets, curtains, sarees woven in these handlooms find market in other parts of the country. For the most part, the Bishnupriya women weave material that is needed use at home, such as female cloth, shawls, etc.

In the Bishnupriya society conjugal life is more emphasized than consanguinal tie. So it is found that when one of the spouses dies the other becomes helpless and remains uncared.

In fa family the relation between the husband and the wife is very deep though there are very little overt expression of it. They cooperate in every sphere of life. A husband seldom does anything without consulting his wife. In fact, they are too loyal to each other and a wife does not do anything against her husband's will.

Parent-child relationship is very affectionate. Children are not usually afraid of their father. As there is usually no other member in the family but the parents and the children, the father and mother take care of the children by turns. This system gives enough scope for personal contact between parents and children and as a result a deep emotional

attachment grows between them. Parents love and guide their children in household duties. Sometimes they give light punishment to the children if they quarrel among themselves. Upto the age of five to six, children of either sex are equally attached to their mother. Their attachment is comparatively less with their father. When they grow up the girls remain more or less equally attached with their mother. The children respect their parents. They seldom smoke in their presence. The main duty of the parents towards their children is to bring them up so they can stand on their own feet. In return, the parents expect care and nursing from them in their old age, besides ablation after death.

### iii) Bishrupriya Kinship System

Kinship system has been dealt with in various ways. The relationship by affinity and consanguinity which is taken as kinship in anthropology, has been referred to as "the rod on which one leans throughout life" (Firth, 1936 : 269).

As a patrilineal society a Bishrupriya male or female finds himself/herself socially bonded with his/her patrikin.

There are definite usages and norms for each category of kin.

The operation of kinship rules, including the norms and the way of behaviour for all members, starts from the

family (Ghar). Every member in this nuclear family can be differentiated from the other not only through specific kinship terms but also by the behaviour one exhibits under the kinship usages.

a) Economic dealings and kinship

Kinship and economy, among the Bishnupriya, are deeply interconnected. Economic help and cooperation are sought, at times, in order of preference, from various category of persons in the kinship circle. Apart from rendering mutual assistance through physical labour, help in the form of cash and kind is obtained at the time of marriage, while purchasing an animal, while constructing a house and when in need of grains. By and large, the members of one's own kin-group are approached for the purpose. In case, the requirement is not met with from them, the next to be contacted is the Mama, the maternal uncle. When a man fails to get a favourable response from the Mama, he barks upon his Susura, the father-in-law. It has been noticed that a susura usually obliges his son-in-law by extending material help as he feels that his own daughter might otherwise suffer. The next category of relatives who are approached for economic help is formed of vini, the sisters husband. In principle, the villagers do not appreciate taking any economic help from the sister-in-law. Such practice is resorted to only in exceptional circumstances

when all other avenues are closed. The norms of village social system condemn and disapprove of borrowing and accepting things from a married daughter's family. An important factor is that in all cases of economic transactions between the members related through kinship, no interest is charged.

b) Social Control and kinship

The kinship system of the Bishnupriya is effective in the socio-political life of the villagers also and relates to matters of social control. The family leadership headed by the father or the grand-father', is maintained. The latter gives direction to the inter-family affairs.

For certain matters specific members, from the consanguinal or affinal kinship circle are asked to act as mediators. For example, when two brothers, after the death of their father, decide to live separately and divide the ancestral property, they always take the help of their Khura, the younger brother of the father or Jeetha elder brother of the father. If it is felt that the separation is being caused as a result of a quarrel between the wives of the two brothers, he may initially try to persuade the women to compromise to avoid disintegration in the family. Likewise, when the behaviour of a daughter-in-law poses a threat to the norms of modesty, character and conduct, her brother

is called upon to advise her to behave herself. The role of Mama, mother's brother, is no less important. After the death of a husband, when a wife finds her grown-up son or daughter violating the norms of approved behaviour, inspite of her repeated warnings, she requests her brother, i.e. the Mama of the wrong doers, to influence her off-spring.

c) Role of kinship in marriage

Among the Bishnupriya, kinship is intimately connected with marriage and its diverse aspects. A marriage proposal itself is based on kinship sanctions and prohibitions. It is essential for the boy and the girl to come from separate lines of descent, i.e. to belong to different gotras which are based upon kinship.

Not only at the initial stage of marriage proposals does kinship operates, it has still wider implications in other stages of pre- and the post-marriage period. A Bishnupriya girl can marry her Baiji's elder brother. It may be mentioned that in Barbartan ceremony act is performed by the younger sister of the bride. Barar Jangdhana ceremony is performed by bride's younger brother. In a Barnak karana ceremony, the most important roles are played by Ima (Mother) and Mama (Mother's brother's wife) of the bride.

The involvement of various members at the time of marriage, both from agnatic and the affinal relations, is not done for the sake of kinship demand alone. It has also got a deep functional interpretation. At any stage of married life, if there is a conflict between the husband and the wife, it is the members of kinship groups who generally sort it out through social pressure and compromise.

#### d) Kinship behaviour

Some salient features of kinship behaviour may be described.

Factors like kinship, age, sex help to regulate the relationship between individuals among the Bishmupriya. The behaviour rules vary with age, sex and nature of kinship. Family prestige and status suffer a setback when the prescribed rules of inter-kin behaviour are overlooked.

#### 1) Husband-Wife relationship:

The husband, in a family, is considered to have a superior position. After marriage, when a wife stays with husband, her activities and behaviour are largely directed and controlled by the husband. Though good deal of affection between husband and wife exists, it is not conspicuously displayed. A husband is laughed at and criticized if he frequently mentions his wife and praises her in family gathering or in public. The husband himself avoids speaking directly to

his wife when he is in the company of other senior persons. When a husband returns home, after a trip outside the village, he first greets his parents, brothers and sisters living in a family, and lastly meets his wife.

A similar code of behaviour is observed by the wife. A wife always avoids sitting by the side of her husband in all social gatherings. Talking to one's own husband, in the presence of others, especially the elders, is taken as disrespectful. In case the reference to her husband becomes necessary, the wife does not make use of his name nor say 'my husband', but uses teknonymical language. A wife is appreciated if she has patience and avoids frequently going to her husband's room and when she concentrates more on her work in association with her mother-in-law or sister-in-law.

## 2) Parents-children relationship

The relationships of the children with their father and mother are different among the Bishrupriya. Normally there is greater intimacy between fathers and sons and mother and daughters.

Rearing of children falls to the lot of the mother, the father exercising overall control over their welfare. When the children are young, their association and involvement with the mother are closer than with the father.

Age factor plays a prominent role in shaping interpersonal behaviour. The father is more liberate to the son's view-point and feelings when the latter become adult specially if he is married by then. The son is often consulted by the father in matters relating to agriculture. But even at this stage, the relationship does not involve complete frankness between the father and the son. Sexual matters are not openly discussed by the parents before adolescents. A son on attaining maturity is careful to maintain an attitude of respect towards his father, so much that a son do not occupy a seat so long as his father keeps standing.

The pattern of behaviour between a father and his son, as explained above, is also applicable to a man's dealings with his father's brothers. Whether living separately, in a nuclear family or together in an extended family a man is expected to give respect and importance to his father's brother. Moreover, the Khura, the father's younger brother and Jatha, father's elder brother, command some authority over their putak. When Khura and putak are almost of the same age, their relationship is more informal and friendly.

Like the paternal uncle, the paternal aunt, called Khuri has been granted the privilege of superiority over the children of her brother. She is shown respect and regard, and

in certain matters, her opinion is sought.

A mother's relations with her children are of a close nature involving intimacy and affection. Till adolescence, sons and daughters share equally their mother's attachment. But later on the intimacy between the daughter and mother increases.

### 3) Between brothers

Ideally, a relationship of cooperation and unity is desired among the brothers. Brothers, till their adolescence, are just play-mates but in the subsequent stages of life the younger brother is expected to respect the elder ones; the latter are expected to be kind, sympathetic and helpful to the former.

