

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE AND POLITICAL VIEWS OF AN ETHNIC COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY OF TWO SELECTED VILLAGES IN MOULVI BAZAR DISTRICT

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“Hindu-Muslim relations in Manipur are a lodestar for the rest of India. The Muslims in the land came from outside, found wives among the local womenfolk and settled down. The Maharajas did not treat them as aliens”.

- A. R. Constantine: *Manipur: Maid of the Mountains*

As it is obvious from the quotation above, it can hardly be overemphasized that development and security depend on a better understanding of the dreams and desires of the mainstream population as well as those of the ethnic groups. Article-28 (1) of our constitution declares, “The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth”.¹ Most recent publication of draft *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (PRSP) of the Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, entitled, *Unlocking the Potential*, while highlighting issues like Participation, Social Inclusion and Empowerment, has correctly pointed out these aspects under the heading *Supporting Strategies*. The section of PRSP that deals with *Tribal People (TP)* issues, expresses the view that in the *social development inclusion framework* the tribal people of the country are not effectively included in the development actors – whether as contributors or as beneficiaries. The sense of social, political or economic deprivation felt by the tribal people has been highlighted in the draft PRSP.²

The words Manipuri and Meitei are synonymous with each other, except for drawing a conceptual line of demarcation between the Manipuri Muslims and Manipuri Hindus/Sanamahis, in the discipline of Meiteiology. And there are differences for sure and so is for our present study too. The prevailing sense of mistrust, exclusion, discrimination, insecurity and deprivation etc. which are mentioned in the draft PRSP, can be addressed if a congenial atmosphere prevails. If studies are carried out sociologically, the wholeness of the real life situation of a community gets unfolded.

The aim of this article is to explore socio-economic, socio cultural, socio-political along with brief historical aspects of the community. While dealing with their political views, attempts have been made to assess whether that poses any direct or indirect threat to our national security.

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1. The Constitution of The People’s Republic of Bangladesh, The British Council Bangladesh, Dhaka, p.24
 2. General Economic Division, Planning Commission, *Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction*, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2004, Pp.136-137

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MEITEIS

Manipuris of Bangladesh

The Manipuris inhabit the Northeastern districts of Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Sunamgonj and Habigonj in Bangladesh. Historians believe the Manipuris are the original inhabitants of the Northeastern Indian State of Manipur. According to Tanubabu,³ “Manipuris are living in Bangladesh since 18th century in four districts of Sylhet Division, located in North-eastern part of Bangladesh.” Political incidents, such as war with Burma and annexation by the British colonists, etc. led the Manipuris to migrate to different places in India and Bangladesh. They came to this country mainly between 1819 and 1826 AD. Meiteis belong to Mongoloid race. Their language belongs to the Tibetan-Burmese branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. It has similarity and historical connection with Kuki-Chin language family. A section of Manipuris of Bangladesh are Muslim, known as Pangan. Their language is similar to those of the Meiteis but physical features are not.⁴ Sheram⁵ maintains that during the reign of Maharaj Garibniwaz (1709-1748), some missionaries went to mainland Manipur from Sylhet. There is a view among researchers or meiteiologists that these missionaries named the land ‘Manipur’.

Meiteiologists’ View

A sovereign state of the past and a northeastern state of present India, Manipur, was the homeland of the Manipuris of Bangladesh, one of the many ethnic communities of the country. ‘Manipur’ literally means the city or the land of gems. During the course of historical developments Manipur was known by different names, such as Mekhala or Mekhali, Kangleipak, Poireipak and Metrabak.⁶ The present name ‘Manipur’ was first officially introduced in the eighteenth century when Garibnewaz was reigning.

