CHAPTER 4

A HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL SKETCH OF THE BISNUPRIYA MANIPURI COMMUNITY

4.1. INTRODUCTION

The origin of the Bisnupriya Manipuri is shrouded in mystery. But the absence of clear written history or records of the people of any particular region does not signify that those people have only a mute past. The original homeland of the Bisnupriya Manipuri community was Manipur. Manipur has a long past and the culture of its people is very rich, but they till await proper accounting and reproduction in writing catering to the taste of the time. We have to look to the sources for materials relevant to the study.

4.2. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE BISNUPRIYA MANIPURIS

There are different schools of thought regarding the origin of the Bisnupriya Manipuri people. In other words, there are several beliefs about the origin of the Bisnupriya people. The theories as believed by different sections of people are given below. Dr. K.P. Sinha, Ph.D., D.Litt., an eminent scholar, has thrown some light on this belief.

i. The orthodox Bisnupriya holds that Bisnupriya Manipuri people were carried over to Manipur by some immigrants from Dwaraka and Hastinapur just after Kuruksetra war during the Mahābhārata era. It is further said that
these people were led by Babruvāhana, the son of Citrāngadā and Arjuna, who also brought a Viṣṇu image from Hastinapura and installed it in Bishnupur of Manipur.

ii. Some believe that Bisnupriya language was never spoken in Manipur and the Bisnupriya Manipuris are the descendants of those Meitei people who left Manipur and took shelter in Assam, Tripura and Sylhet towards the beginning of the 19th century through inter-marriage with Kacharis, Bengaleese, Assamese etc.

iii. The third legend says that the Bisnupriyas were descendants of sixty-five Bengali families who migrated to Manipur under the leadership of prince Dhanapati Rajkumar known as Kaireng Khullakpa during the reign of king Garib Niwaz (Pamheiba) in the second part of 18th century. They finally merged into Meitei society and started speaking a broken Meitei dialect.

iv. Some of the Bisnupriyas believe that they are from far-east Asia like the other tribes of the region. They migrated from around Thailand when Buddhism started dominating Hinduism. The Bisnu or Viṣṇu statue that was installed in Bishnupur was actually brought by them from Thailand.

v. The last story says that the Bisnupriyas were originally the people belonging to a stock as Indo-Aryan Bengali and Assamese who migrated long back before Meiteis came down from hills and subjugated them.
Now to know the real facts, the above stories have to be analyzed in a critical manner. The first theory cannot be accepted on the following grounds.

First, the story of migration from Dwaraka and Hastinapur does not occur in the *Mahābhārata* or there is no historical evidence to this migration theory. Secondly, there are reasons to doubt whether the present Manipur is that of the Epic. Thirdly, it is not possible for a handful of persons to retain their language for such a long period in the heart of land which was pre-eminently a land of the Tibeto-Burman speakers. Fourthly, the distinctive marks of the Māgadhī Prākṛta found in Bisnupriya dialect and the striking similarities which Bisnupriya Manipuri language shares with Assamese and Bengali could not be explained since the dialect of Dwaraka and Hastinapur dialect during ancient days did not have any relationship with the Māgadhī Prākṛta.

The second theory is totally hollow to deserve any consideration. Firstly, historical documents or works written by both the Indian and the European scholars testify to the existence of Bisnupriya language in Manipur before the twentieth century in a very developed form. *Khunal Purāṇa* by Nabakhendra, *An Account of the Valley Munnipore* by Major Mc Mulloch, *Ethnology of Bengal* by E.T.Dalton, *Linguistic Survey of India* by G.A. Grierson and many other works may be referred to in this connection. Secondly, there are over half a lakh of people living in the valley of Manipur.
who speak Meitei but are Bisnupriyas. Their special features, complexion etc. are also similar to the Bisnupriya people living outside Manipur. These people, even now, hold that their original language was Bisnupriya Manipuri. Thirdly, it is not possible for the speakers of Tibeto-Burman language to adopt an Arayan tongue with such a distinct pronunciation as Bisnupriyas do. Fourthly, this theory cannot account for the uniformity found in the speeches of different groups of these people who took shelter in distant places and in distinct atmosphere outside Manipur.

