



Socio-Cultural Transformations In Eighteenth Century Manipur: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significant socio-cultural changes in Manipur during the 18th century, focusing on the emergence of Hinduism as the predominant religion among the Meiteis. Officially adopted as the state religion in 1714 AD under King Garibanwaj, Hinduism was systematically introduced to the region's non-Hindu communities. Brahmins from neighbouring states played a pivotal role at the royal court, overseeing ceremonies and rituals, while facilitating the translation of key Hindu texts from Sanskrit and Bengali into Manipuri. This cultural integration led to the incorporation of elements from Sanskrit, Bengali, and Hindi into various aspects of Manipuri society, significantly influencing literature and education. By the early 19th century, Manipuri literature had surpassed its Sanskrit and Bengali counterparts in influence. Additionally, traditional Meitei deities were increasingly associated with Hindu gods, and educational initiatives like "Lairik Thiba Haiba" (speech and translation of scriptures) and "Waree leeba" (mass education) promoted widespread engagement with Hindu scriptures, exemplified through community performances of the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Keywords: Manipur, 18th century, Hinduism, socio-cultural changes, literature

Introduction

The modern state of Manipur is a unique tapestry woven from the threads of its historic Meitei monarchy and the diverse hill tribes that inhabit the region. At the heart of this cultural mosaic is the Meitei community, the largest ethnic group in Manipur, which predominantly practices Hinduism. According to the 2011 census, Hinduism accounts for approximately 41.39% of the population, illustrating its significant role in shaping the social and cultural landscape. Additionally, 7.78% of the Meiteis adhere to Sanamahism, the pre-Hindu indigenous belief system, highlighting a revivalist movement that seeks to reaffirm and celebrate their rich social and linguistic heritage. The linguistic dimension of Meitei culture is exemplified through Manipuri, also known locally as Meiteilon. This language acts as a linguistic bridge, connecting around 35 ethnic groups within Manipur and extending to neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Assam, Tripura, and Myanmar. Manipuri is classified within the Sino-Tibetan family, specifically under the Tibeto-Burman subgroup. Scholars such as Grierson and Shafer have emphasized its connections to other regional languages, positioning Manipuri within the Kuki-Chin and Kachin branches. This linguistic classification not only highlights the intricate relationships between various ethnic groups but also underlines the importance of Manipuri as a medium of communication and cultural exchange in the region.

Manipuri literature plays a prominent role in the literary landscape of Northeast India. It is distinguished by its unique writing system, Meitei Mayek, which is a testament to the community's literary heritage. In a landmark development, Manipuri became the first Tibeto-Burman language in India to be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution on August 20, 1992, following the 71st Amendment. This recognition underscores the linguistic and cultural significance of Manipuri, which has evolved from a rich amalgamation of various dialects and languages, including English and early Indo-Aryan languages. The process of Hindunisation, or Sanskritization, which began in the early 17th century, further contributed to the evolution of Manipuri, blending indigenous practices with new religious and cultural influences. Before the

widespread adoption of Hinduism, Manipuri society was deeply rooted in the worship of the Umanglais, or sylvan deities. The Maiba and Maibi, as priestly figures, played crucial roles in this spiritual framework, extending their influence beyond religious guidance to encompass significant cultural celebrations that brought together the nobility and the wider community. This indigenous belief system, with its rich rituals and traditions, laid the groundwork for the socio-cultural transformations that would occur in Manipur during the 18th century.

As Hinduism gained traction, particularly through the efforts of the Meitei monarchy, the cultural fabric of Manipur began to shift. The integration of Hindu beliefs and practices marked a turning point, creating a synthesis of indigenous traditions and new religious frameworks. This transformation was not merely a replacement of one belief system with another; it was an intricate process of negotiation and adaptation that redefined social structures, cultural practices, and community identities. The interplay of these diverse influences, from indigenous beliefs to the adoption of Hinduism, continues to shape the modern identity of Manipur. The revivalist movements within the Meitei community that seek to preserve Sanamahism are emblematic of a broader desire to maintain cultural roots while embracing new influences. Thus, the socio-cultural evolution of Manipur is a rich narrative of resilience and adaptation, reflecting the complexities of identity in a region characterized by diversity and change. This ongoing dialogue between past and present, tradition and modernity, underscores the dynamic and multifaceted character of Manipuri society today.