3. Tanubabu, Hamom, *op cit.* p.2

4. Source: <http://www.weeklyholiday.net/2005/220705/cul.html> Accessed on 26-03-2006 (10:04pm)

5. Sheram, A.K., “The Manipuri”, in Islam, Sirajul and Sajahan Miah (Eds), *BANGLAPEDIA: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, Vol. 6, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2003, p.409

6. Kabui, Gangmumei, *History of Manipur: Precolonial Period*, Volume-I, National Publishing House, New Delhi: 1991, p.1

Parratt and Parratt⁷ quote from Grimwood's description of Manipur in his *My Three Years in Manipur*, as follows.⁸ In order to know the Ethnic Community under study from different angles it is essential to have some idea about the Mainland Manipuries, the Meiteis, including the genesis and evolution of the term Meitei. Kabui, at the very outset of his book on the history of Manipur, states in the preface "The History of Manipur is the story of the evolution of the culture and society of a remarkable people who built up their cradle of civilization in Manipur valley amidst the mountain ranges that divide India and Burma. The beautiful valley of Imphal⁹ which is situated on the trade and migration route between South Asia and South East Asia was a valley of cultural assimilation of the varied people who came to this hilly country in search of land, fortune, better living and glory."¹⁰ He goes on to maintain which is given in footnote.¹¹

It follows from above that history, culture, religion, ethnicity, tradition etc. have intermingled with one another in the process of making of the history of Manipuris.

7. Parratt, Jhon and Saroj N. Arambam Parratt, *Queen Empress vs. Tikendrajit Prince of Manipur: The Anglo-Manipuri Conflict of 1891*, Har-Anand Publications & Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, New Delhi: 1992, p.11

8. "A pretty place, more beautiful than many of the show places of the world; beautiful in its habitable parts, but more beautiful in those tracts covered with forest where the foot of man seldom treads."

9. Present capital city of the North-East Indian State of Manipur.

10. Kabui, Gangmumei, *op.cit.* 1991, p. vii.

11. Manipur was a cradle of human civilization and creativity which has come under the influence of many cultures of many different ethnic groups who came at various times and contributed to the growth of the civilization in this hilly state in India's north eastern frontier. Manipur being a gateway of India to South East Asia, was influenced by her geographic situation and ecology in the shaping of her history and cultural development. (ibid, p.1)

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE COMMUNITY

During a previous study conducted by the researcher almost in the same study-area, it was found that Manipuris of Bangladesh do have poverty, in some cases ‘abject poverty’.

Following is a brief discussion based on data collected from the study area, it is found that Meitei households have higher incomes, on average, compared to Muslim households. Percentage of Manipuri Muslims and Meitei in the study area is 66.67% and 33.33% respectively. Manipuri Muslims have larger family size compared to Meiteis—97% of Muslim households have family size of 4 or more, as compared to 85% of Meitei households.

Distribution of the Respondents by Family Size and Religion

Table-1

Family Size	Muslim		Hindu / Sanamahi		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
1-3	1	2.5	3	15	4	6.67
4-6	25	62.5	14	70	39	65
6+	14	35	3	15	17	28.33
Total	40	100	20	100	60	100

Meitei households have higher incomes, on average, compared to Muslim households—60 percent of Meitei families have annual income above Tk 40,000, compared to 40 percent of Muslim families.

Distribution of the Respondents by Annual Family Income (Taka) and Religion

Table-2

Income Group (in Taka)	Muslim		Hindu / Sanamahi		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
1-20000	6	15	1	5	7	11.67
20001-40000	18	45	7	35	25	41.67
40001-60000	7	17.5	4	20	11	18.33
60001-80000	2	5	2	10	4	6.67
80000+	7	17.5	6	30	13	21.67
Total	40	100	20	100	60	100

Distribution of the Respondents by Number of Children and Religion

Table-3

Number of Children	Muslim		Hindu / Sanamahi		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Still Single	1	2.5	1	5	2	3.33
0-2	14	35	8	40	22	36.67
3-4	17	42	7	35	24	40
4+	8	20	4	20	12	20
Total	40	100	20	100	60	100

The above Table-03 shows that Manipuri Muslims tend to have more children—62% of Muslim families have 3 children or more, as compared to 55% of Meitei families; whereas the following Table-4 shows that Meitei households have higher incomes, on average, compared to Muslim households—60 percent of Meitei families have annual income above Tk 40,000, compared to 40 percent of Muslim families.