The third theory can not be accepted on the following grounds: First, the persons from Bengali stock entered Manipur in the middle of the 18th century while there is evidence that the Bisnupriyas left Manipur during the first part of 19th century (between 1806-1829 A.D.) with their fully developed language. It is not possible for a whole community to learn an entirely foreign language within such a short period, specially in the absence of any political or economic pressure. Secondly, it is very difficult for a section of the Meitei speaking people to adopt the phonetic peculiarity so distinctly as Bisnupriyas do. Thirdly, it cannot be explained why some Meitei-speakers should adopt a language quite foreign to them in place of their own mother tongue. Fourthly, it also cannot be explained how the features of Mogoloid-Meitei could change so rapidly into sharp features close to Indo-Aryan groups. Fifthly, the descendants of the so-called Bengali speakers are barely twenty five percent of
the total population of the Bishnupriyas. The rest of the population, according to
the upholders of this theory was originally Meities. But this cannot be
supported, since the facial features, complexion etc. of these people are quite
distinct from those of the Meiteis.

The fourth theory also is completely hollow, since the language of the
features of the Bishnupriya Manipuris does not prove any influence from
Thailand or any Far-Eastern countries.

The fifth theory has some authenticity, but then it is not very clear how
and from where they migrated and so on.

As the language, culture and religion of the Bishnupriya Manipuris
originated or took shape in the soil of Manipur, a brief account of the history
of Manipur as background studies is felt necessary. Like other branches of
Indian history, the work in the construction of the history of Manipur was
begun first by the British Officers who came from time to time and served in
Manipur. Besides this, some royal chronicles called Purāṇas were composed
and in subsequent period some Indian and Manipuris have also written history
of Manipur. According to Jyotirmoy Roy1 Captain R.B. Pemberton, Joint
Commissioner in Manipur may be regarded as pioneer in this field. His report
on The Eastern Frontier of British India 1835 is a mine of information about
Manipur. He was followed by Lt. Col Mc Culloch. He came to Manipur as
Assistant Political Agent in 1855 and held the post until 1867. In the long
period of 27 years he acquired a most intimate knowledge of the state and its inhabitants. He wrote *An Account of the Valley Manipore and of the Hill Tribes* and published it in 1859. Ever since its publication this work has been the chief authority in this subject.

Mc Culloch’s successor Dr. R.Brown published his work *Statistical Account of Manipur* in 1874. Another contribution to the ethnography and history of this state was made by Mr. G.H. Damant, ICS whose papers were published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*. James Johnstone’s work *Mr. Experience in Manipur and the Naga Hills* published in 1896 also gives many valuable facts about the history of Manipur. Fortunately, the work done by some British authors in this field has attracted the attention of the Indian historians also.

Manipur lies on the eastern frontier of India. The present Manipur lies between 23.50 and 25.30 Latitude North and 93.10 and 94.30 Longitude East. It is now very difficult to ascertain the original boundary of the ancient Manipur. The Manipur of today is bounded on the North by series of hills called Nagaland; on the North-East, East-South by Burma; on the South-West, West and North-West by present state of Assam.

In the olden days Manipur was a part of Assam. It has historical evidences. According to Jyotirmoy Roy, “Accounts of Huen Tsang and Kamekshya Tantra refer that Manipur was once a part of the Kingdom of
Kamarupa. Similarly, Mahendra Kr. Singha, a prominent historian of Bisnupriya Manipuri quoting Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya mentions in his book, "Once Kamarupa was over expanded. Karatoya river was its western boundary. modern Assam, Manipur, Jayantiya, Cachar, Mehmansingha, Srihatta, Rongpur, Jalpaiguri etc. belonged to it. As Manipur was under the Kingdom Kamarupa. the Kamarupians also entered to this Island[1].