Literature Review

The historical and cultural context of Manipur, particularly regarding the Meitei monarchy and its religious transformation, has garnered attention from various scholars. The Meiteis, primarily Hindus, form the largest ethnic group in Manipur, with significant numbers practicing Sanamahism (Ibungohal, 1987). The revivalist movements among the Meitei community reflect a complex interplay between ancient traditions and contemporary socio-religious practices (Singh, 1963; Vijaylakshmi, 1998). The linguistic classification of Manipuri, often referred to as Meiteilon, has been a focal point in the study of Sino-Tibetan languages. Grierson (1904) posits that Manipuri connects the Kuki-Chin and Kachin languages, while Shafer (1955) identified it within the Meithei branch of the Tibeto-Burman subgroup. Benedict et al. (1972) further contextualize Manipuri's place within the broader Tibeto-Burman language family, emphasizing its significance as the first Tibeto-Burman language included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1992.

The cultural and religious transformation of the Meiteis from animistic traditions to a Hindu-centric society has been thoroughly documented. This transition was significantly influenced by various Hindu schools arriving in the region, notably during the reign of King Garibniwaz, who established Hinduism as the state religion in 1714 AD (Chatterjee, 1979; Singh, 2013). The integration of Hindu practices into Meitei society was facilitated by royal patronage, particularly under King Bhagyachandra, who played a pivotal role in promoting Ras Lila and other Hindu cultural forms (Khelchandra, 1969). Manipuri literature evolved during this period, showcasing a synthesis of local and Sanskrit influences. Numerous translations of significant Hindu texts were undertaken, with Angom Gopi being a notable figure in this literary renaissance (Khelchandra, 1969). The impact of Bengali literature and Sanskrit on Manipuri writings is evident, with many authors incorporating these influences into their works (Jhaveri & Sharma, 1967).

The social dynamics of the Meitei community were further altered by the Hindunisation process, where traditional Meitei practices were reinterpreted through a Hindu lens. This is evident in the adoption of Hindu rituals and the identification of Meitei deities with Hindu gods (Sadananda, 2015). The storytelling traditions of Waree Leeba and Lairik Thiba Haiba emerged as key mediums for disseminating Hindu values and narratives within the community (Sadananda, 2015). To sum up, the historical interplay of language, literature, and religious transformation in Manipur reflects a unique cultural synthesis shaped by both indigenous and external influences. The scholarly works cited provide a comprehensive understanding of this dynamic process, contributing to a richer appreciation of Manipuri identity and heritage.

Objectives

This study aims to investigate the socio-cultural landscape of Manipur prior to the adoption of Hinduism, emphasizing the significance of indigenous beliefs and practices within the Meitei community. It will explore the mechanisms through which Hinduism was introduced and established as the state religion, particularly focusing on the roles of Meitei rulers and Brahmins. Additionally, the research will assess how the adoption of Hinduism influenced various aspects of Manipuri culture, including literature, language, and traditional practices. The impact of community-driven educational initiatives, such as "Lairik Thiba Haiba" and "Waree Leeba," on the dissemination of Hindu teachings will also be evaluated. Finally, the transformation of

Manipuri literature during the 18th and 19th centuries will be examined, particularly regarding the integration of Sanskrit and Bengali influences.

