The Ethnic Identity of the Bishnupriya Manipuris

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Abstract

The Bishnupriya Manipuris has been classed under the category of Other Backward Classes (OBC) in Tripura and Assam, a non – tribal community originally concentrated in the Bishenpur (earlier name Bishnupur) district of Manipur. Due to some historical circumstances, the Bishnupriyas have migrated to different parts of Cachar district of Assam, Agartala district of Tripura and Sylhet district[1] of Bangladesh. They consider themselves as communities in diaspora[1] who demonstrate their spatial, social, and imaginary aspects and are subject to changes brought by historical transformations. But the word diaspora, a dynamic concept changed with the passage of time thereby inculcating several characteristics. So whether this ethnic group can be considered as communities in diaspora in relation to Manipur (Bishnupriya Manipuris living outside Manipur) is yet a matter of doubt. Moreover, their adoption of the nomenclature Bishnupriya Manipuri specially advocated by their leaders supported by their false propaganda literatures has created a menace to the linguistic identity and history of the Meeteis or Manipuris. In the contemporary period, the study of race, ethnicity, identity and culture has assumed increasing importance and ethnic identities can be constructed with the context and sense of history. Of course , these studies have to take into consideration the process of social change that takes place within a society . The reconstruction of the history and culture of the Bishnupriya Manipuris has assumed utmost significance in the light of the increasing search for identity in the recent past. So a big question lies in their assumptions of being Bishnupriya Manipuris as to whether the history and culture of the community can be reconstructed with an incorrect nomenclature or perhaps their real origin is from the west i. e., Bengal based on their linguistic origin.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Diasporic Ethnic Groups, Politicisation of Ethnic Identity, Theoretical Frameworks

Introduction

The North Eastern part of India represents a unique cultural and linguistic mosaic among the states of Indian sub – continent . Although , it is stated that this part of the country covers 7 . 9 % of the total geographical area , more than 75 % of languages belonging to four main linguistic groups viz. Indo – Aryan , Dravidian , Austro – Asiatic and Tibeto – Burman are found . The heterogeneity of language and culture are found among varied populations , each having a distinct culture, social set – up , religion , values , language , mode of living etc .

The North Eastern region also could not escape from the global phenomenon of migration, immigration or emigration from the neighbouring areas since time immemorial leading to demographic as well as social , political and economic changes . Migration is considered to be an important characteristic of human civilization and endeavour for survival is its vital cause . The term migration means the movement of people from one place to another permanently or temporarily and it includes the two terms emigration and immigration as they share the same meanings . The North Eastern states specially Assam (Cachar district) , Manipur , Tripura and the neighbouring country of Bangladesh (former East Bengal) are the main regions that are considered to be connected with the history of migration of the Bishnupuriyas , a dominant ethnic group that have migrated from West Bengal i.e. Bishnupur under Bankura district . The Bishnupuriya language is the language of Bishnupur or from Bishnupur , this is beyond doubt as there are still some speakers of this language found in the place . But an unfortunate part of their history was that they had to migrate in successive waves to the nearby areas perhaps starting from the 15th century due to

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various reasons like 1) Maratha raids , 2) A warfare with the nearest kingdoms , 3) Islamic conversion on Hindu settlements, 4) propagation of Vaishnavism, and 5) The Great famine of Bengal in 1770 and 1943. The ethnic identity of a community can be judged from the language they speak, so the Bishnupuriya identity also is closely linked with the language they speak . Based on the language which the people speak , an Indo –Aryan group of language placed beside Bengali and Assamese under " Magadhi Aprabhamsa ", the origin of the ethnic group has to be placed in Bengal . After their migration from Bengal , they are dispersed in several areas of Assam , Manipur , Tripura , Bangladesh and Myanmar , thereby coming into contact with different ethnic groups . So , the concept of ethnic identity has turned out to be a meaningful discourse only in the situations when two or more ethnic groups comes in contact over a period of time .There has been the resurgence of ethnic identity of the Bishnupuriyas at present , due to the persistence of ethnicized politics . The identity controversy of the Bishnupuriyas was created by the use of the suffix or prefix " Manipuri " along with Bishnupriya , mainly outside Manipur . Further , the decision of the Government of Assam and Tripura in 1983 and 1985 respectively , to introduce the " Bishnupriya Manipuri Language " as a medium of instruction upto the primary level , was met with strong protests by the Government of Manipur and also the Meeteis all over the North East India . Naorem Sanajaoba says : " Their political leadership changed the Bishnupuriya to Bishnupriya for their own convenience . "[2]