Distribution of the Respondents by Annual Family Income (Taka) and Religion

Table-4

Income Group (in Taka)	Muslim		Hindu / Sanamahi		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
1-20000	6	15	1	5	7	11.67
20001-40000	18	45	7	35	25	41.67
40001-60000	7	17.5	4	20	11	18.33
60001-80000	2	5	2	10	4	6.67
80000+	7	17.5	6	30	13	21.67
Total	40	100	20	100	60	100

Distribution of the Respondents by Illiterate Family Members and Religion

Table-5

Illiterate Family Members	Muslim		Hindu / Sanamahi		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
0	12	30	7	35	19	31.67
1	12	30	9	45	21	35
2	10	25	4	20	14	23.33
3	4	10	0	0	4	6.67
4	1	2.5	0	0	1	1.67
5	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	1	2.5	0	0	1	1.67
Total	40	100	20	100	60	100

Table-5 depicts that percentage of Manipuri Muslims is higher than Meiteis in categories having greater number of illiterate family members. While Meitei families have at most two illiterate family members, 15% of Muslim families have three or more illiterate family members. As regards their landholding pattern, it is apparent from Table-6 that Manipuri Muslim families have lower-size landholdings—77.5% of Muslim families have landholdings of 200 decimals or less, compared to 60% of Meitei families.

Distribution of the Respondents by Total Land (in Decimal) and Religion

Table-6

Land Group (in Decimal)	Muslim		Hindu / Sanamahi		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
0-100	23	57.5	3	15	26	43.33
101-200	8	20	9	45	17	28.33
201-300	2	5	6	30	8	13.33
301-400	4	10	2	10	6	10
401-500	1	2.5	0	0	1	1.67
500+	2	5	0	0	2	3.33
Total	40	100	20	100	60	100

Distribution of the Respondents by Occupation and Ability to Save

Table-7

Occupation	Yes		No		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Farmer	6	33.33	25	59.52	31	51.67
Business	5	27.78	2	4.76	7	11.67
Service	6	33.33	0	-	6	10
Carpenter	0	-	2	4.76	2	3.33
Day Laborer	0	-	11	26.19	11	18.33
Others	1	5.56	2	4.76	3	5
Total	18	100	42	100	60	100
Percentage	30.00		70.00			

Table-7 reveals that 30% of the respondents stated to have the ability to save. Of them, 33% are farmers, and 61% are businessmen or service holders. Since business or service yields higher incomes than farming, this implies that the ability to save increases with income. Of the 70% of the respondents who said that they do not have the ability to save, 60% were farmers and 26% day labourers. Table-8 reveals that a greater percentage of Manipuri Muslims claim to have some ability to save compared to their Meitei counterparts. Interestingly enough, it is apparent from Table-9 below that Meiteis are more interested in making contributions to cultural activities than the Manipuri Muslims.

Distribution of the Respondents by Ability to Save and Religion

Table-8

Ability to Save	Muslim		Hindu / Sanamahi		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Yes	13	32.5	5	25	18	30
No	27	67.5	15	75	42	70
Total	40	100	20	100	60	100

Table-9

Respondents by Religion and Willingness to Donate for Cultural Activities

Willingness to Donate	Muslim		Hindu/Sanamahi		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Yes	14	35	15	75	29	48.33
No	26	65	5	25	31	51.67
Total	40	100.00	20	100.00	60	100.00

Table-10

Distribution by Mode of Spending/Saving Their Earned Money and Religion

Mode of Spending/ Saving	Muslim		Hindu / Sanamahi		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Spending For Family	40	100	20	100	60	100
Contribution to Cultural Activities	14	35	15	75	29	48.33
Deposit to Bank	10	25	6	30	16	26.67
Purchase of Land	5	12.5	3	15	8	13.33
Total	Out of 40	100% at 40	Out of 20	100% at 20	Out of 60	100% at 60

In terms of mode of spending, all families do, incur normal household expenditures. Apart from that, Meiteis have a much greater tendency to make cultural contributions. This may imply that Meiteis are culturally more conscious and concerned than Muslims, which indicates that millennia-old religio-cultural evolution of the Meiteis have left a permanent imprint in their social mind.