There were some routes to the hills connecting Manipur with Surma Valley, the Brahmaputra Valley and Kabaw Valley. The hill routes were used by Aryan Colonisers for going to Burma. In this regard, mention has been made by Jyotirmoy Roy and R.K. Jhalajit Singh in their books about the view of Sir James Jhonstones. Jhonstones writes "In the days when the Indian branch of Aryan race was still in its progressive and colonising stage. this district (Manipur) was repeatedly passed over one wave after another of invaders intent on penetrating into the remotest part of Burma". Thus in early times Manipur was one of the gates through which there was cultural flow between India on the one hand and Burma on the other. Enterprising Aryans from other parts of India passed through this gate en route to Burma and beyond. Some of the Aryans settled in Manipur and were absorbed in the local population leaving evidence of their absorption on the physique and culture of the people. The coming of immigrants from different parts of India and other settlement in Manipur was a continuous process. It went on right upto the
closing of the 19th century and is going on even now. Such immigration and settlement of the Aryans took place for the purpose of commercial and religious causes. Hence Mahendra Kr. Singha, a historian of Bisnupriya Manipuri holds that the Vedic Aryans especially the Kṣatriyas who came to Manipur in different times were known as Bisnupriya Manipuri being mingled with the original people. Lairenmayum Iboongohal Singh also holds that the Vedic Aryans, the aboriginals, the easterners and the westerners all mingled up. Subsequently in the historic age many people from the East and many from the West were forced to settle in Manipur as war captives and some were brought by the good kings of Manipur to do the caste duties. Those who came from the west were known as Nongchup Hārām and those from the East as Nongpok Hārām. They were all merged to the Manipuri Community.

It is now historically recognized and universally known that some groups of Aryans passed through Manipur to Burma and some of them reigned and settled in Manipur. The Branch of the Aryans who came to and settled in Manipur was of the Vedic age. L.I. Singh’s opinion that the Manipuri community was made of Aryans and non-Aryans may be correct. As a matter of fact there is no race or community of people in India who are of the purely Aryan blood. If there be any, they must be infinitesimally small.

Besides this, the history of Burma also throws some light on the migration of people from Burma to Manipur and from Manipur to Burma.
There was an influx of the Shans to Manipur in 14th century. As a result of the fighting between Manipur and Burma there was exodus of a large number of people including Manipuris and Burmeses from Manipur and Burma.

Manipuri historians like R.K. Jhalajit Singh, Lairenmayum Iboongohal Singh, Ch. Manihar Singh, K.S. Singh, Dr. S.K. Chatterjee, G.K. Ghosh, etc. have stated that there are seven clans namely-Khamul, Kshumal/Khumal/Kšamul, Moirang, Luwang, Angom, Khabanganba, Sarang Leisangthem (Chenglen) and the Ningthouja (Meitei). The land Manipur was formerly divided into small territories occupied by the different peoples as mentioned above. According to R.K. Jhalajit Singh, "The division of the valley into seven principalities, independent of one another, continued for some centuries." Legends, old texts and chronicles together speak of the rule of 'Hepatarchy' in Manipur before the dawn of history. In 33rd A.D. we find the seven clans firmly established in well defined separate regions of the valley. Each of the seven clans had an independent principality of its own in its well defined region in the valley. He was advised by a council of Nobles. The territories were after the name of respective clans who lived side by side in Manipur for centuries. Though it is difficult to trace precisely the boundaries of the seven principalities after such a long time, but broadly their sites can be located. It can, therefore, be adduced that culture, faith and language did not strictly confine to the political and administrative jurisdiction of each dynasty.
There was struggle for supremacy among the seven principalities. Ultimately the Ningthouja proved the ablest of them all. They gradually annexed the territories of other clans. According to L. Iboongohal Singh, “The Mitaya established its supremacy in the valley since the middle of the 18th century (1769)." Manipur was brought in or about the beginning of 19th century under the sovereignty of one king. As a result more people of the subdued clans merged to Meitei clan using the Meitei language. According to R. K. Jhalajit Singh, “The name Meitei applies to all the seven clans. There has been constant inter marriage among the seven clans for last about two thousand years. A man belonging to any of the seven clans, say the Moirangs, is now as much a Meitei as a man belonging to the Ningthouja clan but the seven clan still exist.”