Aim of the Study

The present work is to put the question of identity of the Bishnupriya Manipuris into the context of social change . Identity itself is subjective as well as social and is said to be constituted in and through culture , both the terms culture and identity are inter – related . The question of identity specifically cultural , linguistic and geographical of this particular ethnic group has in fact , at present has become the major issue of concern for the community . The language of the community has been studied in the Linguistic Survey of India by G . A . Grierson as Mayang or Bishunpuriya in the family of Indo-Aryan languages Eastern Group . The Bishnupriya Manipuris (a contested nomenclature) although claims to have originated from Manipur , are at present spatially scattered communities that are closely interwoven by a common cultural identity outside Manipur

The Concept of Ethnic Identity

In recent years, the notion of ethnic identity has attracted the attention of scholars, politicians, sociologists, psychologists and so on. It has become a debatable issue at regional, national and international level, as more and more ethnic groups are demanding for ethnic identity. The term ethnic identity is said to be an affiliative construct and the most popular discourse in social sciences . Ethnic identity is a "complex and dynamic construct which takes place within the context of changing power relations and socio – economic conditions where the past is reconstructed to give meaning to the present and hope for the future (Yos 2011 : 166) .Ethnic identity is a multi – faceted construct , derived from a sense of people's belonging to a group, culture and a particular setting. It is different from other group identities like racial identity, yet it shares common traits with both personal and group identities. The etymological origins of the construct ethnic identity were from the Greek word 'ethnicus' and the Latin word 'ethnikas' meaning nation . The word 'identity' has originated from the Latin word ' identias ' derived from ' idem' referring to same . Together it stands for notion of sameness, oneness and likeness. In a general sense, it implies the sameness of a band or nation of people who share common customs, traditions, historical experiences, and in certain cases geographical residence.

The term ethnic and identity are interrelated, as ethnic groups associate identity to identify themselves as distinct groups. Identity needs to be acknowledged by others. The term identity was first propounded by Sigmund Freud and David Riesnan used ethnicity for the first time in 1953 .Often ethnic identity is used as a synonym for ethnicity. In demographic terms, the definition of ethnicity includes common language, national origin and culture.

"Ethnicity is an umbrella concept that easily embraces groups differentiated by color , language , and religion, it covers "tribes" , "races" , "nationalities", and "castes" (Horowitz 1985 , 53). Martin Bulmer (1986 : 54) defines : "An' ethnic group ' is a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry , memories of a shared past , and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity , such as kinship , religion , language, shared territory , nationality or physical appearance . Members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to the group. "Pierre Van den Berghe (1978) says that an ethnic group is " socially defined on the basis of cultural criteria " . According to Anthony Smith, an ethnic group is " a named human population with myths of common ancestry , shared historical memories , one or more elements of a common culture , a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity (Hutchinson and Smith 1966 , 6) . Ethnic identity refers to a sense of psychological affiliation and connectedness to a group of people with a common heritage (Branch et al 2000).

Bishnupuriyas are Diasporic Ethnic Groups

The term diaspora has been derived from the Greek words 'dia' meaning 'across' and 'speirein' referring to 'scatter ' , together ' diaspeirein i.e., disperse. According to Wikipedia, " A diaspora is a scattered population whose origin lies within a smaller geographic locale ." [3]

Diaspora is the spreading , dispersion of people from one original country or homeland to different places , spreading their language or culture and also assimilating some of the cultural traits as well as language of the place to where they have settled . In all cases , the term diaspora carries a sense of displacement the population so described finds itself for whatever reason separated from its national territory , and usually its people have a hope ,

