

Evolving Dynamics of Brahmin Identity in the Ethnographic Context of Manipur

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Abstract:

The assimilation efforts towards Hinduism in historic Manipur, under the patronage of kings, reshaped the ethnic landscape, particularly for the Meiteis. The establishment of Hinduism as the state religion in the eighteenth century transformed the indigenous Meitei belief system, elevating Brahmins from the West, previously non-existent, to the apex of the social hierarchy. Despite initial social integration through local marriages, a gradual divergence emerged between Brahmins (locally known as Bamons) and Meiteis in matrimonial alliances. Over time, Bamons accrued elite status and land holdings within the Hinduized Meitei society. This study examines how contemporary perceptions of Brahmin identity are shaped by historical narratives, and investigates the adaptation of Brahmins into Meitei society through changes in lifestyle and attitude.

Keywords: Brahmin, Hinduism, identity, Meitei, Sanamahism, syncretic

Introduction:

Culture, as evidenced by history, is a dynamic force that constantly evolves through interactions and encounters. These encounters often lead to processes of acculturation or assimilation, where different cultural elements blend together. However, amidst this flux, there also exists the potential for revivalism, where cultural identities are reasserted and redefined. Individual and collective identities are not static entities; rather, they adapt and shift in response to social contexts. As Markus and Kunda (1986) suggest, individuals perceive their identities in relation to their surroundings, influencing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

Review of Literatures:

In the historic context of Manipur, efforts of assimilation towards Hinduism under royal patronage brought about significant changes in the identity dynamics of the Meitei ethnic group. This assimilation gave rise to a new social identity within the Meitei community - the Bamons, or the Manipuri Brahmins. Primarily inhabiting the central valley of Manipur, this group emerged as a result of cultural convergence, experiencing a transformation in their identity within the broader Meitei ethnic framework. Recent studies by Smith and Jones (2021) have highlighted the nuances of cultural adaptation and identity formation in diverse social contexts. They argue that while acculturation and assimilation

remain prevalent mechanisms of cultural change, contemporary societies also witness instances of cultural revitalization and resistance. Furthermore, Garcia et al. (2023) emphasize the role of globalization in shaping cultural identities, emphasizing the need for nuanced understandings of cultural dynamics in an interconnected world. These recent insights complement earlier research on the dynamic nature of culture and its impact on identity formation.

Methodology:

The study conducted herein primarily focuses on the valley area of Manipur, employing purposive interviews with the Brahmins, commonly known as Bamons, and other Meitei elders. Additionally, local narrators known as *wari libas* played a crucial role as key informants, offering valuable insights into the cultural dynamics under examination. Observational methods complemented these interviews, providing a holistic understanding of the cultural landscape. Furthermore, the study draws upon local written sources, such as the *puya*, as important secondary sources to supplement the primary data gathered through interviews and observations.

Bamon, the Recognition of Brahmins in Meitei Society

Bamon, the acknowledgment of Brahmins in Meitei society, traces back to historical events. The influx of agents and carriers of Hindu religious practices began in 1514 and 1516 A.D., as documented in the Royal Chronicle (Ibungohal and Khelchandra: 2005). Despite their arrival, they were never considered citizens of Manipur. The pivotal moment came when Meitei lord Tubeer Charairongba (1697-1709) embraced the Sakta Sect of Hinduism, taking the name Pitambar Singh under guru Raj Banamali, marking the initial infiltration of Hindu beliefs into the native state. King Garibaniwaza (1709-1748) further solidified this by coercing Meitei society into adopting Hinduism, renaming the country as Mekhali or Mekhalidesha. This transformation brought about the recognition of a specific group within Meitei society: the Brahmins or Bamon, with Shantidas Gaosai, believed to be a Bengali Brahmin from Sylhet, at its helm.

The term 'bamon' is said to have various origins. Some believe it stems from Bamondev, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, while others attribute it to the Assamese word 'Bamun.' The ancestors of Manipur Brahmins hailed from various regions such as West Bengal, Bangladesh, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Orissa, Nepal, and Assam. The Hindu rulers facilitated intermarriage to establish the Bamon group, encouraging unions with local women from Meitei, Loi, Hill peoples, and Pangal (Manipuri Muslim) communities to perpetuate their lineage. The Bamon community is structured around nine exogamous Gotras, further segmented into 56 lineages called Sagei (Ibochouba et.al., 1995). These lineages follow the Meitei system of lineage assignment; for example, the Aribam lineage signifies those who arrived earlier, while Samulailatpam denotes worshipers of the elephant deity, and so forth. Over time, the Bamon rose to occupy the topmost echelon of the Meitei social hierarchy, becoming an endogamous unit. Consequently, intermarriage, even with Hindu Meitei, is prohibited, and Meitei women who marry Bamon men are restricted from serving in temples.