### 4) Between sisters

The relationship among married sisters is not made by the same intimacy as holds true in the case of brothers. The sisters are more closely connected in pre-marital years, but after they get married, they settle down with their respective husbands, far away from each other. Then they meet only in ceremonial occasions such as marriage, death, birth or festival.

An exactly the same question is maintained in case of the brother and their married sisters; they too, meet each other after long intervals. But to meet the demand of kinship obligations, the brothers, on certain occasions, have to call on their sisters and extend material help to them.

5) Baiji-Dewar relations (Elder brother's wife and Husband's younger brother's relation):

The relationship between a Dewar, the husband's younger brother, and a Baiji, the elder brother's wife is normally frank and uninhibited. They can freely converse with each other. Their moving together is also unobjectionable.

The relations of an elder brother with his younger brother's wife are formal and reserved. In their case, face to face conversation is neither permitted nor prevalent. From a distance, the man can however, convey something through teknomymical reference.

6) Relationship with the in-laws

This pattern of relationship involves obligations, respect and sentiment. The parents, in general, maintain a relationship of love and respect with their son's wife. She, too, favourably responds to the prescribed norms of relationship

and behaviour. She is expected to veil her face, both inside and outside the house, avoid sitting or partaking of food in the presence of the senior members of her husband's family.

The relationship pattern of a man with his wife's mother and the wife's father involves respect as well as reserve. The mother of wife never talks directly to her son-in-law. She does so only after veiling her face.

A daughter-in-law extends more respect to her sasura and sasuri than what she does to husband. For example, she does not burst into laughter in the presence of her sasura. Reciprocally, a sasura has to be very careful in his dealings with the daughter-in-law. Whether or not she is present in the house, a sasura would enter into it only after coughing in order to alert the daughter-in-law of his presence. This also gives her time to veil her face so that the sasura may not have a glimpse of it. If a sasura is negligent in his behaviour towards his daughter-in-law, he is criticized and degraded.

It is interesting to note that both the Meitei and the Bengali follow the above mentioned pattern of behaviour.

e) Kinship terms

To understand the kinship system, the study of terms used in addressing and referring to persons, related through

kinship, is quite important. The kinship terms apparently share many features with Bengali and Meitei, both of these are also patrilineal.

The following kinship terms have been collected with the help of genealogy:

### I. Ego's second ascending generation

Relation- ship	Terms of reference			Terms of address		
	Bishnu- priya	Meitei	Bengali	Bishnu- priya	Meitei	Bengali
Father's father	Babar baba	Ipa gi Mupa	Babar baba	Bura baba	Ipubok	Dadu
Mother's father	Imar baba	Imagi Mupa	Mar baba	Bura baba	Ipubok	Dadu
Father's mother	Babar Ima	Ipagi Mama	Babar Ma	Abok	Abok	Thakuma
Mother's mother	Imar ima	Imagi Mama	Mar Ma	Abok	Abok	Didima

### III. Ego's first ascending generation

Father	Pita	Ipa	Pita	Baba	Paji	Baba
Mother	Ima	Ima	Ma	Ima	Ima	Ma
Father's sister	Babar banak	Ipagi Machan	Babar Ban	Pehi	Ine	Peshi
Father's sister's husband	Babar banakar pati	Inegi rupa	Babar Bhagipati	Peya	Mamma	Pisha
Father's brother	Babar baik	Ipagi mayumba	Babar Bhai	Khura	Khura	Khura

Relation- ship	Terms of reference			Terms of address		
	Bishnu- priya	Meitei	Bengali	Bishnu- priya	Meitei	Bengali
Father's brother's wife	Babar baikar bou	Khuragi Nipi	Babar Bhar bou	Khuri	Idon	Khuri
Mother's sister	Imar banak	Imagi machi	Mar ban	Moi	Indo macha	Mashi
Mother's sister's husband	Imar banakar jamai	Imagi nupa	Mar Bhaga- vipati	Moiya	Khura	Mesho
Mother's brother	Imar baik	Imagi maupa	Mar bhai	Mama	Mama	Mama
Mother's brother's wife	Imar baikar bou	Imagi Mabung	Mar bhair bou	Mami	Ine	Mami

### III. Ego's generation

Elder brother	Dangar baik	Mayimba	Jathya bhai	Dangar baik	Tada	Dada
Elder brother's wife	Dangar baikar bou	Mayimba gi Nipi	Jathya bhaer bou	Baiji	Iteima	Boudi
Younger brother	Khurkang baik	Inao nupa	Kanitha bhai	Bynme	Byname	Byname
Sister	banak	Iche	Bhagni	Byname	Inao	Byname
Sister's husband	Banakar jamai	Iche gi nupa	Bhagni pati	Vini	Ibai	Jamai- babu
Father's brother's son	Babar baikar	Iche gi nupa	Barba bhaar Putra	All cousins are addressed		Same as Bishnu- priya
Father's brother's daughter	Babar baikar jilak	Ipagi manao	Barba bhaag kanya	as own brother and sister	Iche	

according  
to senior-  
ity and  
juniority

Relation-ship	Terms of reference			Terms of address		
	Bishnu-priya	Meitei	Bengali	Bishnu-priya	Meitei	Bengali
Father's sister's son	Babar banakar putak	Ipagi mayumba	Babar Bhagna		Itei	
Father's sister's daughter	Babar banakar jilak	Ipagi machi	Babar Bhagni		Iteima	
Mother's sister's son	Imar banakar putak	Imagi machunupa	Mar bhagni putra			
Mother's sister's daughter	Imar banakar jilak	Imagi machi	Mar banji		Iche	
Mother's brother's son	Imar baikar putak	Imagi mayamba	Manato bhai		Itei	
Mother's brother's daughter	Imar baikar jilak	Imagi macha	Mamato ban		Iteima	
IV. Ego's Son	Putak	Icha-nupa	Putra	By name	Ibungo	By name
Daughter	Jilak	Ichanupi	Kanya	By name	Ibemona	By name
V. Ego's second descending generation						
Son's son/ Daughter's son	Natiya	Ishunupa	Nati	By name	By name	By name
Son's daughter/ Daughter's daughter	Natinak	Ishunupi	Natin	By name	By name	By name

In the second ascending generation, there are no similarities among the Bishnupriya, Meitei, the Bengali in respect of terms of reference, as well as, terms of address.

In the first ascending generation, there exists some similarities. For example, terms of reference and terms of address in case of mother (Ima) are same in both the Bishnupriya and the Meitei. The term of address of 'Father's brother' (Khura) is same among the Bishnupriya and the Meitei, as well as that of the Bengali. This similarity also exists in the terms of address of mother's brother (Mama) among these three groups. Both the Bishnupriya and the Bengali call the mother's brother wife as Mami who is addressed as Ine by the Meitei.

In other generation, no similarities are found. So, it becomes clear that the Bishnupriya have borrowed some words from Meitei and some from the Bengali.

#### f) Inheritance

The rules of inheritance are fairly simple among the Bishnupriya but still they need to be mentioned.

Among the Bishnupriya, no son can inherit the property of his father while he is living. On the death of the father, the property is equally divided among the sons.

If, however, a son starts living separately before his father's death, the son or sons living with the father at the time of his death gets or get a larger share or shares of the residential house but landed property is equally divided.

Widows or daughters do not inherit anything. In case a man dies without any issue, the property may remain in the possession of the widow until she marries again. If she marries in accordance with the laws governing the re-marriage, it goes to brother's son of the deceased husband. In the absence of any such blood relation, it goes to any members of the clan of deceased husband.

If a man leaves a minor son or sons behind, his brother will look after the property as a guardian of the minor son or sons during his or their minority, and hand over to each his share according to the customary law of partition as and when he or they attain or attain majority.

These laws are same as that of the Meitei and the Bengali.