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or at least a desire , to return to their homeland at some point , if the" homeland " still exists in any meaningful sense.[4] Some of the examples of diaspora communities are African diaspora (largest diaspora of modern times)in countries like USA, England , Russia etc , Asian diaspora specially the Jewish exodus from Israel to many countries due to Roman conquests, Indian diaspora, Nepalese diaspora, European diaspora etc. The Bishnupuriyas are the migrants coming from the west (Nongchup haram) i.e., Bengal since the 16th century in Manipur. The records of their migration has been given in the Meitei royal chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba , Kaalishalon , British writers like Dalton, Col McCulloch, B. C. Allen, Meitei scholars like Naorem Sanajaoba , Chongtham Manihar Singh, Bishnupuriya scholars like Vidyapati Sinha and Sena Sinha. They are a diaspora community having dispersed from their original homeland Bengal since the 16th century due to various reasons and have settled in different regions in India and also abroad .Surajit Sinha was of the view : " Due to the havoc caused by the Marathas , a large number of people fled from their homes and migrated towards east . "[5] In the 18th century the family rapidly declined : the Marhattas impoverished them ; the famine of 1770 left their kingdom empty of inhabitants .[6]

The Roots of Ethnic Identity Of The Bishnupuriyas

Over the years, specially in areas (Assam, Manipur and Tripura) of North East also, there has been the proliferation of ethnic identity movements for ethnic self – assertion, ethnic identity among different communities resulting in marked ethnic conflicts." Ethnic movements in North East India involve the assertion of identity around certain social problems, historic – cultural legacies and political exigencies by way of organizing themselves into an ethnic body to concretize their identity." (Rizvi , 2006 : 17) . The identity movement of the Bishnupuriyas commenced since the beginning of the twentieth century, culminating in the formation of the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha in 1932. The ethnic mobilisation movement was started under the guidance of this organisation among the people living in several areas of Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh. This mobilisation process was intensified by the linguistic movements of the Meiteis and the Bengalis living in Barak Valley. " The intellectuals , educationists , elites and mass organisations of the community are the wheels of the Bishnupriya ethnic mobilisation which emerged as a direct result of western education and social evolution that began in the colonial period " .[7] The Mahasabha , the Bhasa Parishad , the Andolan Parishad , the Students' Union and the Sahitya Parishad played an active role in ethnic consciousness of the people . The youths and students of the community formed the Andolan Parishad and started their movement with ' Seven Point Demands ' of the Mahasabha such as :

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 Bishnupuri Manipuri at the AIR Station , Gauhati .
3. Financial assistance to the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Sahitya Parishad .
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 .

The Bishnupriya Andolan Parishad started " Satyagraha Movement " in a phased manner –

1. The first phase started from May , 1968 with the two slogans i.e., " Amar Dabi Dena Lagtoi " and " Ema Thare Lerik Tamkarani Dena Lagtoi " . This was accompanied with strikes all over the district by picketing of schools and colleges .
2. The second phase from July , 1968 , with public meetings , picketing at schools and colleges and burning of token of the Census report of 1961 .
3. The third phase commenced from 15th October , 1969 , people got involved in mass processions and picketing .

Finally , the Government of Assam in their Cabinet Meeting held on 26 – 10 – 83 under the Chief Minister Sri Hiteswar Saikia , decided to introduce the Bishnupriya Manipuri Language as a medium of instruction in the districts of Cachar and Karimganj . Similar decision was made by the Government of Tripura to introduce the language as a medium of instruction upto the primary level of education . The ethnic mobilisation movement of the NBMM culminated in the recognition of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language only by the Goverments of Assam and Tripura and not Manipur . This movement can be regarded as the first phase of the ethnic identity movement of the Bishnupriyas , which have misguided the people through a constructed identity as " Bishnupriya Manipuris " thereby leading to identity crisis among the people . The introduction of the mother tongue as Bishnupriya Manipuri language has also endangered the linguistic identity of the community . So , the Bishnupuriya identity issue revolved around changing the nomenclature from " Bishnupuriya to Bishnupriya Manipuri " .

The "*Bishnupuriya Language And Development Organization* " was formed on 15 – 11 – 2016 , but formerly it was called "Bishnupuriya People's Organization " which started from 25th August , 2013 . This organization was formed under the initiative of Parimal Sinha Bishanpuriya , who was a student leader during his college life . The organization has already launched a satyagraha movement against the use of the incorrect nomenclature "Bishnupriya Manipuri" for the community and also " Bishnupriya Manipuri Language " as the nomenclature of the language of the ethnic group . They have raised strong protests against the manipulations and misinterpretations of Linguistic Survey of India reports of Dr G . A . Grierson , Census reports , concocted documents and history of the community connecting it with Manipur and Mahabharata . The organisation has taken strong initiatives to revive the history, culture , tradition and