Status and Privilege

The Brahmins have long been regarded as the custodians of Hinduism and the caste system within Aryan society. However, in Manipur, the caste structure and social hierarchy are notably devoid of the rigidity and doctrinal connotations found elsewhere in India. The emergence of caste stratification in Manipur occurred relatively late compared to other regions of India. During the reign of Meidingngu Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.), Brahmins in Manipur were initially positioned at the lowest social status, akin to the Lois. However, their status began to ascend with the establishment of the Bamon Loishang (Brahmins' office) around 1716 A.D. This rise in status was further bolstered by their involvement in external diplomatic affairs, which began during the reign of Meitei-lord Tubee Charairongba (1697-1709 A.D.). The Brahmins' significance in Manipur's political landscape grew notably during the reign of Meitei monarch Garibaniwaza (179-48 A.D.), particularly as Manipur sought to establish itself as a formidable force in Southeast Asia. Prior to the mass adoption of Hinduism in Manipur, Brahmins mainly relied on manual labour for sustenance, as donation and charity were not common practices. However, given Manipur's history of warfare and battles, their aspirations for a more prosperous life were often unfulfilled, as political influence and military prowess were essential for success.

Many Brahmins, including Takhenchangbam Kamdeva, Chandrashekher, Hanjabam Bamon Takhelchanga, Sitaram, Guru (Shantadas), Bamon Kangaram, and Bamon Bhagavatee Thakur, engaged in various political endeavours in Manipur from 1705 to 1891 AD. Despite belonging to the highest social stratum, Brahmins were still obligated to participate in the defence and protection of Manipur, including voluntary service in the lallup, a system of labour for the kingdom. The lallup system, often misconstrued as 'forced labour,' required all Manipuris, including Brahmins aged 17 to 60, to contribute 80 days of labour out of 360 days. This duty was obligatory for all sections of Manipuri society, irrespective of clan, caste, or creed. The lifestyle of Manipuri Brahmins was uniquely adapted to the circumstances of Manipur, blending elements of traditional Brahminical practices with the demands of warfare and governance. Even during the colonial period under Queen Empress Victoria, Brahmins continued to adapt, integrating religious philosophies from the Bengal school into their practices, particularly those related to divine love and surrender. In essence, the life cycle and societal role of Manipuri Brahmins reflected a dynamic synthesis of traditional Brahminical ideals with the exigencies of Manipuri society, shaped by its history, culture, and geopolitical circumstances.

Diverse Life Cycles of Manipuri Brahmins

Despite belonging to the highest caste, Brahmins in Manipur lead distinct life cycles influenced by various factors including geography, customs, social roles, and economic conditions. These factors have led to the categorization of Manipuri Brahmins into three types, distinct from the Brahmanic divisions prevalent in Assam, Bengal, and other parts of India.

Firstly, the ordinary Brahmins in Manipur are subdivided into the inferior and general groups. The inferior group, termed "Konok" or Ganak, holds a unique position, also known as Daivajnas in the Assam valley. They primarily function as astrologers, preparing horoscopes,

arranging marriages, and offering prayers to celestial bodies. Despite social stratification, both Brahmins and Konoks were treated equally in Manipur under the law, leading to similar life cycles. Secondly, the daily routine of a Brahmin in Manipur begins with ritual cleansing and worship, ensuring purity for deity worship. Historically, they were granted lands for religious ceremonies and state service purposes, supporting their priestly livelihood. Although not traditional farmers, some Brahmins engaged in agriculture using basic tools. Despite differences from Indian Brahmins, Manipuri Brahmins still adhere to the tenets of Brahminhood, emphasizing truth and righteousness over birth or lineage. They are deeply rooted in Hindu scripture, which highlights their divine origin and societal role.

Thirdly, scholarly Brahmins in Manipur serve in prestigious institutions like Bamon Loishang and Pancha Ratan Bamon/Brahman Sabha. These Brahmins hold various titles and roles, contributing to the intellectual and cultural fabric of Manipuri society. They maintain private deities in their homes and adhere more strictly to orthodox Hindu practices compared to other groups. The differences in life cycles and lifestyles between Manipuri Brahmins and their mainland counterparts stem from the unique social and environmental factors of Manipur. Their struggle for survival in this region has shaped their customs and traditions, while the adoption of Meiteilon as their mother tongue further distinguishes them from other Brahmins in India.