SOCIO-CULTURAL PROFILE OF THE COMMUNITY

Cultural Background

This community grew with the growth of its cultural trends and traits, which shaped their norms and values, religious belief system, their polity and society, psychological bent of their 'social mind', taboos and socio-cultural sanctions, in a word, every aspect of their existence. Their 'cultural uniqueness' is manifested in all possible spheres of the life right from birth to death which, in Sharma's¹² view, didn't have to wait for the western renaissance to come and teach them. An extraordinarily high degree of sense of self-dignity derivative of their core cultural values system has been embodied in their behavioral pattern and has taken possibly the deepest possible roots in their 'social mind'.

Manipuri Language

Manipuri Language is about 3,500 years old and belongs to the Kuki-chin group of the Tibeto-Burmese stream of the Mongoloid family of languages. In the original Moitai language there were 18 alphabets.¹³ Other alphabets were added later. Alphabets are similar to the Tibetan family. The Manipuri language began to be written in Bangla script during the days of Maharaja Garib Newaz in 18th century due to phonetic closeness of the two languages.¹⁴ Meiteis have been using Bangla script for last two and a half centuries.

12. Sharma, B.I., In the confluence of cultures, The Daily Telegraph, Kolkata, Date: July 30, 2004, Source: <http://www.northeastvigil.com/articles/index.php?itemid=92> Accessed on 15-04-2006 (At 11:52 AM)

13. It seems that the author of this article might have intended to mean *letters* by using the word *alphabets*. As is found in the *Bookman-Franklin Electronic Dictionary*, 'letter' means 'unit of an alphabet'.

14. Nawaz, Ali, "Tribal Culture", in Islam, Sirajul and Sajahan Miah (Eds), *BANGLAPEDIA: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, Vol. 10, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2003, p.213

Religion

The religious history of the Meiteis can be divided into following periods including (1) Pre-Hinduism and (2) Hinduism and (3) Revivalist Movement of the traditional Meitei religion popularly known as Sanamahism.¹⁵ The essence of their cultural uniqueness lies in Hindu-Muslim harmony as mentioned by Constantine.¹⁶ “Every ceremony and almost all aspects of day-to-day life of the Manipuris has a religio-cultural orientation.”¹⁷ Manikchand¹⁸ writes, “(t)he Meiteis have their own system of religion, which has its own myths and legends, gods and goddesses, priests and priestesses, rituals and festivals etc. The religion centres around their belief in a Supreme Being.” The Meiteis of the study area are the followers of two religions; Islam and Hindu/Sanamahism. About three hundred years ago, they used to follow their traditional religion i.e. Sanamahism. Manipuri Non-Muslims practice their ancestral religion Sanamahism wholeheartedly in their homestead, while outside they practice Hinduism (for more¹⁹). In fact, the original religion of the Meiteis that their ancestors had been practicing since time immemorial was animistic. Singh²⁰ et al writes²¹ as follows. And Manikchand opines in following way.²² Manipuri Community under study has been practicing high degree of religious harmony among the Meiteis and the Manipuri Muslims.

15. Nilabir, Sairem, “The Revivalist Movement of Sanamahism”, in N. Sanajaoba (ed), Sanajaoba, N.(ed) , Manipur Past and Present: The Ordeals and Heritage of a Civilisation, Vol.II (Philosophy, Culture and Literature), Mittal Publications, New Delhi: 1991, p.109

16. Source: <http://www.kanglaonline.com/index.php?template=kshow&kid=47> Accessed on 25-03-2006 (09:53pm)

17. Sharma, B.I., In the confluence of cultures, *op cit*, (<http://www.northeastvigil.com/articles/index.php?itemid=9>)

18. Manikchand, Dr. Konsom, *op cit*, 1988, p.145

19. Source: <http://manipuri.itgo.com/intro.html#top> Accessed on 25-03-2006 (05:02pm): The Manipuri Religion is said to be the oldest organized religion of Southeast Asia. Manipuri religion is *Open, Universal* in outlook and without any founder prophet or any holy book. The *deeply philosophical* Manipuri religion propounds the universal concept of equality of mankind that all human made on the image of God, in other words all human are made equal since there is only one creator.