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linguistic identity of this ethnic group . The greatest achievement of the movement was the order (Vide order No . NER – Misc . / Prog./ 2012/ 2745/ dated 17 / 9 / 2012 ,) passed by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to the Bishnupuriya community of Assam to perform programs in All India Radio , Silchar .Parimal Sinha says ,” Nothing is written for any language or dialect as " Bishnupriya Manipuri or Kalisa Manipuri " in Linguistic Survey of India . A wrong inclusion of the nomenclature " Bishnupriya Manipuri " and the language as Bishnupriya Manipuri language will misinterpret the real identity of the community . The Bishnupuriyas are the Bishnupuri people of Bishnupur at Bankura district and the language spoken is the Bishnupuriya language as given in Census reports , LSI by Dr Grierson and Suniti Kumar Chatterjee . "On the occasion of Republic Day 2017 , the Bishnupuriya community performed the Bishnupuri Folk dance , the dance group of Nritya Kala Niketan at Police Parade Ground, Silchar along with other recognised dance groups .

The "Bishnupuriya Language and Development Organization" is the supreme body of the Bishnupuriya speaking people all around the world . The aim of this organization is to safeguard the historical nomenclature and the cultural traits of the people. The basic aims and objectives of the organization are as follows

1. To establish the Bishnupuriya language and community as a distinct ethnic group of the Indian subcontinent .
2. To encourage basic historical research and experimental work in speech , language and culture of the Bishnupuriya by promoting high educational research standard .
3. Implementation of Bishnupuriya language in primary and secondary level in the state of Assam at the initial stage .
4. To strengthen capacity of the community in participatory activities for economic empowerment by enhancing livelihood and opportunities through socio – cultural programs .
5. Preservation of endangered Bishnupuriya minority language with attempts to analyse the causes , circumstances and results of language endangerment as well as the social condition and effects of political intervention for the survival of the language .
6. To take steps for the grant of reservation status of the people in the Government and private sector .
7. Holding meetings and discussions with the government on the matter of inclusion in actual population figure in census reports , survey reports on the Bishnupuriya speakers , to find out accurate figure of the speakers .
8. To create awareness among the masses on the history , language and origin of the people .

Politicisation of Ethnic Identity

The politics of ethnicity / ethnic politics is considered as one of the chief cause of instability among ethnic groups leading to ethnic conflicts. The term identity politics is said to signify a wide range of political activity and theorising founded in the shared experiences and injustice of members of certain social groups. It attempts to attain empowerment, representation and recognition of social groups by asserting the very same markers that distinguished and differentiated them from the others and utilise those markers as an assertion of selfhood and identity based on difference rather than equality. These markers includes language, culture, ethnicity, gender, tribe, religion, race etc., institutionalised in jargons , metaphors , stereotypes , and academic literature and reinforced through practices of positive discrimination or affirmative action . The adherents of identity politics utilise the power of myths, cultural symbols and kinship relations to mould the feeling of shared community and subsequently politicise these aspects to claim recognition of their particular identities .

Identity politics is the most popular discourse in the contemporary world, as more and more ethnic groups are demanding ethnic identity largely based on the dissatisfaction of the political set up and unstable domestic environment. The dissatisfied groups often get themselves involved in ethnic movements in order to fulfil their charter of demands and objectives. As a field of study , identity politics gained legitimacy during the period between 1950s and 1960s in the United States. In India, it became prominent in the post – independence period . The arrival of identity politics during the 1980s, whereby people mobilise politically around particularistic identities, be it religion, caste, jati or language, has promoted the political expediency of organisations and political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Guha, 2007: 546). Numerous ethnic communities in India, continue to claim recognition of their identity, rights and priviledges. The liberal democratic set up of Indian polity has in fact, failed to live up to the aspirations of the people. Thus the state is seen as an "active contributor to identity politics through the creation and maintenance of state structures which define and recognise people in terms of certain identities. " Even in the North East India, politics of ethnicity emerged since the period of 1970s and 1980s caused by several grievances from the Central government on issues relating to the huge influx of refugees from Bangladesh, denial of economic development, exploitation of its natural resources like tea, oil, coal etc. Some of the present ethnic movements to safeguard the ethnic identity are the Bodo demand for Bodoland , the demand for a " Twipra land " by the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura ,demand for the formation of " Nagalim" spearheaded by National Socialist Council of Nagalim – Isak – Muivah (NSCN – IM) etc . The immediate threat faced by the Assamese people of Assam was the loss of identity which led to a mass movement called " Assam Movement " , started in 1979 and continued till 1985 . "It marked a period when every small and big ethnic group began distancing itself from the Axamiya identity and subsequently started placing demands for separate ethnic homelands" (Uddipana Goswami , 2014 : 5) .