Among these seven clans the name ‘Meitei’ was applied only to the people belonging to the Ningthouja clan is evident from A Short History of Manipur. In support of this fact, the reference of T.C. Hodson may be mentioned: “The Meiteis and the Ningthouja are identical, although as a matter of fact, the name Meitei is given to the combination rather than to any single unit in it.” On the other hand, it needs mention that Bishnupriya Manipuri Community consisted of five clans, viz., Khumal, Moirang, Iwangs.
Angom and Khabanganba inhabiting five regions of Manipur valley and they were known as Pañca Bīsnupriya or Viṣṇupriyā. Mahendra Kr. Singha, a prominent historian has upheld this view quoting from the Candrāṇava-vatarm of Poana Pañḍit of Manipur, where it is said

\[ kṣamul moirāng o luwāng nāma yār \]

\[ āngom ye khāhāngānhā eī nāma tār \]

\[ sārāŋthen ningthoujā ye eī duī ār \]

\[ sāt nāme sāt vamśa hailo pracār \]

Khumal, Moirang, Luwang, Angom and Khabanganba were all ksatriyas who settled in five regions and ruled over the regions. They were part of the same race i.e. Ārya. They possessed same language and culture and subsequently they came to be known as ‘Pañca Bīsnupriyā’. It is evident that these five clans were so closely connected with each other that marital relationship is prohibited among them. This is clear from the observation of T.C. Hodson: “The Kumuls (Khumal) and the Luangs are in some remote manner connected with the result that they do not intermarry. Angoms were not allowed to marry with Khabanganbas, Moirangs, or Luangs. The Luangs were forbidden to take their wives from among the Kumuls, and the Moirangs were not permitted to marry the Khabanganbas, and one or two families of the Chenglei salci were also forbidden to them”\textsuperscript{14}. They formed the Bīsnupriya Manipuri Community.
From the study of history, it is known that Manipuri community may also be divided into three groups, viz., Meiteis, Lois and Bisnupriyas. These groupings have been mentioned by the writers in history like Mahendra Kr. Singha, G.K. Ghosh etc. The Meiteis are at present the majority and Hinduised. The Lois have been described by T.C. Hodson as the hill people. On the contrary, Mahendra Kr. Singha has stated that the Lois are Aryan-Buddhists. In the ancient period the Bisnupriyas and the Lois had mixed with the Austro-Aryan people like Kol, Ho, Gandharva etc. and also Dravidians who were inhabiting in Manipur. This indication of mixture is found presently in the Bisnupriyas in respect of appearance, culture, language etc. The appearance of the Lois and Bisnupriyas are like the Aryans but that of the Meiteis is like Mongolians.

4.3. ABOUT THE NAME BISNUPRIYA

Different writers describe this ethnic group (Bisnupriyas) in their works with different names. Some call it Bishnupriya or Visnupuria or Manipuri Bisnupriya or Bishnupriya Manipuri, the other refer to it as Khalachai or Mayang Kalisha, Kalisha and so on. There is also a tinge of mystery surrounding the name Bisnupriya. The first mention of Bisnupriya can be traced from the Khumal Purāṇa, where there are several stories about them. The story regarding the name Bisnupriya as found here goes like this: Sāntadās Gosvāmi or Adhikāri belonging to the Vaiṣṇava cult of Rāmaūti School came...
to Manipur from the West during the reign of Garib Niwaj (1714-1748 A.D.) for propagation of his religion by way of initiating the people. Inspired by the teaching of the saint the king embraced the new religion and ordered his subjects to take bath in Nongkhrang lake to purify themselves and accept the new faith. Accordingly all the people of the country assembled on a particular day, had their ablution in the Nongkhrang Lake (known as Nongkhrang Iruppa) and adopted the new faith. But a group of people united under a tributary chief of the Khumal clan (Maimu Chonkhamba) did not follow the king’s instruction on the ground that they were already purified by adopting the Vaiṣṇava faith earlier and needed no purification. Indeed, the influence of the Śankaradeva School of Vaiṣṇavism can still be seen in the Bisnupriyas. The Gosvāmi inquired of Garib Niwaj whether it was a fact. Garib Niwaj admitted it to be a fact. The Khumal king requested the saint to initiate his group into Viṣṇu cult so that they could worship Viṣṇu properly as they were also the worshippers of Viṣṇu. Hearing the words of the Khumal king, Śāntadās Gosvāmi initiated the group of people led by the Khumal king into Viṣṇu cult instead of Rāmauti School. As the Khumals worshipped and respected Viṣṇu more than any other deity, he called them Bisnupriya. And from that time onwards, these people of the Khumal kingdom were known as the ‘Bisnupriyas’ i.e. ‘the darlings of Viṣṇu’ or the beloved of Viṣṇu.17

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Mahendra Kr. Singha, a noted historian of Bishnupriya Manipuri has also referred to this story quoting the reference as found in *Candrāṇavatara* and the *Khumal Purāṇa* translated by Jagadananda Barman. In this context, the present researcher likes to explain the name Bishnupriya Manipuri in a slightly different way.