20. Singh, L. Jeetendro, N. Biraj Singh and Abhik Gupta, *Environmental Ethics In The Culture Of Meiteis*, (Source: <http://manipuri.itgo.com/intro.html#top> Accessed on 25-03-2006 (05:02pm)

21. “Worship of nature and its various components forms an important part of the Meitei religious practices. However, the original animistic religion of the Meiteis was largely replaced by Hindu Vaishnavism in the 18th century.”

22. Hinduism couldn't destroy nor sweep away the timeless Meitei religion and culture, rather, Meiteis rejected many of the tenets of Hinduism keeping up most of their own traditional basic elements, which formed the core of the Meitei religion.

Customs and Traditions

Meiteis have deep respect for their traditional religion. Their customs and traditions conform to their religious ethics and aesthetics woven in a highly balanced pattern and fashion, which covers whole gamut of the events from pre-birth stage of a life to post-death funerals.

Laiharaoba: “Of all the Meitei religious ceremonies, the Lai Haraoba, literally ‘Pleasing the gods’, is the most important. In this, the beliefs, expectations and hopes of the people are reflected”.²³ This ceremony celebrates the God’s (Sanamahi/Ashiba) joy of creation of universe. The Maibas (Priests) and Maibis (Pristesses) come from mainland Manipur, who determine the length of such ceremony – normally ranging from one to two weeks. Their growing concern about their traditional religion indicates that Meiteis are getting increasingly inclined to their quest for roots.

Manipuri Dances: The Manipuri classical and folk dances and folksongs are lauded worldwide and have occupied a special place in the Bengali culture. Generally, the Manipuri Dance is divided into two main groups, folk dance and classical dance. Laiharauba, Khamba-thoibi, Thable Chongba, Maibi Jagoi, Leima Jagoi dances are categorized as folk dance; whereas, Ras Lila is classical.

Ras Lila: The Rush/Ras is the biggest among Manipuri festivals. In 1776, the devoted Vaisnav, Rajrishi Bhagyachandra, established the Govindaji temple and inaugurated the divine idol of Radha Krishna and introduced the dance. Beauty lies in the movements and the fixation of eyes is to the point of the tips of the fingers of dancers. It fixed only at, not higher than forty-five degree above, a distance of about three meters. The artist never looks at any person or audience as a mark of concentration to the Lord surrendering the outward world and illusions of Maya and also giving up all lust, greed, anger, envy, hatred and pride of the Gopies.

Birth: On the delivery of the child, the attending maiba and other maibis use to perform rituals of birth. Umbilical cord of the child is cut ritually with the sharp edge of bamboo piece by the maibi²⁴ The pregnant mothers are allowed to take any foodstuffs. On a particular day fixed by the Brahmins a sacred ceremony known as Savasti Puja is conducted on the birth of a child. Depending on the financial solvency, the women from mother’s family of the child join in traditional dress like saffron, fanek, white endi or silk shawl. Presents brought by them include foodstuffs and clothes for both the child and mother. In this procession men follow the women as symbol of honour.

23. Source: <http://www.kanglaonline.com/index.php?template=kshow&kid=66> Accessed on 09-04-2006 (01:37am)

24. Bhagyachandra, L., “The Meitei Rites and Rituals”, in Naorem Sanajaoba (ed), Manipur: Past and Present: The Ordeals and Heritage of a Civilisation, Volume-II: (Pgilosophy, Culture and Literature), Mittal Publications, New Delhi: 1991, p.128

Marriage: “Ordinarily, there cannot be marriage between a girl and a youth belonging to the same yek (salai). A formal traditional marriage has certain stages to pass through.”²⁵ In fact, intra-clan marriages are strictly prohibited but inter-clan marriages are allowed. Hodson²⁶ writes as follows.²⁷ Manipuris do not want to confront criticism by samaj. Mannan²⁸ describes samaj as follows.²⁹ Whereas Jahangir³⁰ describes it in the same manner. The same is true of the Manipuris under study. “Polygamy is allowed but polyandry is disapproved socially. In the present day the trend is mostly to have only one wedded wife. A widow cannot marry her husband’s brother. Divorce is very uncommon.”³¹ “Early child marriages are unknown. In ancient Manipur, there were no strict rules for the marriage. ... Then laws of marriage also developed gradually.”³² Rich or Poor, Manipuris maintain cleanliness in attending and participating in ceremonies of marriage and others. This ‘participation’ itself is very important social phenomenon. Reception of the guests is very simple and formal. Only sweets are distributed among the guests. Bride’s dress is very decorative known as Raslila Skirt, which is obligatory. They spend very *minimum amount* and avoid any wastage or extravagancy. Dowry is not obligatory but optional depending on the ability of the girl’s parents.