In the present context, the threat to the identity of the Bishnupuriyas and the Meiteis has been created by a group of leaders of the Bishnupriya

Manipuris by the illegal use of the prefix or suffix 'Manipuri' with Bishnupriya . In this connection we can quote the words of Naorem Sanajaoba who said: "Since the 1950's , the Bengali speaking people who hailed from Assam – Bengal transborder areas , who had been in exile in Manipur due to Moghul invasion in Bengal in the medieval age , claimed themselves as a Manipuri clan . They call themselves as Bishnupuriyas [now corrupted into Bishnupriyas] and some of their leaders demand that they should be known as Manipuri . "[8] Further he writes:" The Bishnupuriya leadership is disseminating numerous concocted propaganda literature thereby attempting at a complete dislocation of the two millennia old cultural and even the political history of the Manipuri people in Asia . A concocted monograph entitled , Let History And Facts Speak About Manipuris doctored by Bhimsen Singha and published by Bishnupuriya Sahitya Parishad in January 1984 , a concocted book entitled ' Khumal Puran ' written by Navakendra Singha and small propaganda booklets propagate to the mass an organised disinformation campaign claiming that they are the Manipuris and the genuine Manipuris are aliens . "[9] The identity issue of the Bishnupuriyas at present , after the recognition of " Bishnupriya Manipuri " identity by the Governments of Assam and Tripura, which is in fact a debatable one , the Government of Manipur do not recognise them as Manipuri till now as the conflict is not yet over . The Government of India records and documents needs to be placed in this matter in order to remove confusions and doubts on the issue of nomenclature " Manipuri " as suffix or prefix to Bishnupriya . Shri E. H. Pakyntein, I. A. S, Superintendent of Census Operations, Assam, in a letter addressed to the Special Secretary to the Govt. of Assam, Political (B)Department in reference to letter No. PLB. 145/61/18 , Dated , 22 /7/1961 stated that, '.... no classes or communities other than those of the scheduled tribes and schedule castes were recorded in the 1961 census . The question of separate enumeration of the Manipuri people as a class or community does not arise ....languages or dialects other than those recognised in Sir Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India will not be recognised and will simply be dumped as " Unclassified " ....Meitei and Bishnupriya are both recognised languages or dialects ..." P . Padmanabha , Registrar General of India , in a letter addressed to the General Secretary , Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha , 26th June , 1980 , had given the following instructions : Record mother tongue in full , whatever be the name of the language returned by the respondent and do not use abbreviations . Please note the following :

1. You are not expected to determine If the language returned by a person is a dialect of another language .
2. You should not try to establish any relationship between religion and mother tongue .
3. You are bound to record the language as returned by the person as his mother tongue and you should not enter into any argument with him/her and try to record any language other than what is returned and

4. If you have reasons to suspect that in any area due to any organised movement, the mother tongue is not being truthfully returned, you should record the mother tongue as actually returned by the respondent, and make a report to your supervisory officers for verification. You are not authorised to make any correction on your own."

It is thus notified clearly from the above Government of India records and documents that no relationship can be established between religion and mother, but the present use of the nomenclature " Bishnupriya Manipuri " cannot be accepted as the term "Bishnupriya " signifies a religious group as lovers of Vishnu and the suffix Manipuri is also unacceptable as " Manipuri or Meitei " is a recognised scheduled language of the Manipuris. Sir George A. Grierson has studied and documented both the Mayang or Bishnupuriya and Meitei languages as belonging to two distinct linguistic groups – Meitei is a Tibeto – Burman language of the Kuki – Chin group and Mayang or Bishnupuriya is an Indo – Aryan language of the Eastern group . Nobody is authorised to make corrections on its own regarding the real mother tongue of the community , but the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha (NBMM) has manipulated the records as actually returned by the respondents on mother tongue, misinterpreted and manipulated the Linguistic Survey of India , vol v , part 1 ,p.419, 1904 , compiled and edited by Sir George A . Grierson on the nomenclature as Bishnupriya Manipuri whereas the actual term used was "Bishnupuriya Manipuris or Kalisa Manipuris ". In fact , the word and concept " Bishnupriya " was not in any historical record or written Government records in relation to the history of Manipur , its indigenous people , but the only references found were that the " Bishnupuriyas " were migrants who entered Manipur starting from 16th century onwards . The word and concept of nomenclature "Bishnupriya Manipuri "is a product of the conspiracy of the NBMM. Nothing is written for any language or dialect as "Bishnupriya Manipuri or Kalisa Manipuri "in Linguistic Survey of India. The suffix "Manipuri "was used in LSI, Vol v, part 1, p .419, to identify the group as migrants in Manipur . Grierson has specifically said that there is no use of studying here for such a dialect spoken by the immigrants who actually had lost their own language.