#### IV. Status of the Bishnupriya women

In the social system of the Bishnupriya, the women have always been given an inferior position. Many restrictions in social behaviour, mobility, succession and inheritance are imposed upon them. There are limits to her

participation in the social, political and cultural life of the community. But age plays an important role in the determination of the status of women. An elderly woman is given more respect and freedom than a young daughter or daughter-in-law. With seniority in age comes freedom for more participation in family and outside affairs.

a) Traditional concept

The traditional norms of this community are not liberal towards womanhood. Accordingly, a woman is intellectually, morally and physically considered inferior to man. The women themselves have never thought of their rights and privileges. Members of two sexes are treated differently right from the time of birth. For instance, a girl's birth is never formally announced to the neighbours, whereas in the case of a boy they announces the same. A girl is regarded as Parar Dhan, the property of others, because she has to leave the parental home after marriage and serve her husband and his family. On the other hand, men occupy positions of supremacy in the family. Conventionally, only men are entitled to act as heads of families to do the hardest part of any work and to look after all business outside the house. The man's role is thus positive, important and dominant.

It is to be noted that the woman of the Bishnupriya do not have much freedom whereas the Meitei women enjoy a

greater amount of freedom. Hodson while giving an account of Meitei women mentions that 'The women hold a high and free position in Manipur, all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them' (Hodson: 23). The practice in Manipur is to have bazars at convenient spot, by the roadside where a group of women gather either in the morning or in the evening and sell rice, vegetables, fish, tobacco, salt, oil and other things. Meitei women continuously endeavour to conspicuously help and supplement the income of their house, as far as possible. It is not uncommon in many of the families where it is only the woman who maintains the family economically, even though the husband may also be economically contributing.

b) Inheritance, family and status

As the community is patrilineal, the girl of the family suffer in the matter of property inheritance, as only the sons have the right of inheritance. No women is ever allowed to attend any formal meeting where family heads are required.

Normally, a woman earns a good name for herself provided she follows the age-old norms of behaviour. Major ones of these include non-interference in the larger concerns of the family, non-indulgence in backbiting, bearing of a good

moral character and observance of Purdah inside as well as outside the family. However, the effect of formal education and urban contacts are being felt in this regard.

A pregnant woman, in any family, is expected to behave and carry on her work normally. During confinement, she is kept in a separate and interior-most room of the house. But she gets more care and attention. During the period of pregnancy and confinement, many women utilise the services of trained nurse and mid-wife.

c) Position in the parental home

The rights and freedom enjoyed by a female in the father's home are more than those in the husband's family. Upto the age of 11/12 years of age, the Bishnupriya girls are as free as men in respect of eating, movements and mode of working. At this period women are barred from mixing with group up or adult men free in order to save the pa  
purity of chastity.

The liberty of movement, social behaviour and conversation, granted to a Bishnupriya woman at the parental house, is greatly curtailed in the in-laws house.

d) Marriage and women

A girl is even now not consulted about her marriage and almost all of them depend upon their parents for it. They agree to whatever is decided by the parents. The boys who also, at one time, depended upon their parents solely for their marriages, have now some say in the matter.

Widow-marriages are socially allowed but it has a poor image in the eyes of the Bishrupriya.

e) Local administration and woman

Women have no say in socio-political matters. Since they are regarded as physically and intellectually weak, women are not customarily allowed to intervene in political matters. The Bishrupriya women are not allowed to confront men face to face. Women cannot remove their veils before the elderly men. Another factor preventing the woman from taking part in village administration and politics, has been her extreme devotion to and faith in the husband, which makes the women accept whatever their husbands say or decide. In each Bishrupriya village panchayat, one seat is reserved for a female member, but no woman candidate from Bhakatpur or Kabirgram villages has contested for the position.

It may be mentioned here that the above mentioned features are also found among the Bengali.

## B. Religious beliefs and practices

The influence of religion and rituals on the people of India, or on the whole of the Hindu society, is still very powerful and great. No people so far studied have been found to be without belief in supernatural powers of some kind.

Hinduism is of comparative recent origin in Manipur (Hodson: 95). It is known from the history of Manipur that in the middle of the 18th century during the reign of Gharib Nowaj, Santadas Goswami, a saint evangelist from the Ramauti Sect of Vaishnavism visited Manipur. Santadas Goswami is said to have travelled from Nawadwip (Nadia) now in West Bengal. This place is the centre of Vaishnavism preached by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

The religious teachings of Santadas Goswami deeply influenced king Gharib Nowaj. He was so much inspired by the teachings of the new religion that he adopted the new religion. Govindjee became the main diety. The subjects of the king also followed and asopted the new religion. Thus came Vaishnavism to Manipur. It is, however, not celar what kind of religion the Bishnupriya had before the advent of Vaishnavism.

When the Vaishnavism of Sri Chaitanya entered Manipur, both the Bishnupriya and the Meitei were equally influenced by it. As a result both the Bishnupriya and the Meitei have formed a unique religion.

The Bishnupriya are all Vaishnava. There are no Muslims and christians among the Bishnupriya. The Meitei are also predominantly Vaishnava but a section of them have adopted Islam and Christianity.

(a) Beliefs and deities

The Bishnupriya pantheon of deities is apparently same as of other Hindus. The Ramauti Sect of Vaishnavism has, however, made significant difference.

The Hindu concept of a Trinity, comprising of three manifestations of divinity - 'Bramha', 'Vishnu' and 'Maheswar' - has an all-India spread, and is also found among the Bishnupriya. The Bishnupriya worship each of them. The principal deity of the Bishnupriya, however, is 'Vishnu'. They worship 'Vishnu' in His incarnation of Govindjee, a form of Krishna. The worship of Govindjee is a feature shared by the Bishnupriya with the Meitei.

Along with the great gods of all-India Hinduism the Bishnupriya accepted some of the prominent gods of the Meitei, namely, 'Senamahi', 'Apokpa'. 'Senamahi' is identical as the

traditional religion of the Meitei, which they followed before their conversion to Vaishnavism.

Literally 'senamahi' means 'liquid gold'. It seems more plausible to regard the 'liquid gold' of 'Senamahi' as fire, specially the fire of the household hearth. Because the hearth occupied a place of importance in the Bishnupriya and Meitei house. Formerly it was always to be kept burning and if it were followed to go out it was considered a bad omen. The Senamahi Kachin (Senamahi corner) is situated in the south-west corner of a Meitei house. Here a mat and a bamboo were formerly kept for the worship of this god.

Other deity 'Apokpa' is worshipped by the Bishnupriya. The word 'poka' means 'to beget or to give birth to'. The apokpa are the deceased males of the previous three generations (the father, grandfather and great grandfather), who look after the interests of the family. Worship of apokpa is carried out by each household as a closely knit group. The 'apokpa khurumba' ('bowing down to the apokpa') is a very detailed ritual which must be precisely observed.

In every household of the Bishnupriya in Bhakatpur and Kabirgram portraits or idols of Govindjee and other gods like Rama-Sita are placed prominently on a cushion placed in the north or east corner of a room specified for the same.

In the morning the oldest lady of the family washes them everyday and make offerings of food. A little lamp is lighted and kept burning in front of the image. At the time of the principal worship (particularly in 'Purnima') flowers of several varieties are placed on and around the image, vermilion and sandal paste are sprinkled on it. When this is done all members of the household bow down before the images. Many people express their wishes, which they then expect will be fulfilled with the blessings of Govinda. Besides these, every household has a Tulsi-Vedi. Everyday, <sup>in</sup> the evening, a lamp is lighted in front of Tulsi-Vedi.

#### b) Practices

We can understand the religious practices and rituals of the Bishrupriya at two levels:

- 1) household level,
- 2) community level.

#### 1) Household level practices

Religious practices and rituals is a combination of Hindu Vaishnavism and Meitei Senamahi tradition.

#### i) Senamahi Khurumba

Senamahi is represented by an ancient bell-metal coin, which is placed on a shelf made of bamboo in the

Sanamahi Kachin. In fact, today many households do not have the coin, and the shelf is simply left empty, but is still regarded as the household shrine of the deity.

