

THE BISHNUPRIYA

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Dissertation

SUBMITTED

IN

PART FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT OF THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

To

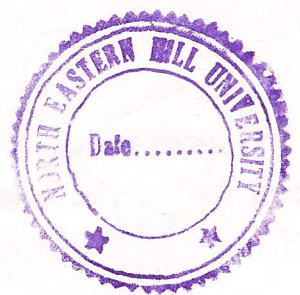


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This is to certify that Mrs. Shibani Biswas(Das) has satisfactorily completed all the course requirements in the Master of Philosophy programme in Anthropology:

- 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 Bishnupriya", 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.

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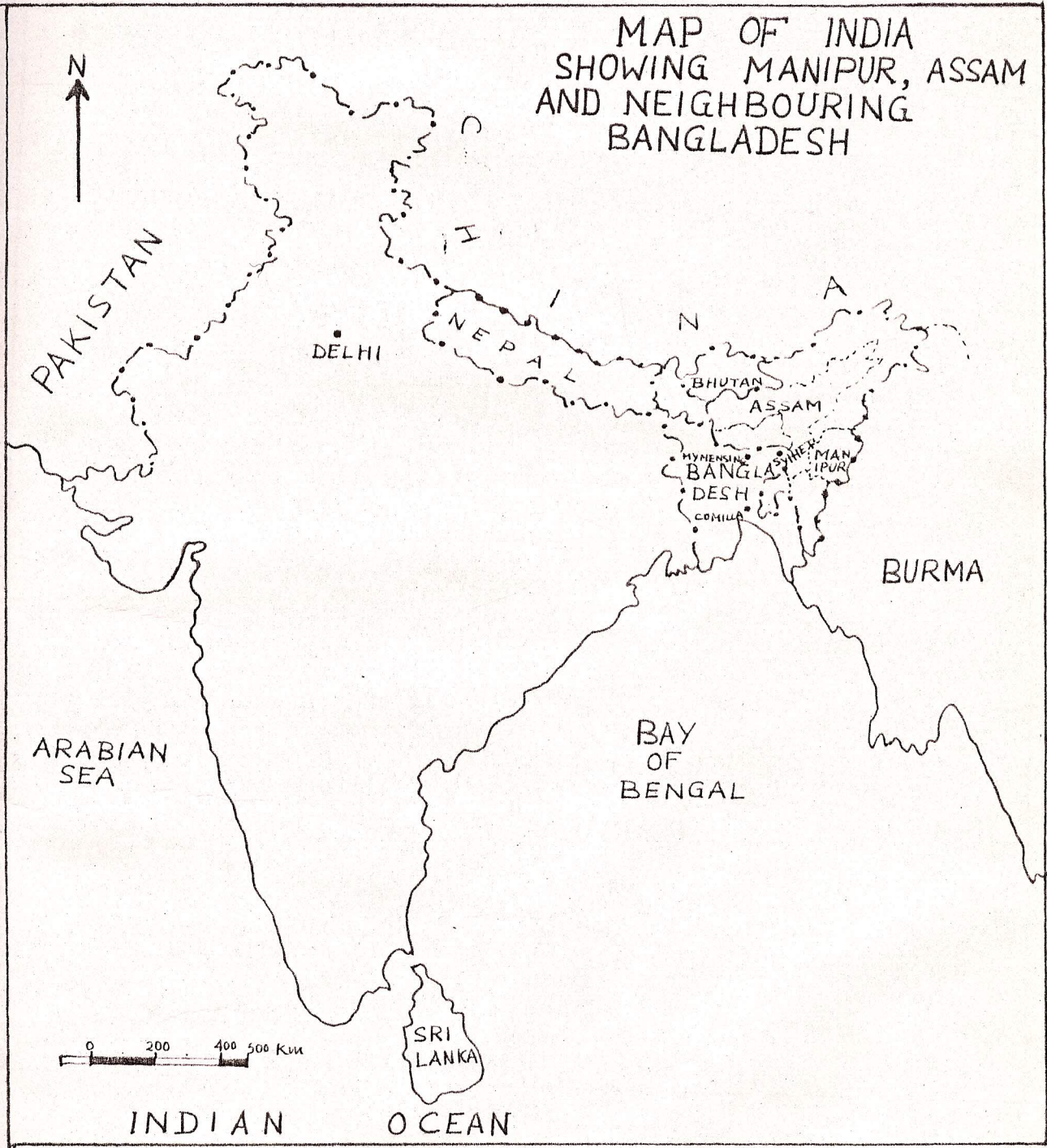
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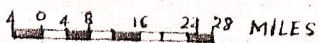
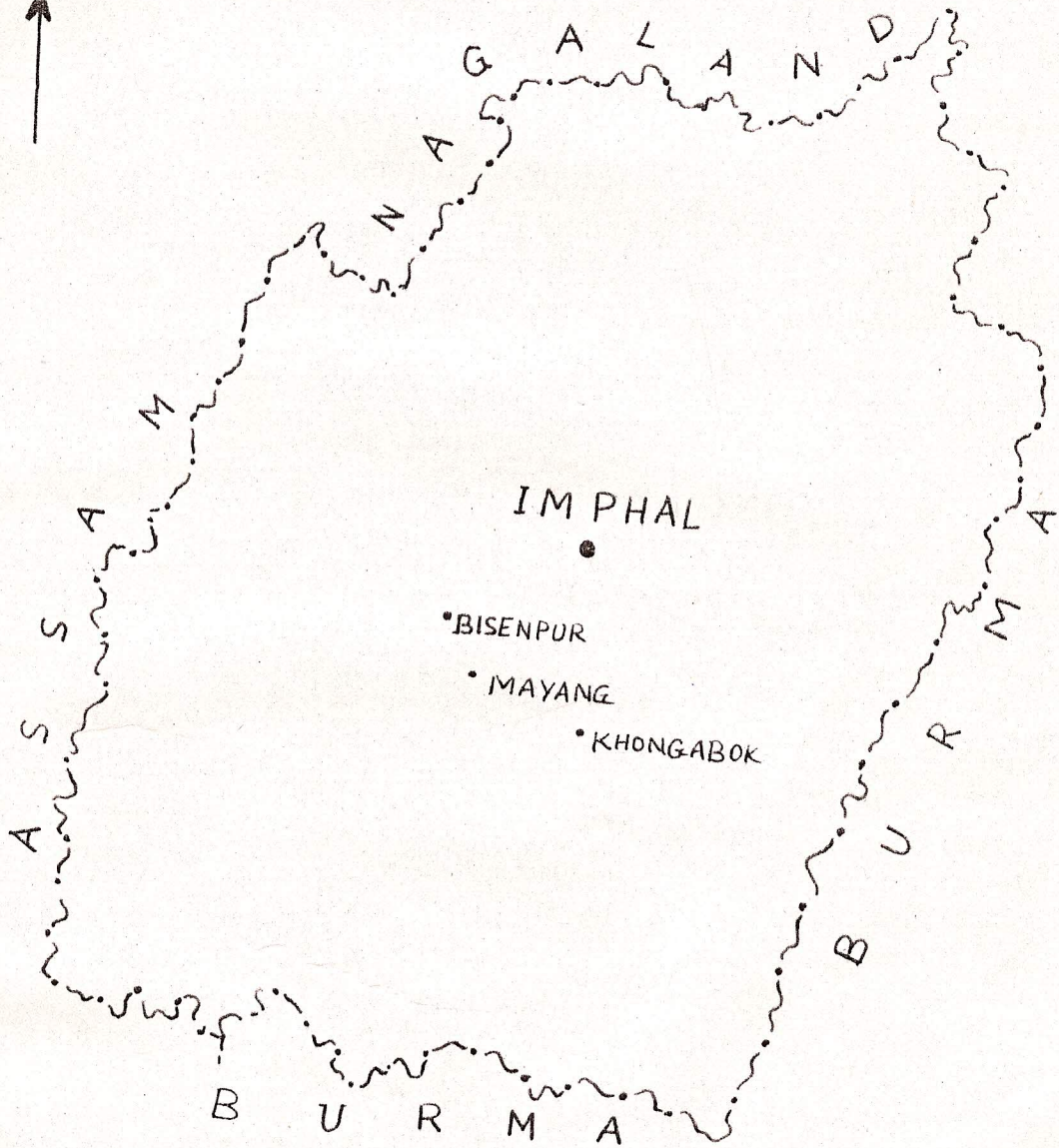
MAP OF INDIA
SHOWING MANIPUR, ASSAM
AND NEIGHBOURING
BANGLADESH