The word Viṣṇupriya may be expounded in Bahuvrihi like viṣnu priyo yeśām viṣṇupriyā with the suffix *tāp*. Then the meaning will be to whom Viṣṇu is the endearing God. In this community the word ‘Bishnupriya’ is widely used instead of ‘Visnupriya’ as ‘B’ and ‘V’ (ヴァ) are bilabial sounds in Bishnupriya Manipuri language. OIA ‘v’ becomes ‘b’ according to the phonology of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language. The word Bishnupriya is used as an adjective with the word ‘Manipuri’. As the term Manipuri is a word signifying a caste (Jāti), so it is feminine in gender as per grammatical rule of Sanskrit. Hence the word being an adjective of Manipuri is used in feminine gender which is signified by the suffix *tāp* (*strīyām tāp*).

Moreover, Pandit Lankoi Lokhoi, the author of *Manipura- Cakram* (a book in Sanskrit) who was the best politician of the Khumal Kingdom argued for the Ksamul king during the propagation of Ramauti Vaiṣṇavism by Śāntadās Gosvāmi. He narrated the origin of the Bishnupriyas who were inhabiting Bishnupur from the time of Babruvāhana. This fact is described in the *Kṣamul Purāṇa* in the following lines:

\[ \text{rājā kahe śāntadev kari nivedan} / \]
The Puranas of Manipur also trace the royal lineage of Manipur from Babruvahana. The Bisnupriyas believe that they are the descendents of Arjuna, the third Pandava of the Mahabharata. Such identity of them is not baseless as evidences are available in the Mahabharata and the Srimadbhagavat. During the first visit of Arjuna, the Pandava prince, and the hero of the Mahabharata war married Citrangi, the only child of Citravahana. According to description as given in the first canto, only a child would be born in the clan of Citravahana at the blessing of Siva. Accordingly only a daughter was born to him. Citrangi had no brother as Citravahana was sonless. For this reason Citrangi was married to Arjuna as per the rule of
The marriage of Citrangadā to Arjuna according to the rule of putrikāvidhāna is also referred to in the Bhāgavata in verse no. 32 of chapter 22 of ninth Book:

\[
\text{karenumatvam nakulo naramitram tathārjunah} \\
\text{irāvantamulupyaṁ vai sutāyāṁ babhruvāhanam} \\
\text{manipurapateh so'pi tatputra putrikāsutaḥ}
\]

Nakula begot Naramitra through (his second wife) Karenumati and Arjuna begot Irāvān indeed through Ulupī; while through the daughter of the king of Manipura, he begot Babhruvāhana, who though sprung from the loins of Arjuna was recognized as the son of his maternal grandfather i.e. The king of Manipur being a putrikāsuta. According to the Mahābhārata Citrangadā and her son Babhruvāhana professed Vaisnāvism.\(^{23}\)
The people who adopted the 'Nongkhrang Luppa' i.e., the Meiteis became envious of the other group of people (i.e., the Kṣamūl khumal group) who adopted the faith at ease without undergoing the expiation ceremony and proclaimed their separation from them. In this way, the people of Manipur who had been in cordial relationship with one another so long became separated into two groups namely the Meiteis as per their ethnic origin and the Bisnupriyas as per the name offered by the saint to them. This is the tale of the separation of the Meiteis and Bisnupriyas from each other.