The worship of Senamahi takes place at least once a year. Offerings to Senamahi may also be made at significant crisis periods, such as before planting or harvest, or when there is trouble or sickness in the family. Senamahi is worshipped usually through the eldest woman of the house. Offerings are largely of foodstuffs, such as 'luchi', rice, fish, fruit. Certain flowers are also offered at this time.

It is the eldest woman in the family also who performs the monthly senamahi ritual. This is carried out only during the day in either the morning or the afternoon. It takes place at the beginning of the month, on the second or third day of the new moon.

#### ii) Senamahi Apoiba

There is a more sinister aspect to senamahi ritual which is designed to bring harm and discord to a rival household. In this ritual the deity is called 'senamalu Apoiba', which means 'untamed, undomesticated, wild'. This is done by a priest only, who offers him flowers, fruit and 'pan' leaf. The Senamahi Apoiba may then enter. Like the domestic senamahi he is represented by a coin, which is secretly buried

in the house or garden of the house concerned by a priest, with suitable mantras. Calamity disease and misfortune are then sure to result. The family upon which these misfortunes come will immediately be known that Senamahi Apoiba has been sent from outside and make the appropriate offerings to placate the deity. This takes the form of a appeasement, which is made to the Senamahi of the house, to induce him to return and become once again propitious.

There are various superstitions connected with the belief in the efficacy of the Senamahi Apoiba coin. Thus for example, it is thought that if one sleeps before the coin unwittingly death is sure to result; if one changes clothes before it illness will follow, and so on. It should be noted that the domestic Senamahi may also become Apoiba if certain rules of ritual cleanliness are neglected.

### iii) Apokpa khurumba

The second group of domestic deity are the ancestors of the immediate family circle. These are called the apokpa, from the word 'pokpa' meaning 'to beget or to give birth to', as it have been mentioned earlier.

Prior to the actual 'Khurumba' a special invitation ceremony must be carried out at which the 'apokpa' are bidden to attend the forthcoming 'Khurumba'. This takes place at night during the full moon, and must be performed at the particular moment when the moon falls over exactly

half of the verandah of the house. At this point a variety of different offerings are set out, which consist of the following: an earthen pot, nine type of flower, nin 'durba' a kind of grass, nine grains of rice which have been husked by hand, one betel leaf which must have a fresh stalk. A coin, the usual representation of the deity, must also be offered. The deity are bidden to come to the feast with the following formula: 'Apokba', come to eat on the day of new moon. The various offerings listed above are then buried in the house and covered with seven layers of banana leaf.

The actual apokpa Khurumba itself shows the same emphasis on the details of the ritual. The food for the offerings is today purchased from the markets, but the buyer is obliged to tell the household that she is going out for the purpose of buying the offerings, and she must not look or turn back once she has done so. Puffed rice and sweets must be purchased from seven different places in the market and no bargaining can be entered into over the prices. These goods should be kept separate from other purchases, although they need not be obtained on seven different shopping expeditions. On arrival the shopper does not take the seven packets of sweets into the house, but keeps them in the garden on the left side. They must not be touched or be brought into the house. Two further groups of offerings are then assembled. The first set consists of a cloth, a hand of bananas containing an odd number of the fruit, a whole betel leaf and a betel

nut. The other contains a large edible fish. Some vegetables and dal. These three items must be set out on five separate dishes.

The actual Khurumba takes place after sunset. Various offerings are displayed on banana leaves, which have to be arranged in a special way. A large leaf, cut in a circular shape, is placed on the ground, and two smaller circles of the leaf are placed on top of it. On some of these 'plates' fruits and flowers are placed, on other betel leaf covered with a further semi circle of banana leaf, and topped by a betel nut. These offerings have to be displayed in groups of three. After the arrival of the priest the raw food is first offered to Senamali, and then cooked. Besides, the rice curry is also prepared. The rice must be cooked by the eldest male of the clan himself or by his wife or a married woman of the household. It must never be cooked by an unmarried girl. The rice on this occasion is not washed before being cooked, and special care is taken to add exactly the right amount of water needed for the cooking, since it is not permitted either to add or to pour away water from the rice. The pot is covered with a banana leaf and tied with a strip of bamboo (paya). If, during the cooking, the right side of the leaf is raised up by the steam then prosperity will follow for the eldest of the clan himself; if it is the left side which is raised then prosperity will come to the daughters of the house.

The woman who cooks has also the task of carrying into the house a pot of water drawn from a place which is regarded as sacred to the clan. This is then added to the water used for cooking. The part of the food set aside for the unseen servant of the three apokpa is then set beside the foundation pillar of the house. Further away three places are set for the deceased apokpa of the clan, in order of seniority thus:

Great-grandfather, grandfather, father. Before they are bidden to eat the priest goes outside the house and offers sweets to the unpredictable deity so that these deity will not disturb the proceedings. Before the apokpa come to eat it is necessary that all the lights be extinguished and everybody leave the house. The priest and the eldest of the clan subsequently re-enter the house, and the priest utters mantras and bows to the apokpa. While this is going on all the goods of the household must be displayed and all boxes and other containers are opened for the 'apokpa' to see. When the lights are relitted the three meals offered to the apokpa are taken by the eldest of the clan, his wife and his eldest son. The uneaten cooked rice and fish are buried in a hole near the foundation pillar. The rice cooked during this ceremony is consumed only by the household, it must never be eaten by those outside the clan since it has been offered to the

deity of the clan. Even the priest who officiates at the ceremony is not allowed to eat of the food. His payment in kind is taken to him in his own house at a later date.

In sum, therefore, apokpa khurumba is the worship with appropriate food offerings of the ancestors who are conceivably within living memory. Its sociological function lies in its ability to confirm the solidarity of the clan group in their common respect for 'apokpa' at a time of communal feasting.

#### Community Level Practices

Apart from household level practices that have been described above, there are several festivals which are observed as the community level. The important among these are 'Janmastani', 'Ratha Jatra', 'Holi', 'Bisu', 'Saraswati Puja', 'Durgapuja'.

In a way, in hierarchy of intensity of significance, there are some of the festivals which are in a way "national for the community", while there are some other festivals the observation of which, is somewhat localized.

Janmashtami is celebrated in the month of July-August. 'Krishna-Janma' is one of the most popular festivals and is widely observed. The twenty-four hours immediately before midnight - the time of Krishna's birth - are usually kept with fasting, which is broken only in the

early hours of the morning. At this hour the temples are usually crowded to hear the Brahmins reciting the stories of the birth and life of the god.

'Rath Jatra' which is locally known as Kang is performed with great festivity for nine days. On the first and last days of the festival, chariot-procession with the idol of Lord Jagannatha is led out. Every evening of this period of nine days, devotional songs, particularly those from Jayadeva's 'Gitagovinda' are sung, along with clapping and dancing, by the people in the 'mandap's or sheds for religious and cultural performances. After the singing of the devotion songs, feasts of 'kechuri' or hotchpotch are given everyday by the people by turns. Formerly, various cultural competitions were held during this festival.

The third of the Krishnaite festivals is 'Holi'. This is celebrated on the fullmoon day of Phalgun (February-March), Aside from the usual Puranic stories about the origins of 'Holi', the Bishrupriya Manipuri festival is closely connected with the coming of spring. Chaitanya, the founder of that particular form of Vaishnavism which predominates among the Bishrupriya, is thought to have been born at the time of 'Holi'. Chaitanya is regarded as an incarnation of Krishna and is therefore worshipped as a god.

Popular piety has attributed to him the same kind of youthful frolics which characterise the youth Krishna himself, and these too are remembered at the festival.

Preparation for 'Holi' begins well in advance. On the night before the actual festival bonfires are made, and in the early morning young males abuse each other with obscene words. Both of these aspects are common in the Hindu celebrations elsewhere in India although the exchange of abuse may have a traditional counterpart. The young men construct bamboo huts which are placed by the sides of the road. At dusk an image of Chaitanya is placed in these huts by a Brahmin. Puja is offered to these images, and a 'Kirtan' and the recital of sacred texts takes place. The image is then removed and the hut set alight. While it is burning shouts of 'Hari bola and He Hari are exchanged. The burnt embers are taken and used to place a mark on the foreheads of the worshippers. They are then placed in the door posts as an apotropaic charm.