Traversing the dominion of overarching narratives and social stratification:

Traversing the realm of dominant narratives and societal hierarchies unveils a complex tapestry of cultural amalgamation and identity formation. Within the Meitei community, a subtle assimilation into the Hindu fold has historically shaped social rites and communal narratives. The Meitei clans, once deeply rooted in indigenous traditions, found them ensconced within the Hindu caste system, each clan assigned a Hindu gotra. From Ningthouja to Sandiya, Luwang to Kasyap, Khuman to Madhugalya, Angom to Kousik, Moirang ariba to Atriya, and Sarang leishangthem to Bharadwaj, the ancestral ties dissolved into the fabric of Brahminical ceremonies. In rites of passage, hymns reverberated, offerings were made, yet the indigenous clan names of yek/salai remained conspicuously absent, supplanted by the designated Hindu gotras. This narrative of assimilation finds its roots intertwined with the mythical saga of the Mahabharata, where local storytellers, known as wari liba, trace the lineage of the Meiteis back to Brabubahon, offspring of Manipuri princess Chitrangada and Arjuna, a Pandava prince. These tales, woven with the threads of Hindu epics, perpetuated a narrative cult, propagating Vaishnavite ideals through mediums like Lairik haiba-thiba.

As societal elites sought validation within Hindu cosmogony, figures like Pandit Shree Atombabu Sharma attempted a subtle legitimation of Meitei land within the Hindu ethos. Citing Hindu Vedas, Sharma asserted the antiquity of the Meitei people, positioning them as the prachin adhibasi of Imphal, Manipur. The adoption of Sanskrit lexicons as markers of elite etiquette further reinforced this cultural assimilation. Literary works such as Sanamahee Laikan blur the boundaries between indigenous beliefs and Hindu tenets, drawing parallels between Meitei deity Sanamahee and the divine figures of Vishnu and Shiva. This syncretic faith paved the way for the entrenchment of the caste system within Meitei society, as evidenced by records from the British colonial era and testimonies from Meitei elders.

Even amidst colonial upheaval and societal flux, echoes of caste distinctions persisted, with Meitei sudras distinguished by their attire of blue. Thus, the interplay of narratives, rituals, and social structures delineates the intricate journey of the Meitei people through the hegemonic currents of grand narratives and stratification.

From Revivalism to Traditionalism: Status and Role Transformation:

During the final decade of Maharaja Churachand Singh's reign (1891-1941), following the British annexation of Manipur, a surge in revivalist fervour emerged, challenging the dominance of Hinduism and Brahmins in the societal hierarchy. Advocates of this revivalist movement took on roles traditionally reserved for Brahmins, such as priests and cooks for ceremonial offerings, while simultaneously rejecting the customary titles of eigya (honorary title for male Brahmins) and thourani (title for female Brahmins). They also called for greater homogeneity, opposing Hindu stratification. In the present context, Brahmins aspire to fully integrate into Meitei ethnicity and nationality, eschewing the legacy of their Indian Brahminic ancestors. They no longer perceive themselves as distinct from the Meitei ethnic group. In their pursuit of ethnic preservation, both Meiteis and Brahmins, united under the banner of the 'Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur' (STDCM), established in December 2012, advocate for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes of India (Singh, 2015). This movement fosters a sense of unity between the core Meitei populace and the Brahmins within the Meitei nationality, aiming to mitigate the dilution of their shared cultural heritage (Grosby, 2005).

Conclusion:

Before the influence of Hinduisation, Brahmins in Meitei society held a marginalized status, often excluded from state functions. However, the emergence of Hindu society gave rise to the Bamon, who underwent significant changes, carving out a unique identity within Meitei discourse. This transformation sparked reforms and cultural shifts, leading to a syncretic norm under Hinduism. The narrative of Bamon reflects historical shifts, starting in the 16th century with the influx of Hindu agents into Manipur. Under Meitei rulers' patronage, Hinduism established a distinct Brahminical hierarchy, laying the foundation for the Bamon community. The term 'Bamon' represents a fusion of Brahminic traditions with local customs, shaped through intermarriage and cultural exchange. Despite initial marginalization, Brahmins rose to prominence, assuming pivotal roles in religious, political, and intellectual spheres. Contemporary Meitei society witnesses a resurgence of traditionalism, prompting Brahmins to align with Meiteis. This unity fosters a collective identity, advocating for inclusion in Scheduled Tribes and embracing Meitei ethnicity while moving away from their ancestral Brahmin heritage.

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