Family: Manipuris do have patriarchy in their family structure, which was not an eternal phenomenon at all. Rather, the patriarchy gradually but partially replaced original Matriarchy with the introduction of Hinduism. Both joint as well as nuclear families are found in the villages. Head of the family is called Karta (in Bangla) or Yumburen (in Manipuri Language).

Death: Since the early primitive stage there had been rituals observed in connection with death of an individual. King “Kangba’s future generations began to bury the dead in a specified place called Mongfam. Cremation was little known to the Meiteis”³³ before Hinduism. Their after-death-rites are almost same as those of the Hindus.

25. *ibid*, p.129

26. Hodson, T.C., *The Meitheis*, Low Price Publications, Delhi, 1908 (Reproduced in 1993), p.75

27. “The Meitheis are *exogamous* as regards the clans or *saleis* into which they are divided, but are *endogamous* as regards members of others.”

28. Mannan, M.A., *Rural Leadership and its Emerging Pattern in Bangladesh*, Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, Comilla, 1972, p.4

29. *Though the samaj is an informal body, it is the basic element of social organizations in the villages. It carries out important social, ceremonial and economic functions.*

30. Jahangir, B.K., *Differentiation, Polarization and Confrontation In Rural Bangladesh*, Centre for Social Studies, Dacca, 1979, Pp.87-88

31. Source: <http://www.webindia123.com/MANIPUR/PEOPLE/customs1.htm> Accessed on 15-04-2006

32. Devi, K.B., “Manipuri Woman – A Study”, in Sanajaoba, Naorem (ed.) *Manipur : Past and Present (The Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization)*, Vol. I, *History, Polity & Law*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p.160.

33. Bhagyachandra, L., *op cit*, 1991, Pp.132-32

Manipuri Women: “Outsiders never go back from Manipur without praising the hard working qualities of the Manipuri woman.”³⁴ There was a custom in the Manipuri society³⁵ that anyone sentenced to death was occasionally reprieved if a large number of women appeared to intercede for him. It showed that women were held in high esteem in Manipuri society. Captain E. W. Dun writes,³⁶ “They are very industrious. It would be difficult to find a more industrious woman in India than the Manipuri.” In another book, “My Three Years in Manipur”, Grimwood, is stated³⁷ to have written, “The Manipuris do not shut up their women ... and they are much more enlightened and intelligent in consequence.” Devi writes, “Manipuri women thus played a major role in the productive process of the state ... Cleanliness again is another virtue for Manipuri women. ... Majority of them are early-risers. In every house, one always finds the floors of the house ... very clean. ... majority of the women population are still engaging in small internal trade and commerce, weaving, agricultural and other domestic works. ... Female labour ... has been the normal feature of Manipuri society from time immemorial.”³⁸ Dalton³⁹ further endorses this finding saying, “(The Manipuri Women) have the entire management of the household in their hands and do most of the outdoor as well as indoor work, including all the marketing”. As regards the Beauty of the Manipuri women, Devi writes,⁴⁰ “Majority of the women have fair complexion of a yellowish colour. They are more alike the women of Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, China and Japan. Some of the Manipuri girls are very pretty and they may be classed as Asian Beauty... They have jolly brown eyes.” During this study the above comments have been found to be true for Bangladeshi Manipuri women too. Hodson also observes the same way, “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 ... The women weave all the cloths, and all girls whose position is at all respectable learn to dance, for in Manipur the dancing profession is often a road to dignity ...”⁴¹

It follows from the above quotations that at a certain point in time, when the means of production was under womens’ control they had a command over the society and family. Some kind of matriarchy might have had prevailed, which is revealed by the ancient worship of number of goddesses. Besides, a high degree of self-respect had grown, and is still continuing to prevail, in their inner psyche, to finally become a part and parcel to their socio-civic conscience.