On the next morning the men and women smear coloured powder (Gulah) and drench each other with coloured water. Generally people of approximately equal status dub each other with powder and embrace in a spirit of brotherhood and friendship. At night the villagers sit together to sing hymns and Holi songs.

It is noted that the Bishnupriya observance of 'Holi', differs slightly from the normal Hindu pattern. The combination of these diverse elements - the Krishnaite Hindu and the Chaitanyaite - help to account for the very popularity of the festival.

The 'Bisu-festival' starts from the last day of the year (Chaitra-Baisak) and continues for seven days. On the first day of the festival, cooked eatables for lunch are exchanged amongst the families of neighbourhood. From the evening of that day upto the seventh day, competitions of various games are held amongst the parties of different villages. The principal games played in 'Bisu' are those played with cowries and with 'gilla' - a flat and round piece of horn or wood.

Saraswati Puja is celebrated by the Bishnupriya, as elsewhere in India, by the student community. On the fifth day (Panchami) of the second fortnight of Magh (January - February), Saraswati Puja is celebrated. In Saraswati Puja the great traditional goddess of knowledge, Saraswati, is worshipped. Money is collected for the construction of images of Saraswati, and these are installed in small huts at the various places of learning. The images are garlanded with flowers and carried in procession on planquins. Songs in honour of the goddess are sung and slogans shouted. On

arrival at various Puja-Mandaps, the images are installed on a platform. According to custom this must face south or east. On Panchami morning, the priest imparts life to the image of Saraswati. The Goddess is worshipped and offerings of mango blossom, flowers, woodapple leaves and sweets are made. In the evening the ritual of 'Arati' accompanied with a hymn is performed by the priest. Food which has been prepared by the Brahmins is distributed to the congregation. This usually consists of sweets and 'Khechri' (Rice and dal coloured with tumeric). The following day the images are immersed.

The Durga Puja is performed from the first to the ninth day of 'Asin' (September-October). This is the most important festival and hence elaborate arrangements are made for its communal celebration.

On the first day the recitation of texts regarding Durga Devi is ritually commenced with the establishment of a water pot by the temple priest. On the fifth day the priest performs 'Panchami Puja' for the arrival, of Durga Devi. On the next day, the 'Belvarni Puja' under the wood-apple (Bel) tree is performed by the priest to impart life to the image of Durga Devi. The image is ceremonially installed in the Devi Mandir. On the seventh day the goddess is worshipped and ritually washed (adiwash) in the evening.

There are two temples in Bhakatpur and one temple in Kabirgram. Community level religious practices are performed in these temples.

c) Witchcraft

Quite apart from a faith in gods and goddesses of 'all-India-spread', villagers also believe in supernatural powers like ghosts and spirits. In Bhakatpur and Kabirgram, a few number of witches are present who are an object of fear to the people. The witches are supposed to be capable of inflicting all types of physical sufferings starting from temporary to a long and continued illness. In such situations villagers take recourse to a witch-doctor but in most cases they go to present day medical practitioners.

During Kalipuja, the witches exercise the powers of their magic to gain maturity by dancing naked at mid-night in solitary places like cross-roads, ponds, cremation ground, etc. In the case of snake bite, villagers rush to witch-doctor. The villagers believe that the witch-doctor will successfully cure such cases.

d) Rites-de- passage

The critical periods in the life of the individual are marked by rituals in which the entire community of both the villages participate. Such rites-de-passage pregnancy,

birth, marriage and death. A description of essential features of these rites-de-passage is presented in this chapter.

(a) Pregnancy:

Like the neighbouring Bengali, the Bishmupriya do not observe so many rites in relation to pregnancy. Usually the Bishmurpriya do not observe sadh - a ceremony observed by the Bengali, but it was reported that some, particularly financially better off families, perform sadh at the ninth month of pregnancy.

No taboo is imposed on food and drink during the period of pregnancy but there are certain restrictions. A pregnant woman is not allowed to go out of the house from dusk to dawn. Of course, in the day time, they are free to move about.

(b) Birth

A child is born in the house itself but the mother and her child are kept in a separate room. On the birth of a child the mother, as well as other members of the family, is ritually impure. There are few women in the community who are skilled as mid-wives locally termed as Dhatri. The services of such women are adequate. She comes regularly for three days, takes special care of both the mother and the child and even stays with them at night

for their comforts.

On the sixth day after the birth the Sasthi rites are performed which remove the ritual impurity of all members of the family except the mother. The mother continues to be ritually impure for twenty-one among the Brahmin and thirty-days among the Kshatriya. This twenty-one or thirty days ceremony is known as Masabrata. On the particular day, the whole house is fully washed, the floor polished with cowdung and the old earthen pots are replaced by new ones. Both the mother and the child along with all other family members, get their nails cut and they all undergo purificatory bath in the morning. In the morning the family members worship Bishnu in the room for the family deity and offer food to the deity. The mother and the child are dressed up in new clothes and dhatri also receives new clothes. As child-birth is welcomed with joy and happiness, a feast is arranged at which villagers, relatives and friends are entertained. The name of child is announced to the assembly of men and women present. The child is then shown to the invitees who shower their blessings and present money or gifts to the child.

### Marriage

Tradition type of marriage, i. e. marriage settled by the parents is the widely prevalent form found among the

people of the village.

The details about the ritual of marriage have been described earlier in the section 'Marriage and Family'.

d) Death:

The Bishnupriya methods of disposal of the dead have been extensively hinduised and today are firmly in the hands of the Brahmins. The rituals of death in detail are given below:

Death should not take place in the house if this can be avoided. The dying person must be carried out of the house by the left side of the verandah. The body is bathed before cremation and dressed while still in house. It is then taken out with its feet towards the road as if it were going on a journey. Cremation takes place according to Hindu custom.

At the cremation the clothes, gold and ornaments are removed from the body. After a proper bath, the deceased is kept on the pyre with the head lying northward and the legs stretched southward. Generally, the eldest son performs the fire-giving ceremony. A small piece of sandal wood, with one of its two ends wrapped in cloth and having a little quantity of ghee sprinkled over it, is kept burning with which the pyre is lit. But before doing so, one has to

go thrice round the pyre, holding the other end of the sandal wood in the left hand and each time getting the navel feet and lastly the mouth touched with it amidst vedic mantras. Males may stay until the body has been consumed, and they have to bath in the river before they return to their home. Again they are not permitted to enter the courtyard of the house until they have been met, at the gate, by someone carrying fire to keep away the evil spirits. Only then, they are permitted to enter the courtyard and to change their wet clothes. This must be done outside the house. Before the family mourners arrive home it is essential that all the cooking pots be cleansed and the whole house purified with water. The bedding of the deceased has also to be removed and burnt.

The frontal bone of the deceased is removed from the ashes and placed in a bamboo tube. It is then put on the bark of the river or adjacent to 'tulsi' plant until it can be taken to one of the Hindu sacred sites, such as 'Furi' or 'Gaya'.

The whole family, also all lineage members, is subject to dietary restrictions until the 'Sradha', since they are not permitted to eat either fish or salt. Daily, until the 'Sradha' takes place, they must conduct a recital or sacred Hindu texts. The date of the

'Sradhha' varies according to the caste of the deceased. For Brahmins it takes place on the eleventh day after death, for Kshatriyas two days later than this. The Sradhha is usually performed on as large a scale as possible, and includes a 'Kirtan' and a feast for a large gathering of people. It must be continued as a monthly ritual for the first year after death. In this, food is first offered to the Hindu gods and then eaten by a few close relatives. On the first anniversary of the 'Sradhha' a repetition of the ceremony takes place. This again takes place on a large scale and is accompanied by Kirtans. Food is offered to the Hindu gods before being consumed by the people present. Vegetarian food only is acceptable on this occasion.