Another interesting turnout of the identity issue now is that a majority of the Bishnupuriyas now refute the identity as " Bishnupriya Manipuri " , instead they claim that they should be recognised as " Bishnupuriyas " (original inhabitants of Bishnupur in West Bengal) . The nomenclature Bishnupriya Manipuri was solely the creation of some Bishnupuriya leaders and intelligentsia by misinterpreting and misrepresenting the Census records of the Government of India as well the

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Linguistic Survey of India by Dr Grierson. [10] The ethnic mobilisation of the Bishnupuriyas started since the 1950's by a group of leaders for political and economic benefits, first by changing the nomenclature ' Bishnupuriya ' to ' Bishnupriya Manipuri ' in order to remain as a sub – group of Manipuri .

As per Article 29 (1) of the Constitution of India , the conservation of the nomenclature 'Manipuri i.e. the Meitei language' is a guaranteed Fundamental Right of the Meiteis .The community also demanded inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri in the State OBC list in Serial 13 as a sub – group of Manipuri along with Manipuri along with Manipuri Brahman and Manipuri Muslims . The Assam Backward Classes Commission was constituted in 1993 also known as " The Assam Act", issued a corrigendum dated 18-3-96 upon complaints raised by the NBMM, NBMU and the Samaj Santha , Guwahati relating to non- inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri in Serial 13 of the lists of OBC .Thereby the Commission issued a notification dated 27-11-75 of the Government of Assam by its order dated 29-9-95 in Case No.1/94 recommending inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri along with Manipuri Brahmins and Manipuri Muslims in Serial 13 of lists of OBC .K . Kumardhan Singh filed a writ petition under Article 226 of the Constitution of India praying for declaration of the Assam Act as unconstitutional and praying for quashing the aforesaid order . The Meiteis also filed Special Leave Petitions in the Supreme Court . Ultimately . the Gauhati High Court stated that it cannot issue a declaration that the word Manipuri cannot be prefixed or suffixed to the word Bishnupriya as the dispute was not a matter relating to reservation issue in favour of OBC . Moreover adjudication of the said dispute will require a study of the origin , history and culture of the two communities . Under Article 226 of the Constitution , the court was not the competent authority to settle the dispute and so the order was quashed . In Tripura , the Bishnupuriyas have been included in the Central list of OBC , but in Assam or in India , they are yet to be included in the OBC list . The records maintained by the British India Government as well as the Government of India mention Bishnupuriya as a community speaking a language by the same name .

Theoretical Framework for ethnic identity of the Bishnupuriyas

The ethnic identity issue of the Bishnupuriyas is indeed a very complicated matter as it centers round the formation of " Bishnupriya Manipuri " identity and also the " Bishnupuriya " identity at present . This community is presently on the process of re – asserting and reconstructing their identity on the basis of linguistic , historical , religious and cultural identities . The three main theories adopted for studying the Bishnupuriya identity formation , takes into consideration all the places of settlement of the population in several areas of North East India , Bangladesh and Tripura The theories includes – Primordial , Instrumental and Constructivist perspectives in the formation of the 'Bishnupuriya ' identity in Assam i.e., Cachar district . At present , the community is facing " identity crisis " , for the usage of the term" Bishnupriya Manipuri ", an incorrect nomenclature which was found out after intensive fieldwork of the Bishnupuriya inhabited villages of Cachar district .