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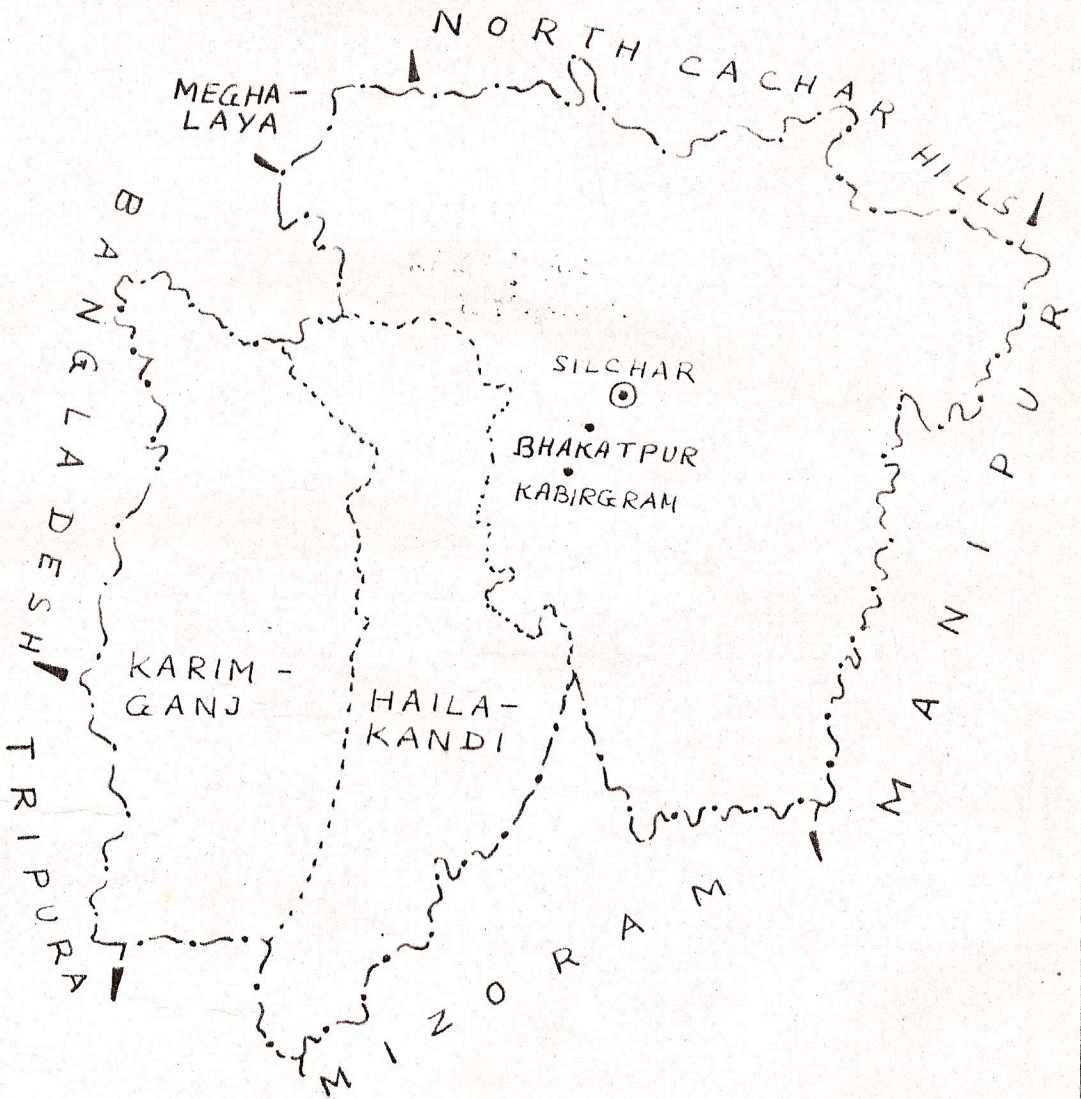