Children dying in infancy and women dying at childbirth called for special ceremonies toward off the attentions of their potentially malignant spirits from the living. The bodies of infants are isolated spot. Some roasted peanuts were buried with the body by the priest, who enjoined the dead infant not to return until the peanuts were grown.

The method is same among the Meitei and the Bengali.

Chapter - VII

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DISCUSSION

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## DISCUSSION

The present study has been an attempt to outline the social history of the Bishnupriya. For some obvious limitations of purpose and resources, the present study has remained rather exploratory in nature.

The Bishnupriya is a prominent ethnic group of north-east India. The members of this community, specially those residing outside Manipur, would prefer to be referred to as 'Bishnupriya Manipuri'. There is special emphasis on the use of the prefix Manipuri. There is deep controversy between the Meitei and the Bishnupriya on the use of this suffix along with the name 'Bishnupriya'. This has now become a political issue. This issue may be said to have been precipitated with the decision of the Government of Assam in 1983 to recognize 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' as language as medium of instruction upto the primary standard. In 1985 the Government of Tripura also took a similar decision. The Government of Manipur expressed their resentment on the decision of the Government of Assam and raised the objection to suffixing the word 'Manipuri' after 'Bishnupriya', thereby giving the impression that the Bishnupriya represent the Manipuri. The controversy has gone to the extent that the Government of Manipur, and so also the people there now claim that the Bishnupriya are not Manipuri. In a way there is a deep controversy on

'what the Bishmpriya represent'.

This controversy provided the <sup>l</sup>cue for the present study.

The Bishmpriya situation offers a challenging opportunity for anthropologists and other social scientists for ethnographic and comparative study of an ethnic group with the intention to study its social history and dynamics of ethnicity. The present study is visualized as part of a longer study of different historical and contemporary social, economic and other dimensions of this ethnic group spread in three states of India, namely, Assam, Manipur, Tripura and in Bangla Desh.

This study tries to focus attention on two questions which emerge from the above refered controversy on suffixing 'Manipuri' to the name of the Bishmpriya. The two questions are: (i) the social history of the Bishmpriya, and (ii) ethnography of the Bishmpriya now inhabiting Cachar district of Assam.

The present study has been conducted with some practical and personal limitations. To begin with, there was the constraint of resource, time and finence. This to a fair extent restricted the scope of the present study. This in no way was, however allowed to tell on the quality of the present work. Ethnographic field work for the present study

was confined to two villages near Silchar town.

There was another constraint, apparently not within the control of the Investigator. So far very little written information is available on the Bishmupriya. Much has been to be done to reconstruct their history of origin (in Manipur) and their migration (to their present abodes in Assam, Tripura, and Bangla Desh). This was one of the reasons that the present study is of a rather exploratory, depending mainly on ethnography and reconstruction/compilation of available historical references. The main thrust of the present study thus is to compile sufficient ethnographic information on the Bishmupriya. It is expected that this will help to outline the social, cultural and historical contexts of 'politics of ethnicity' among the Bishmupriya.

The controversy of identify of the Bishmupriya appeared to have two inter-related dimensions, The first one, more immediate, that relating to the controversy as observed in Cachar district, and the second one, emerging out of this, that relating to the history and origin of the Bishmupriya. The sequence of events was briefly as follows. The Bishmupriya in Cachar wanted to gain recognition, initially as an ethnic group representing a distinct culture and language. On basis of this they demanded the recognition of their language, first with the All India Radio, and later with the State Government, as medium of instruction. With a sequence of

events both of these were recognized.

This official recognition, that one to the 'Bishmupriya Manipuri' led to a series of controversies. Each of these were about the appropriateness of suffixing 'Manipuri' to the name Bishmupriya, specially those in Cachar, as this gave the impression that the Bishmupriya represent the Manipuri. In the face of it there was no such intention of the Bishmupriya, that the project an image that they only represent the Manipuri. In the heat of the controversy, the main issue was lost, and as mentioned by Tombi Singh, 'the extreme orthodoxy of the Manipuris outside Manipur', precipitated the issue on a totally new direction. While on the one hand the Bishmupriya claim their Manipuri origin, to the extent that they claim to be the true Vaishnavites, and the 'original inhabitants' of Manipur, the Meitei on the other hand contest this to the extent of accepting that the Bishmupriya belong to Manipur.

With the controversy born in Cachar going back in history of Manipur, and revolving round the question of origin and distinct identity of the Bishmupriya, it became necessary to define two parts of the question: one, relating to the maintenance of distinct ethnic identity in Cachar, and two, relating to the social history of the Bishmupriya.

The controversy relating to the identity of the Bishmupriya as 'Manipuri' can be viewed from this perspective. It will be interesting to note that the crisis is only with the Bishmupriya living outside Manipur. The Bishmupriya now residing in Manipur have either to a great extent merged, or subdued their distinct identity vis-a-vis the Meitei identity. Moreover, there does not apparently exist any situation of 'crisis of ethnic identity' for the Bishmupriya now in Manipur, as by the very fact of their living in Manipur, they are 'Manipuri'.

One of the methodological questions in conducting the present study was to search an 'approach' which will help to answer questions like: emergence of ethnic identity, their maintenance, and the heightened form of expression of such distinct identities. A survey of relevant literature helped us to locate the 'attribute theory' by Barth and the 'interaction process theory' by Pye and Deutsch, both relating to the question of maintenance of distinct ethnic identity. On a survey of relevant literature on the question of emergence of ethnic identities it has been found that social scientists dealing with this question have identified three possible reasons for the emergence of ethnic identities. These possible reasons can be:

(i) Manipulation of economic and political resources. According to this explanation, it is interpreted that in a particular territory, at a particular point of time, a social group (community), with some distinctive identity characteristics, may attempt to manipulate the situation for its own economic and political interests.

(ii) There are others who argue that the rise of ethnicity takes place in situations where social mobility is difficult. They argue that the rise of tribal identities in India has been because the Hindu society does not have any provision for according social status to the tribals, as a result of which primordial collectivities have assumed pronounced ethnic identities.

(iii) There is a third category of explanation. This interprets the rise of ethnic identities as the outcome of 'process of survival'. The threat to 'survival' for a community arises when there is change in the context of the living of the community. This explanation defines change in terms of change consequent to rise of education, political awareness, technology, communication, and all that goes along with these. The 'survival theory' considers the earlier two explanations as 'too restricted'. Perhaps they are. In fact we need to examine each of the three, in combination and with necessary modification.

The material in the present study has been presented through six chapters, one each on: Introduction of the subject, Conceptual Clarifications and Review of Literature, a Historical Survey of questions relating to identity of the Bishnupriya, Review of Indicators on basis of historical analysis, an Introduction of the Bishnupriya in Cachar, and an Ethnographic Profile of these community to locate their distinctiveness vis-a-vis the Meitei.

Besides Manipur, there are pockets of concentration of Bishnupriya in Cachar district of Assam, in Agartala and around, and in parts of Sylhet and Comilla districts of Bangla Desh. It is interesting to note that the controversy about the identity of the Bishnupriya and their claim to use the suffix 'Manipuri' along with their name is something which is prominent outside Manipur, rather than in Manipur. In this connection it is also interesting to note that the 'crisis of identity', if we may call it, is only with the Bishnupriya who have settled in places outside Manipur, such as in Cachar of Assam and in Tripura. The Bishnupriya now residing in Manipur have either to a great extent merged their identity with the Meitei of Manipur, or have atleast subdued their distinct identity vis-a-vis the Meitei, the majority community coresiding with them. History explains much about the controversy.

In the present study we have tried to review the available historical as well as mythological evidences cited by the Bishmupriya or the Meitei.

There is a chapter on 'The Bishmupriya Identity - Historical Survey' dealing with this aspect of the question. It is possible to identify five different versions of 'the history'. A review of the history takes our attention, for obvious reasons, to Manipur, the original abode of the Bishmupriya.