The Primordialist Approach for ethnic identity of the Bishnupuriyas

The primordialist approach is also known as essentialism , laid stress on the belief that identity is unchangeable , singular and endogenous attribute . It is the result of deep rooted attachments to group and culture . It takes ethnicity as a fixed characteristic of individuals and communities (Isaacs 1975 ; Smith 1986 ; Kaplan 1993 ; and Connor 1994) . Every individual carries with him some attachments derived from his / her place of birth , kinship ,
religion , language and social practices which are natural to him , spiritual in nature and provide a basis for an easy affinity with other people from the same background . Around 89 % of the respondents interviewed commonly agreed that their ethnic identity was based on common language , religion , cultural traits , ancestral bonds or biological origins for the formation of " Bishnupuriya " identity or the genuine identity of the people . The origin of their language , religion , culture , history was closely connected to West Bengal which was discovered from the respondents through oral interview .

The Instrumentalist Approach

Instrumentalism / situationalism / circumstantionalism / interactionalism / instrumentalist approach was the first major challenge to primordialism . This theory can also be applied to study the Bishnupuriya identity in the formation of " Bishnupriya Manipuri " identity , a constructed identity for the realisation of certain interests by the political elites and leaders under the guidance of the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha . The creation of the "Bishnupriya Manipuri " identity and affiliation into " Manipuri " identity was mainly to enjoy the benefits provided by the Centre and States in the social , economic and cultural spheres . The ethnic identity was used as a device to conceal their real motive . The Bishnupriya Manipuri identity movement was spearheaded through the language movement and its seven point demands . The constructed identity as Bishnupriya Manipuri recognised by the governments of Assam and Tripura but not yet recognised by Manipur government , language as Bishnupriya Manipuri language , have created repercussions within the Bishnupuriya society and also the Meiteis . It is still now strongly protested by the Meiteis living in Assam and Manipur , and also by the Bishnupuriyas . Most of the respondents (90%) claim that the Bishnupuriyas are not Manipuris *, we have no connection with Manipur historically and linguistically .*

The Constructivist Approach

Philip Q . Yang writes : " Constructionists have advanced three major arguments : First, ethnicity is a socially constructed identity , something that is created . The emphasis of this school on the social construction of ethnicity breeds the label of " constructionist " school . Second , as an extension of constructed identity , ethnic boundaries are flexible or changeable . Ethnicity is dynamic . Lastly , ethnic affiliation or identification is determined or constructed

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by society . Ethnicity is a reaction to changing social environment."[12] The constructivist paradigm shift started from the early 1980's, have completely submerged ethnicity with identity . The main argument of the theory is that ethnic identity is dynamic, a social construct with political and historical forces. The theory has brought about a new theoretical orientation for studying ethnic identities in sociology, history, science, literature and anthropology. The ethnic identity construct of the Bishnupuriyas as Bishnupriya Manipuri shows the application of this approach as it was socially constructed by a few leaders to fulfil their objectives. Secondly, the ethnic boundaries of the ethnic group have accumulated the features of amalgamation, expansion and changed. This can be particularly noticed among the Bishnupuriyas settled in Manipur and Bangladesh. In Manipur, to some extent , the amalgamation process has started but still now there is a division between the indigenous people and these migrants linguistically and culturally .

Conclusion

Thus, the ethnic identity of the Bishnupuriyas has been manipulated and politicised by a group of leaders which has resulted in threats, controversy and identity crisis among the people . The basis of ethnic identity of the community is language . The Bishnupuriya language is originally an Indo –Aryan language of the Eastern group beside Bengali and Assamese . The origin of this language is Bishnupur in West Bengal. But the linguistic

identity have been shifted due to political interests , concealing ethnic and religious identities. In Manipur , their first place of migration , the migrant Bishnupuriyas of Bengal origin have registered themselves as Meeteis or Manipuri speakers in the Census records so that they assimilate with the local population .

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Footnotes

1. The word 'diaspora ' originally taken from the Greek word ' spiro ' means "to sow ". The Greeks used it for migration , colonization and expansion through military conquest . But in modern times , this word is synonymous with " exile , minority , overseas , refugee , expatriate , migrant " and so on .
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8. Based on an interview with Parimal Sinha Bishanpuriya , the co – ordinator of BLDO on 24-3 – 2017 .
9. Sanajaoba , Naorem (edited).: Manipur Past And Present : The Ordeals and Heritage of a Civilization , Mittal Publications , New Delhi , 2005 , taken from the preface/ xix.
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11. Based on an interview with Parimal Sinha Bishanpuriya , chief co – ordinator of TheBishnupuriya Language and Development Organization
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