The Meiteis took serious concern over the non-adoption of the Nongkhrang Lupp by the Bisnupriyas and began calling the latter as Miyang or Mayang or Miung. The term ‘Mayang’ was used in early Manipuri literary works and chronicles like Chitharol Kumbaba, Khuman Kangleiron etc., which mean ‘other people’. The word ‘Mayang’ thus denotes the Mayang Kalisha or Bisnupriyas settling in the vicinity of Manipur in that early period. According to Ch. Manihar Singh the generic title Mayang was applied to the immigrants- the Hindus having the connotation of persons originating from the west. This view is also shared by E.W. Dun as he asserted the same in Gazetteer of Manipur. “Thus during the reign of Maharaja Gambhir Singh and Maharaja Chourajit Singh, we find the Cheitharol Kumbaba mentioning a particular village generally believed to be the fons et origio of the Bisnupriyas as Mayang”26. But according to Mahendra Kr. Singha Meiteis have possibly
called the Bisnupriyas as *Mātām*”. *Mi* means people and *Yām* means large number. The term *Māvang* is perhaps a twisted form of *Mātām* and it implies that at one time the Bisnupriya Manipuris lived near the lake Loktak in great number. As they had earlier settlement surrounding the Loktak, the Bisnupriya Manipuris used to describe the largeness of something using the term Loktak as simile. Now in Manipuri this word is being used extensively for the people other than Meitei.

In this regard, the observations of Sir G.A. Grierson ICS is notable. According to Grierson, “A tribe known as Mayang speaks a mongrel form of Assamese known by the same name...They are also known as Bisnupriya Manipuris or Kalisha Manipuris. Except for their language the Mayang are indistinguishable from the general Manipuri population and are said to be comparatively numerous among the Manipuri population of Cachar and Sylhet, where their special dialect is still spoken in their homes as well as Meitheis and Bengali......We may, therefore, put the total number of speakers of the dialect at 23,500..... This is just as much case with the speakers of Mayang who are settled in Sylhet, so that it may be taken as certain that they have come there from Manipur, although according to tradition they originally came into Manipur from an Aryan speaking locality” 28.

This report relates to the period after the heavy exodus of the Manipuris from Manipur. Dr. S. K. Chatterjee called the language of the
Bisnupriya Manipuri simply ‘Bisnupuria’ and brought it under the Indo-Aryan speeches of the East. Dr. K.P. Sinha holds that both G.A. Grierson and Dr. S.K. Chatterjee denote this language by the term Mayang which means westerner or foreigner.

During the reign of king Gambhir Singh (1825-1834 A.D.) in the year 1827 A.D. ‘Nugun-Thanga’ or the ceremony of taking sacred thread was held. All Manipuris were invested with the sacred threads (upavīta). The Bisnupriyas had to put on the holy thread (upavīta) by sitting at the verandah of Govindaji’s temple. But the Meiteis put on the holy thread after ablution in Nongkhrang tank. Regarding this fact, the statement of Ch. Manihar Singh is noteworthy. He says, “They got the name Bisnupriya only after Maharaja Gambhir Singh conferred it (Holy Thread) on them along with their admission to the Manipuri Vaiṣṇava Society in saka 1749 i.e. 1827 A.D. And if they have anything to do with Bishnupur the new name of the locality Lamlantong, then it also indicates that they are quite new community or one which acquired its name late. …..The suggestion of their association with this locality is derived from the fact that they are mostly referred to by the British writers as Bisnupriya.

From the above reference this is confirmed that the Khumals got the name Bisnupriyas in 1728 A.D. at the time of their initiations in the Vaishnavism religion from Sāntadāś Gosvāmi and subsequently this was supplemented at
the time of investment of 'holy thread' in 1827 A.D. during the reign of King Gambhir Singh. It has also proved their existence in Manipur.

According to Dr. K.P. Sinha, the name Bisnupriya may be explained in another way. It is said that this people were followers of the Visnu cult from very ancient time. They installed the image of Lord Visnu at a place in Manipur which was given the name 'Bishnupur'. As the culture of these people had its headquarters at this Bishnupur, they were called the Bishnupurias, i.e., the inhabitants of Bishnupur and 'Bishnupriya' is a contracted form of the term 'Bishnupuria'. This tradition is in harmony with the name 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' recorded by G. A. Grierson.

The Bisnupriya Manipuris have been called sometimes as Kalisha and Mayang. Many have attempted to give different interpretation of the word Kalisha. Raj Mohan Nath has maintained that the word Kalisha is a corrupt form of Chinese Kha-la-chais. Khala-chais means children (Cha, chais) of the wide lake (kha-closed water, la-wide). The big lake is called Kha-la by the Chinese. Khalachais refers to the race of people who lived surrounding the Loktak lake. The country of the wide lake was called Mieung-khala which was gradually been transformed into Mekhali or Meckley.