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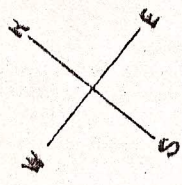
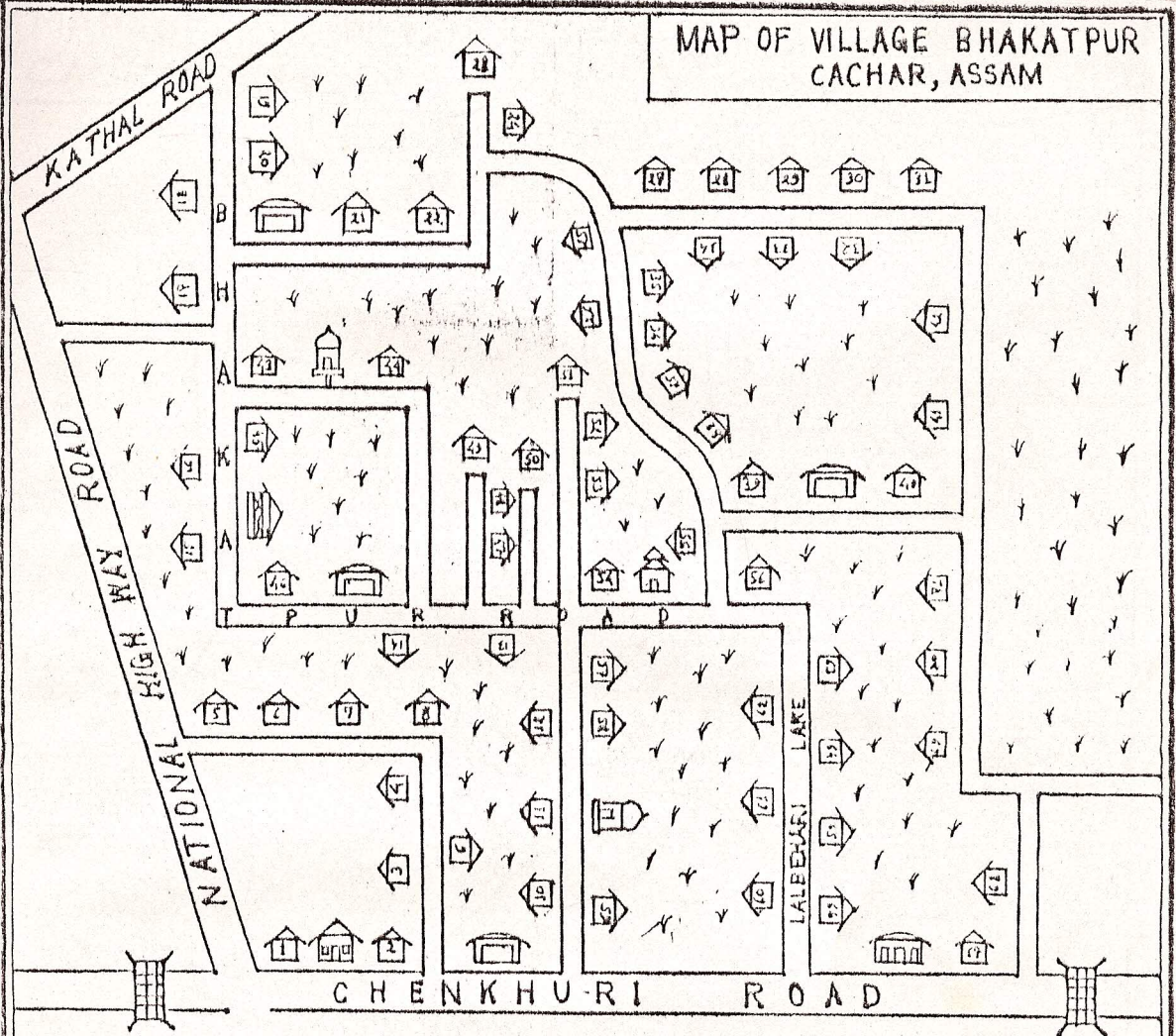