34. Devi, K.B, *op cit*, 1988, p.160.

35. Rakesh, Manipur is Aflame, Source: <http://www.peoplesmarch.com/archives/2005/feb2k5/Manipur.htm>
Accessed on 24 March 2006.

36. Dun, Captain E.W., As quoted in Devi, K.B, *op cit*, 1988, p.160

37. *ibid*, p.160

38. *ibid*, Pp.160-61

39. Dalton, E.T., *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1973, p.55

40. *op cit*, Devi, K.B., 1988, p.163

41. Hodson, T.C, *op cit*, 1908 (Reprinted in 1993), p.23

Manipuri Houses: Colonel McCulloch observed the houses of the Meiteis were all of the same form. The Manipuris conceived of the House in conformity of the human limbs. Colonel McCulloch, as quoted in Hodson,⁴² “The dwelling houses of the Munniporees are all of the same form ... All the dwelling houses face to the eastward, in which direction they have a large open verandah”. Same is the case with the Manipuri houses under this study area. The style dates back to their past.

SOCIO-POLITICAL VIEWS OF THE MEITEIS

Structural interviews containing eighteen questions were conducted with the respondents to assess their attitudinal awareness of mainland Manipuri politics and also their preparedness to make any active contribution whatsoever. The questions include, among others, the most recent ones regarding Manorama killing, hunger strike unto death of Sharmila Chanu and ceasefire issue between Indian Government and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). Besides, from amongst past issues, they were asked about victorious Anglo-Manipuri women-war of 1939 to assess their sense of pride and prejudice and their concerns. The findings are discussed:

Manipuri Muslims are indifferent about political matters, whereas, the Meiteis are a little more concerned about mainland politics. In fact, they all are indifferent due to lack of awareness about at least the ceasefire issue. But, in respect of the Tipaimukh dam both the religious sects express their deep concern. It is found that Manipuri Muslims have no idea about this Manorama killing issue of the mainland Manipur. On the contrary, the Meiteis are much more concerned about the issue. Similarly, it is observed that although both the religious sects of the study area are considerably aware of this widely circulated issue of Sharmila Chanu’s fast-unto-death-strike in mainland Manipur, the Hindu/Sanamahis (the Meiteis) show much higher level of awareness in this regard. It also appears that attitudinally both the sects of our study area take pride about the victorious Anglo-Manipuri war fought by the Manipuri women in 1939. Meiteis are more concerned about this historical issue. In response to a question all the Meitei respondents said that they confronted no odd situation in Bangladesh like their mainlander counterparts. It follows from above that the respondents are not adequately aware about the politics of mainland Manipur. One of the reasons behind asking aforementioned questions was to assess whether or to what extent the Manipuris under study have been concerned with and anxious about the political activities and movements of the mainland Manipuris. Regarding the question whether they

42. Hodson, T.C, *op cit*, 1908 (Reprinted in 1993), 1993, p.25

harbour any mainlander counterparts to help them any way and, thereby, pose any indirect external threat to our country, level of their awareness about politics, doesn't allow the researcher to believe that our respondents can be involved in such activities. It seems that any such activity is improbable, at least, in so far as this particular investigative research is concerned.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the basic findings as stated above, it may reasonably be asserted that the Manipuris of the villages under study are culturally aware due to their life long exposure to those cultural activities. They are born and brought up in an environment that is endowed with the elements of cultural awareness. Similarly the Meiteis possess a unique kind of value system infused in their conscience by the socio-cultural environment itself that enables them to grow as appreciably good human souls. No matter how poor or how illiterate they are, they have strong and sincere sense of harmonious belongingness to their community. Bangladeshi Manipuris are a peace loving, self-reliant and hardworking community with high sense of self dignity, who maintain imitable kind of civic and aesthetic sense. In their community life the social cohesion that they maintain is something that many of the developed and forerunner societies have only recently started to conceptualize. We believe that the greater cultural arena may benefit by trying to learn from their nice neighbours.

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