King Khongtekcha (765-799 A.D.) established friendship with the powerful emperor of Kamarupa of Mlechha dynasty. At his request an army of Kamarupa settled in Manipur. These people mixing with the Khala-chais
controlled the affairs of the state for several generations. Their head-quarters were at Vishnupur, so named after the tutelary deity Vishnu. Their language developed into a mixed dialect separate from that prevalent in Manipur. And they were designated by a separate name — 'Vishnupurias' (now pronounced 'Vishnu-priyas') to distinguish them from the Meiteis who came afterwards. This people settled in the valley of the wide Loktak Lake.

In this regard the view of Dr. K.P. Sinha is remarkable. He holds that Kalisha is a combination of two words — Kali (goddess Kāli) and Meitei (beast) meaning beast of the goddess Kāli. There is a hearsay that the Bisnupriya Manipuri sacrificed a 'He-goat' to Kāli and ate its body while the Meiteis ate the head. Hence the Meitei called the Bisnupriya Manipuris 'Kalisha' while the latter called the former 'Ākokśā'. He has also tried to explain it citing a historical event. A group of Bisnupriya Manipuris settled at Khaspur. When Krishna Chandra, a Cachari king married Induprabha, the daughter of Madhudeva, a king of Manipur, this group of Bisnupriya Manipuris accompanied the princess. As Cachari kings were the devotees of Kāli, the group of Bisnupriya Manipuris also became worshippers of Kāli under their impact. On despising this group of Bisnupriya Manipuris as Kalisha, the derogatory sense applies to all Bisnupriya Manipuris due to expansion of meaning (semantic change).
Dr. Sinha holds that the word Kalachaya is formed from the word Kalisha due to folk-etymology, from the Bengali speaker's influence on Kali and Chaya (like the word hāspātāl from hospital). As the complexion of the Bisnupriyas is somewhat dark, the shadow also is dark: the word Kalisha is formed under the impact of these couple of words. The word Kalachaya is a distorted form of Kalachaya.

Dr. K.P. Sinha has criticized the word Khalachai as used by R.M. Nath because it has no reasoning behind it. It is his imaginary explanation. Firstly, the words that he explained are Chinese words. There is no reason behind explaining the word Kalisha with Chinese words. This word was found used for last two hundred to two hundred fifty years. No reason is seen for incoming of Chinese words. Secondly, the word Khalachai has been used by none but Rajmohan Nath. Thirdly, this word is generally used in abusive sense. But there is no hint of despise in this explanation. Involvement of historical or traditional information behind the explanation of a word is needed to be stressed.

But a somewhat different version about the Khalachais is found in Manipur Prachin Itihās. The Nagas called the Bisnupriyas as Khalachais while the Meiteis as ‘khai’. According to the Nagas Khalachais means person who is living on pisciculture. Such ill-reputation of the Bisnupriyas probably originated from the reason of fishing by the Bisnupriya at Loktak lake.
Ch. Manihar Singh has also referred to the word Kalisha as identifying Bishnupriya. The kings in Manipur maintained genealogies of each group of people or family that intermittently entered the valley either from the east or the west and settled there. Likewise the genealogy of the Mayang Kalisha or Bishnupriya Manipuri has been reduced to writing in ‘Kalisharuni’ a part of the ‘Sanggai Phammang’, a momentous work prepared at the instance of Maharaja Gambhir Singh in 1833.

According to him Kāliśās are those darker people with non-Mongoloid appearance and having no knowledge of Manipuri at all. Therefore, it seems to be the most juste of the term. And Kalisha is a corruption of Kalichaiya.

The Tripuris, a branch of Bodo Community in Tripura call the Bishnupriya Manipuri since long as ‘Mekhali Kasam’ and ‘Kalisha’ for their dark complexion. Therefore, the view of Ch. Manihar Singh that the very term Kalisha does not evolve from Manipur itself is reasonable.