DISTRICT CACHAR SHOWING BHAKATPUR AND KABIRGRAM

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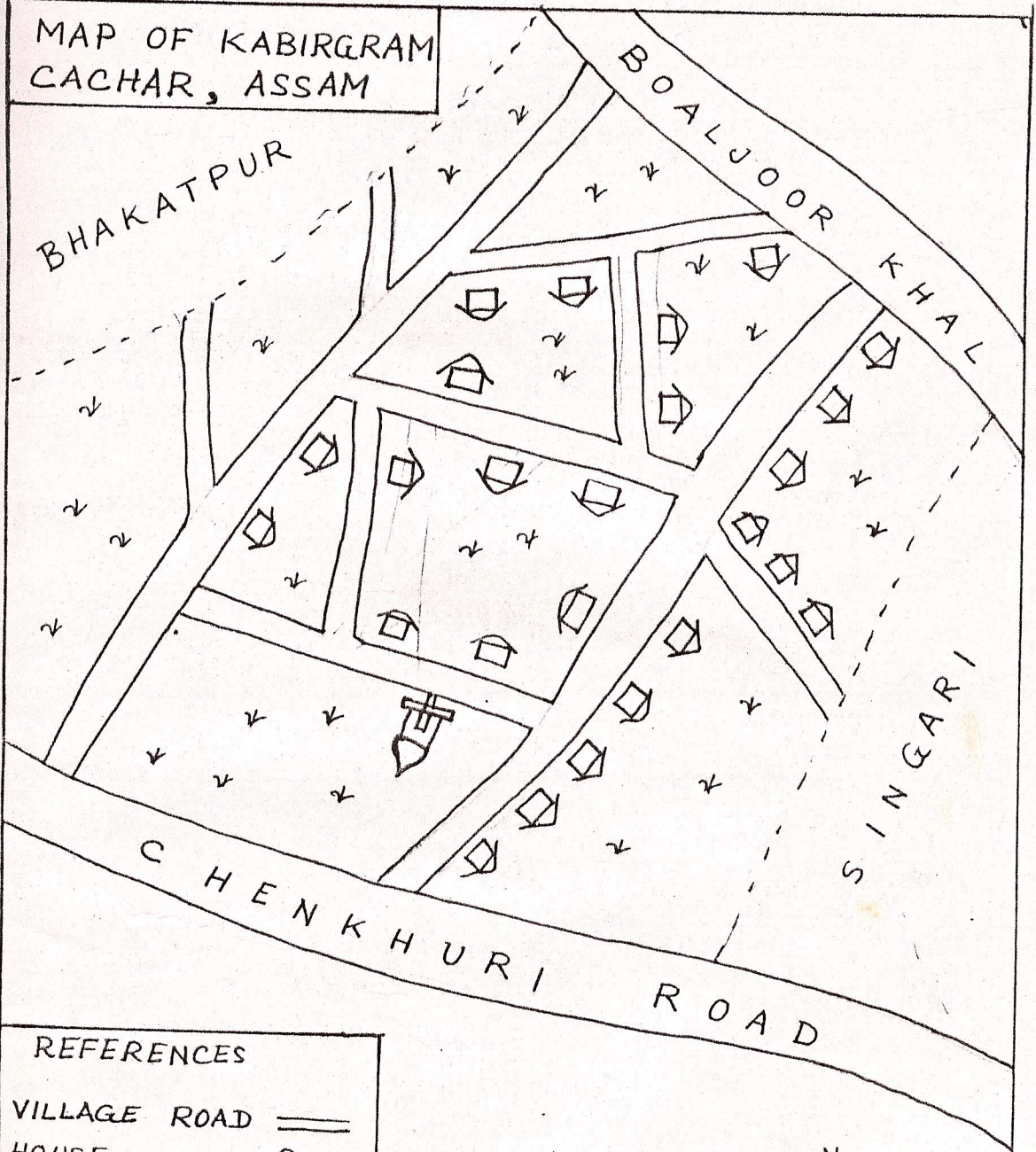
MAP OF VILLAGE BHAKATPUR
CACHAR, ASSAM



REFERENCES	
VILLAGE ROAD	
HOUSE	
TEMPLE	
SCHOOL	
POST OFFICE	
SHOP	
CLUB	
MUSIC SCHOOL	
BRIDGE	
PADDY FIELD	

NOT ACCORDING TO SCALE


MAP OF KABIRGRAM
CACHAR, ASSAM



REFERENCES

VILLAGE ROAD ==

HOUSE 

TEMPLE 

PADDY FIELD v



NOT ACCORDING TO SCALE

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 Bishnupriyas as 'Bishnupriya' language but there can never be a 'Bishnupriya Manipuri language' ... The Bishnupriya language is not a constituent part of the Manipuri language, as such, it can not claim the use of the word "Manipuri" as "Bishnupriya Manipuri language ...".

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

Again, the decision taken by the Government of Assam to introduce Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya ... 'It may be recalled at this stage that Mr. G.A. Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India mentioned the number of Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriyas 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 Bishnupriya Manipuri speaking population of Assam and Tripura¹.

This controversy provides the cue for the present study.

The Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya presents some crucial questions which emerge from the above referred controversy on suffixing 'Manipuri' to the name of the

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

The focus on the social history of the Bishrupriya is with the intention to trace the origin of distinctive identity of the community, the Bishrupriya. There are two questions related with this: (a) the history of the origin of the Bishrupriya 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 Bishrupriya.

The second part of the study is devoted to an ethnographic study of the Bishrupriya in Cachar district of Assam. This has been made with the intention (a) to identify the salient social and cultural characteristics of the Bishrupriya, 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 Bishrupriya. 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 Bishmupriya. It is expected that this will help to outline the social, cultural and historical contexts of 'politics of ethnicity' among the Bishmupriya.

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

Chapter IV deals with 'The Bishmupriya Identity - Historical Survey'. A review of this 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 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 Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya 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 Chittrangada by the third Pandava, Arjuna, of the Mahabharata episodes. The question of the origin of the Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya language is of the Indo-Aryan group, whereas that of the Meitei is of Tibeto-Burman group. The Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya and how these have functioned to maintain distinct identity. The study also compares the socio-cultural traits of the Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya 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 Bishnupriya'. 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 Bishnupriya 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 Bishrupriya 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.