Materials and Methods

To achieve these objectives, the research will analyse historical texts, royal decrees, and literary works from the 18th and 19th centuries to trace the evolution of Hinduism in Manipur and its socio-cultural implications. Field research will include interviews and oral histories from community members, scholars, and practitioners of traditional Meitei rituals to gather contemporary insights on the integration of Hinduism. A comparative literary analysis of key texts in Manipuri, Sanskrit, and Bengali will identify thematic elements and linguistic influences during the Hindunisation process. The study will also observe and document performances of "Lairik Thiba Haiba" and "Waree Leeba" to evaluate their educational roles. Demographic data from the 2011 census and other studies will be analysed to quantify Hinduism's influence on the Meitei population and the persistence of Sanamahism. Finally, an interdisciplinary approach will integrate perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and religious studies to provide a holistic understanding of the socio-cultural transformations during this period.

Findings

The socio-cultural transformation of the Manipur Valley, particularly within the Meitei community, is a rich tapestry woven from the threads of historical, religious, and cultural change. This transformation has been significantly influenced by the introduction of three distinct Hindu schools: the Nimbarka, Ramandi, and Cheiteina. While the early Nimbarka School struggled to make a lasting impression, the Ramandi and Cheiteina schools played pivotal roles in reshaping the religious landscape and cultural identity of the Meiteis. In 1714 AD, King Garibaniwaz declared Hinduism the official state religion, marking a critical juncture in the region's history. This official sanction not only integrated Hinduism into the societal framework but also facilitated military and political alliances with neighbouring Hindu kingdoms. The strengthening of ties with the Ahom kingdom in Assam, as well as other regional powers like Tripura, Cooch-Bihar, and Sylhet, underscored the strategic importance of this religious shift. It provided the Meitei community with both a sense of unity and a strengthened position in the complex political landscape of Northeast India.

The reign of King Bhagyachandra (1759–1798) marked another significant phase of transformation. Under his leadership, the earlier Ramandi school transitioned into the Cheiteina school, which introduced culturally rich practices such as Sankritana and Ras Leela. These practices elevated the worship of Radha and Krishna to central positions in Meitei religious life, reinforcing the integration of Hindu deities into local worship. The groundwork for this cultural shift was laid by King Charairongba (1698–1709), who first introduced Hinduism to the Meitei masses. The institutionalization of Hinduism by Garibaniwaz, and the subsequent reinforcement of these practices by later rulers, led to a profound embedding of Hindu values in everyday Meitei life. One of the most notable cultural developments during this period was the evolution of Meitei dance forms, particularly Ras Leela. This theatrical dance, which blended traditional Meitei elements with Hindu themes, eventually achieved recognition as one of India's classical dance styles. Such artistic developments were reflective of a broader cultural renaissance, which was further amplified by the establishment of significant Hindu festivals like Gostha Ashtami and Rath Jatra under Gambhir Singh's reign. The translation of Hindu texts proliferated during this time, making sacred literature more accessible to the populace and allowing for a deeper engagement with religious teachings.

The socio-cultural landscape of the Meitei community was further transformed as the seven clans became aligned with Hindu Gotras, fostering a sense of continuity with ancient traditions. This alignment, which persists today, often leads rituals to reference Hindu Gotras rather than the traditional Meitei lineage. The ongoing process of Hindunisation blurred the lines between indigenous beliefs and Hindu worship, resulting in the re-contextualization of Meitei deities. For example, Panthoibi was increasingly associated with Durga, and Nongpok Ningthou began to be equated with Shiva. Traditional Meitei rituals were not merely replaced; rather, they became intertwined with Hindu practices, showcasing a remarkable cultural synthesis that underscores the deepening influence of Hinduism. As Manipuri society evolved, its literature also began to reflect these changes. The 18th-century literary works exhibited significant influence from Bengali and Sanskrit literature. Important texts, such as "Leithak Leikharon" and "Thawanthaba Khongjanglon," emerged during this period, alongside translations of portions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana into Manipuri. Poets like Angom Gopi played crucial roles in this literary expansion, contributing to the growing body of Manipuri literature and ensuring that Hindu narratives were woven into the fabric of local storytelling. The royal court played a vital role in this literary flourishing, preserving and disseminating manuscripts through the king's office, thereby enriching the intellectual landscape of the region.