The Bishmupriya, on their part, make two claims: first, that they are the original inhabitants of Manipur, and not the Meitei. The Bishmupriya claim that 'Manipur is an ancient Aryan land ruled by Indo-Aryan people for several centuries, and that the Bishmupriya Manipuris are the Indo-Aryan people and the first cultured ruling race of Manipur, while the Meitei are the Mongolian people and the later immigrants to Manipur.'

The Meitei, the main inhabitants of Imphal valley, in Manipur, are followers of 'Vaishnav' sect of Hinduism. The second claim of the Bishmupriya relates to this. They claim that, compared to the Meitei, they are the 'original and true Vaishnava'. Reference to mythology and historical evidences is cited by the Bishmupriya to impress their claim. It is interesting to note that both the Meitei as

well as the Bishnupriya trace their origin to Babrubahan, the son of Chitrangada by the third pandava, Arjuna, of the Mahabharata episode.

Both the Bishnupriya as well as the Meitei trace historical evidences to put their claim. The Meitei claim that the Bishnupriya are the descendents of low-caste Bengali Hindu who were brought to Manipur during the 15th century by one of the Meitei kings. The Bishnupriya strongly contest this version.

This version of history suggests attention to two questions. One: is it possible that a small batch of low-caste Bengali immigrants who settled in Manipur about five centuries could multiply to number as that of the Bishnupriya today. This seems rather improbable. Two: the question relating to the social status of the Bishnupriya in Manipur, among the Meitei. In 1908, Hodson wrote an elaborate monograph on the Meitei. It is surprising that there is no reference to Bishnupriya in this work. The Bishnupriya claim that much historical evidence which could authenticate their claim has been lost. They cite a passage in Assam Census Report of 1891 in which it is mentioned that "as already stated the Schedule of Manipuri Census were destroyed during the late rising and thus much valuable information regarding the Manipuris and other tribes of the state have been lost."

R.M. Nath, has produced a scholarly treatise on the Background of Assamese Culture. In his opinion the Bishmupriya are the descendants of a batch of troopers sent by the King of Kamrup, to Manipur, on the request of King Khongtekcha. According to him, "this people (the Bishmupriya) mixing with the Khalachais developed a language of a mixed dialect separate from the language prevalent in Manipur, and they were designated by separate name 'Bishmupris' (as they settled in a place named as Bishmupur). Later these people pronounced their name as 'Bishmupriya'. Language distinction has indeed played a crucial role, as we have seen earlier.

In the present study we have tried to review the available historical and mythological evidences cited by the Bishmupriya as well as by the Meitei.

There is the myth that the origin of the Bishmupriya can be traced back to the days of Mahabharata. This is commonly referred to as the 'Babrubahana legend'. This version of the origin of the Bishmupriya is strongly put forward by the vocal leaders among the Bishmupriya.

'Babrubahana legend' is fraught with severe defects such as there are reasons to doubt whether the present Manipur is that of the epic.

According to Prof. Tombi Singh, the Meitei Scholar, the Bishmupriya are formed from the illegitimate issues of some Meitei King. Such a view cannot be accepted because in the world history there is no such records evidencing the evolution<sup>of</sup> a vast ethnic group from the illegitimate issues.

According to R.M. Nath's and E. Gaets' versions, the Bishmupriya are the descendants of some Bengali Hindus. This version may be taken for granted because culturally and linguistically they have some similarities with the Bengali. The Bishmupriya language is of Indo-Aryan group and is akin to Bengali and Assamese. After examining the Bishmupriya language, it is found that out of 30,000 words, 18,000 Bengali words and 2,900 Meitei words are present in Bishmupriya language.

To understand the conflict in its true and objective perspective, it will be worthwhile to examine at length the observations of a respected Meitei scholar on the issue. To quote from him extensively, we may examine the following:

Prof. Tombi Singh is a renowned Meitei scholar, and according to one of his writings "Manipur and the Mainstream", published in 1975, he writes about "Manipuris Outside Manipur". "It is reported that Government of Assam and Tripura are in the apparent grip of a claim and a counterclaim put of by Manipuris and Bishmupriyas as to whose language should be recognized by

the Governments as the Manipuri. The problem is unique and interesting. The fact of the situation, however, is that Manipuri language, recognised as such by the Government of Manipur, Assam Board of Secondary Education, the Indian Universities and the Sahitya Academy, is only one. In the absence of any slightest sign of counter claim in the mainland of Manipur which is the only competent and rightful party to make a decision in the matter, the emergence of reported counter claim in Assam and Tripura is both abnormal and fanatic. In Manipur the problem is totally non-existent. The author has studied the problem in all its aspects with maximum sense of detachment and from purely objective academic angle. The Bishmupriyas' claim the status of Bonafide Manipuris or their formation of section of Manipuri population has to be examined with emphatic reference to their position in Manipur and the affinity of the language and other ethnic factors. They have a dialect absolutely strange to the Manipuri language in structure and original character. It looks like more deformed Bengali than Manipuri. The proof of Bishmupriyas relation with Manipur in the recent past is, however, given by the vocabulary contents of the dialect. That is to say that the dialect contains quite a large number of Manipuri vocabularies. The emergence of this community in the context of the recent history of Manipur must have been consequent upon the contacts between the kings of Manipur and the other communities, especially

of the eastern zone, comprising Assam and Bengal.

It is possible that some kings might have brought some of them and allowed to settle in Manipur. The installation of Bishnu temple five hundred years ago could be one of such occasions. The story has it that the King Biyamba was in frantic search of men from across the western border to help in the preparation of 'Kshir' (rice cooked in milk with sugar and tasty ingredients) for the Bishnu deity, received as present from the King of Siam. For the Vishnu temple and the deity these people might have been brought. It appears that their number increased in Manipur even after the king had shifted his palace to the north-eastern part of the valley. In the history of Manipur they are not mentioned anywhere as of any significance till the time of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra who is reported to have married a maiden of this community, thereby, leading to birth of his son who later on became to be known as Kalaraja. The Rajkumar families in Ningthoukhong trace their origin to Kalarja. In due course of time the community left Manipur in large numbers during the time of the main evacuation into Cachar, Tripura and Sylhet during the Manipur-Burmese wars. The descendants of Kalaraja stuck on to the motherland along with some of their relatives. They have now been completely absorbed in the Manipuri community leaving no trace of any distinction whatsoever. The population which left Manipur in

the exodus towards the West also included Manipuri Muslims and the community now known as the Bishrupriya. Thus one can see big pockets of Manipuri Muslims living in close neighbourhood of Manipuri Hindus as members of the same family in Cachar, Tripura and Sylhet. The Bishrupriyas also got settled more or less in the neighbourhood of the Manipuris." (Tombi Singh, 1975, 101).

The critical observations of Prof. Tombi Singh in this continuation demand close attention and due recognition. According to him, in continuation "Till recently the Bishrupriyas sincerely struggled to get into the mainstream of Manipuri culture and language. A total absorption of this community into the Manipuri-fold would have been possible except for the extreme orthodoxy of the Manipuris outside Manipur in this regard. The social process in Manipur has worked in much more liberal and catholic outlook than in Cachar and Tripura. The total absence of this problem in Manipur, the mainland, is an eloquent explanation of this contention. Rightly or wrongly the process of absorption in the said areas was too slow in view of the onslaught of other socio-economic factor in the states of Assam and Tripura." (Tombi Singh, op. cit., emphasis added).

Prof. Tombi, we find is extremely objective in his analysis when he adds, on the one hand that "When the race for seeking individual entity among different communities and

linguistic groups became the order of the day all over India, it has its natural repercussions in Assam and Tripura too. The Bishnupriya forgot all objective consideration and acted with a sense of vengeance in claiming that they were the bonafide Manipuris. It appears that they had to do this to substantiate their claim for recognition of their dialect as Manipuri. As to the attainment of this dialect as a medium of education the author does not feel a need for any elaborate discussion. The foregoing discussion automatically boil down to the conclusion that this dialect must be far from attaining the status of a language with all its paraphernalia."