King Bhagyachandra, a staunch supporter of Hinduism, undertook significant reforms in education and temple construction, embedding Hindu values within the cultural fabric of Manipur. His initiatives not only facilitated the translation and creation of religious texts but also inspired Manipuri poets to integrate Bengali and Sanskrit terminology into their works. This period saw a blossoming of religious literature, with notable contributions from figures like Bhagyachandra's son, Nabanada, and his daughter, Sija Lairoibi, who helped to solidify the integration of Hindu themes into Manipuri literature. As the region transitioned into the 19th century, the process of translation and adaptation continued to evolve. The Manipuri Vishnavas played a crucial role in translating major Hindu epics such as the Bhagavad Purana and the Vishnu Purana into Manipuri, enriching the literary landscape with new influences. This blending of Manipuri, Bengali, and Sanskrit terms became commonplace, shaping a distinct identity for Manipuri literature that mirrored its socio-cultural context.

The traditions of Waree Leeba and Lairik Thiba-Haiba emerged as pivotal channels for disseminating Hindu teachings within the Meitei community. These practices allowed for the mass education of the populace in Vaishnavite literature, effectively integrating religious doctrines into everyday life. The storytelling format of Waree Leeba, likely influenced by Assamese culture, fostered an appreciation for epic narratives and their moral teachings. Simultaneously, the Lairik Thiba-Haiba tradition deepened the understanding of sacred texts through rhythmic recitation and translation into Manipuri, enhancing communal engagement with religious content.

The findings of this study illustrate the profound influence of Hinduism on the socio-cultural transformation of Manipur during this period. The reshaping of religious practices, the evolution of literature, and the transformation of community life reflect a unique synthesis of indigenous and Hindu traditions that continues to resonate within Meitei culture today. The intricate interplay of historical, political, and cultural factors underscores the complexities of this transformation, providing valuable insights into the negotiation of identity in a pluralistic context. Through this lens, we can appreciate how the Meitei community has navigated the challenges and opportunities presented by the interplay of tradition and adaptation, ultimately shaping a vibrant and multifaceted cultural identity that endure in contemporary society.

Conclusion

The socio-cultural transformation of Manipur, particularly within the Meitei community, during the transition to Hinduism highlights a complex interplay of historical, linguistic, and cultural forces. The declaration of Hinduism as the state religion by King Garibaniwaz in 1714 marked a critical juncture, fostering alliances with neighbouring Hindu kingdoms and embedding Hindu practices into the core of Meitei society. This transition was further solidified by subsequent rulers, especially King Bhagyachandra, who actively promoted the integration of Hindu elements into Meitei cultural practices and literature. The rise of new religious festivals, dance forms, and literary works exemplifies the profound influence of Hinduism, demonstrating a remarkable synthesis with indigenous beliefs. This blending has cultivated a distinct cultural identity that remains vibrant today, showcasing the resilience and adaptability of the Meitei community. Educational initiatives like "Waree Leeba" and "Lairik Thiba Haiba" were crucial in making Hindu teachings accessible, facilitating the coexistence of ancient and contemporary narratives within the cultural landscape.

Moreover, the acceptance of Hinduism among the general populace was not immediate; it necessitated a prolonged process of social engineering, characterized by the translation and adaptation of religious texts to resonate with everyday lives. The sponsorship of cultural events by the royal family, alongside the efforts of Brahmins as agents of the new faith, played a vital role in popularizing Hinduism throughout the region. Their influence not only shaped Manipuri culture and literature but also enriched the language with Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit vocabulary. The eventual dissemination of translated Hindu literature, initially limited, gained broader acceptance through oral traditions, ensuring that Hindu teachings permeated daily life and continued to shape the socio-cultural landscape of Manipur. This study thus reveals the intricate dynamics of religion, culture, and language, illustrating how the adoption of Hinduism was a complex and transformative process that profoundly impacted the identity and heritage of the Meitei community.

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