Objectively, Prof. Tombi Singh, on the other hand continues to argue that "When, however, one stands detached from sentiments and false sense of prestige, a solution to this problem should not be difficult. Of all the people in the country, the Manipuris will be the happiest to see the Bishnupriyas dialect developing into a rich medium of education. But the growth of a dialect into a language has its own process and unavoidable ingredients which are found lacking in the case of Bishnupriyas. After the recent controversy the bitterness appears to have reached almost an acrimonious situation so far as Cachar and Tripura are concerned. Now the question is whether the controversy has reached a point of no return."<sup>9</sup> (Tombi Singh, op. cit.).

Prof. Tombi Singh, in a true nationalist spirit takes an objective view as "he is not pessimistic about the possibility of an honourable solution of the problem. Such a solution can be achieved honourably for both sides if the following conditions are fulfilled: (i) the Manipuris in the said areas must create the same social climate as has been prevalent in the mainland during the process of the said absorption, (ii) the Bishnupriyas have to search their own hearts and ascertain for themselves as to the content and purpose of their claim as Manipuris. Do they intend to get away from the mainstream of Manipuri culture and language? ... They have to rationalize their claim by pushing up their individuality as Bishnupriya only, if their intention is to achieve complete segregation from the Manipuri community".

Prof. Tombi Singh concludes with the observations that "The Bishnupriya have taken great pains to find out some basic reasons in support of their claim. They have also given some political magnitude to the problem. The whole approach having originated from non-existent formula cannot land the people into any possible solution in the near future. They could easily establish a claim on merit rather than on series of concocted histories and imaginary evidences. ... The future of the Manipuris either in Assam or in Tripura is closely linked with the states of their domicile. While it is imperative that they should have a good grounding in their own language and

tradition, the extreme necessity of qualifying themselves to take up adequate assignments in respect of language as well as other adjustments should not be overlooked. The minorities wherever they are, have to fold obligation (i) realization of its individuality in the midst of the onslaught of the minority community, and (2) adjustment by actual participation, in thought and action, in the mainstream of the social, economic and political life of the state in which it is." (Tombi Singh, op. cit.).

The Bishmupriya-Meitei affair, on review of history, reveals that it is one of identity controversy rather than one of identity-crisis of the Bishmupriya. To emphasize the point, the affair is not one of identity crisis. Field work and an attempt to outline the ethnographic profile of the Bishmupriya highlighted some interesting aspects of the controversy.

The controversy relating to the use of the suffix 'Manipuri' in a way precipitates the issue. We found that this issue has originated outside Manipur. While providing their individual arguments, the Bishmupriya as well as the Meitei take it to the extent to controverting on the very 'origin' of the Bishmupriya. The Bishmupriya on their part claim their origin in Manipur, as the Meitei, and extend this even farther by claiming that 'they (i.e., the Bishmupriya) are the original inhabitants of Manipur, and not the Meitei',

in other words, in terms of originality, the Bishnupriya precede the Meitei. In support to this the Bishnupriya go even a step ahead to claim that they are 'the true Vaishnava followers as compared to the Meitei'. The question is not to who is the true Vaishnavait, but one of who is the original Vaishnavait in Manipur.

History in this respect is in a way rather clear. Vaishnavism came to the valley of Manipur around the eighteenth century, during the reign of King Garibnawaz (1709-1748 A.D.) when Santidas Gosai a disciple of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu visited the valley. History also has it, that prior to this "it is possible that some kings have brought some of them (the Bishnupriya) and allowed to settle in Manipur. The installation of Vishnu temple five hundred years<sup>ago</sup> could be one of such occasions. The story is that the King Kiyamba (1467-1508) was in frantic search of men from across the western border to help in preparation of 'kshir' (rice cooked in milk with sugar and tasty ingredients) for the Vishnu deity, received as a present from the King of Siam. For the Vishnu temple and the deity these people (the Bishnupriya) might have been brought (op. cit., Tombi Singh).

The Bishnupriya in Manipur are older than Vaishnavism. This the Bishnupriya do not contest, rather using this aspect of the history they claim to be 'the true Vaishnava compared to the Meitei'. In an ethnographic study of the Bishnupriya

in Cachar, we find that like the Meitei, the Bishmupriya also have only two castes, the Brahmin and the Vaishya. This is claimed to be as result of the impact of Vaishnavism on the Meitei, as well as on the Bishmupriya. It is said that Vaishnavism was a 'leveller'.

A little closer look at the caste system among the Bishmupriya reveals a rather different situation. The Meitei are divided into seven clans, while the Bishmupriya are divided into nine clans. The clan names among the Bishmupriya are similar to that of the other Hindu castes, while the clan names of the Meitei reflect continuity from their animistic past, the pre-Vaishnavait period.

A review and comparison of the ethnographic and historical traits of the Bishmupriya and the Meitei reveal some interesting features. The starting point of discussion is acceptance of the fact that the Bishmupriya community comprises of people with origin outside Manipur. We have noted the different explanations on this, forwarded by the two controverting communities.

According to Grierson the Bishmupriya language is of Indo-Aryan group, while the Meitei language is of the Tibeto-Burman group. A survey of their present language clearly establishes the distinction. A comparison of the two languages as spoken in Cachar establish some very interesting

feature. The Bishmupriya language, we find is a mixture of many languages, though the predominating number of words are from Sanskrit origin. This perhaps was the basis on which Grierson classified the Bishmupriya language as one of Indo-Aryan group. An analysis of the words in Bishmupriya language reveals that out of a comprehensive collection of 30,000 words, nearly 18,000 are derivatives from Sanskrit, the community has coined about 2000 of its own words, and borrowed about 3,500 words from Meitei. The language has about 2,000 words of Perso-Arabic origin. All this goes to establish that the community had 'owned' a language of Indo-Aryan origin, and in the course of its travel it had also borrowed many words of Perso-Arabic origin. This establishes that it had in its history come under influence of Muslim culture. It is a question of further investigation to find whether this trait came to the community during its 'travel' to Manipur, about 600 years ago, or at a much later time, when the community had moved to Cachar and settled there. There, however, appears to be little doubt that the community had not migrated in to Manipur in some historical time, and much later, in its second phase of migration, travelled to its present abode, in Cachar.

It is interesting to note that this travel, in two phases, have brought an interesting pattern of change in the social and cultural characteristics of the community. These characteristics have provided the basis for maintenance of

distinct identity of the community. We find that while the Bishnupriya, an in-migrating Bengali community, in the process of changes in its social and cultural characteristics, has shown faster change in softer cores of its culture and social systems, the harder cores of culture have shown slow rate of change, or resistance to change.

The structural aspects of the society, like clan system, status of women, and rules of marriage have been rather resistant to change, softer cores of culture like language, dress, dance, religious practices, have been comparatively faster in accepting change. It is these outer manifestations of culture which have reoriented themselves with their changed cultural milieu, and thus there is a tendency often to identify the Bishnupriya as one of the sub-groups of the Meitei. A close look will, however, reveal that there is considerable structural difference between the Meitei and the Bishnupriya.

Another significant point relates to the aetiology of the controversy relating to the identity of the Bishnupriya. It is interesting to note that two traits, language and dance, music, form important markers on basis of which communities in particular social context mobilize themselves to seek their 'distinct identity'. It has been a usual experience, at least in India, that political situations, like election and

government, provide opportunities for mobilization and heightened expression of distinct identity. In the case of poly-cultural regions like north-east India, we find that the All India Radio has precipitated such situations, unintentionally. This has been the experience with the Jaintia vis-a-vis the Khasi in Meghalaya and the Bishmupriya vis-a-vis the Meitein in Assam. It is interesting to note in both these cases, there are more similarities as well as longer history of 'one identity' than that of dis-similarities and 'conflict'. The politics of 'distinct identity' in both the cases had its aetiology with recognition of distinct 'folk songs' by the All India Radio. The heightened form of 'discovery of distinct identity' in the course of its development assumes new indicators to substantiate distinctiveness.

The present study has been only exploratory, for obvious reasons of limitations of scope. The findings of this study, however, provide stimulating challenges for anthropologists interested in study of culture transformation, and social history.

Chapter - VIII

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