Therefore, the present researcher finds it plausible to use Kalachai in the sense of the people of Aryan stock with Indo-Aryan language and religious concept who settled in Manipur in ancient times coming from the west. The Bishnupriya Manipuris are called ‘Nongehuphārām’ people who come from the west. The Bishnupriya Manipuris have never called themselves as Mayang Kalisha or Khalachaya, or Kalachay but as Kṣatriya or Bishnupriya Manipuri or Manipuri Bishnupriya. In this regard the order of the honourable supreme court
of India is noteworthy. The Appex Court of India has given opinion vide case no. C.A. (Civil Appeal) No. (S) 4796-4797 of 2000 State of Manipur vs. Union of India and others dated 08.03.2006 in favour of Government of India to recognize Bisnupriya Manipuri as a Manipuri language.

Almost all scholars like G.A. Grierson, E.T. Dalton, Me Culloch, Padmanth Vidyavinode, R.M. Nath, Jyotirmoy Roy, Dr. M. Kirti Singh, R.K. Jhalajit Singh, M.K. Singha and many others have suggested that the original homeland of the Bisnupriya Manipuris is located in Manipur. In supporting this opinion, observations of Dr. M. Kirti Singh and R.K. Jhalajit Singh are worth mentioning here, as the views of the rest have already been mentioned in the foregoing pages. Dr. M. Kirti Singh asserts “We can broadly classify the people into four groups namely 1. The Manipuris or the Meiteis including the Lois (scheduled tribe) 2. The Bisnupriyas 3. The Hill Men and 4. The Pangans (Manipuri Muslims)”41. The same view is expressed by R.K. Jhalajit Singh. He further mentions that “only some Bisnupriyas live now in Manipur. Most of them live in Cachar and Tripura. Usually, they are more dark-skinned than the Meiteis. Before the Burmese invasions in the 19th century, they lived in the Western part of the Manipur Valley. They fled the country along with other inhabitants at the time of Burmese occupation of the valley and settled like others, in Cachar, Sylhet and Tripura”41.
Bisnupriya Manipuri was originally confined only to the surroundings of the Lake Loktak in Manipur. The principal localities where this language was spoken are now known as Khangabok, Heirok, Mayang Yamphai, Bishnupur, Khunan, Ningthaukhong, Ngakhong, Thamnapokpi and so on. Dr. G.A. Grierson, in 1891 found the existence of a considerable number of speakers in two or three villages near Bisnupur, locally known as Lamangdong. The great majority of speakers of Bisnupriya Manipuri fled away from Manipur and took refuge in Assam, Tripura, Sylhet and Cachar during eighteenth and nineteenth century due to internal conflicts among the princes of Manipur and due to Burmese attack. Now the settlement of the Bisnupriya Manipuri has grown up in the following places:

**Bangladesh**

Among the countries outside India, Bangladesh has the major Bisnupriya Manipuri population. The localities are Sripur, Madhavpur, Tilakpur (Nagar), Kalaraibil, Bhanubil (Banughas), Guramara, Charapathani, Baghbati, Baligaon, Teteigaon, Mahung, Hiramati, Bendaria, Ghanashyampur, Chunarughat, Baram, Majergaon, Baluchar, Lakhat, Rajbari, Machimpur, *(Sylhet city)*, Lamabazar, North Tilakpur or Alipur, Guler Haour, Shimutala, Bamangaon, Gobindabari, Bhandari, Shukkur, Ulla-gaon, Chaygai, Kalibari.
Chaigaon, Fultali, East Tilakpur (Paligo), Digalbhag etc. Besides, there are a considerable number of the Bishnupriya Manipuris living scattered in the local headquarters like Kamalganj, Khuwaighat, Rangamati of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and also at Tezgaon. Manipuri-para of Dacca, the capital city of Bangladesh.

Assam

There are a large number of Bishnupriya Manipuri people settled in Assam for ages, particularly in the districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. This people are counted as one of the major group of people in Cachar and Karimganj districts.

Cachar District

(i). Narsingpur Pargona: The Bishnupriya Manipuri village of the Narsingpur Pargona includes South Bekirpar (Gudamghat or Pambhora) Rengti, Shantipur, Bhatirgram, Khunou, Gossaipur, Ratanpur, Katakhal (East), Katakhal (West), Narnita Nagar (South-East Katakhal), Hingor Haour, Kala Haour, Rakhaltila, Dulalgram and Malugram.


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(iii). **Jatrapur pargona:** Srikona, Machughat or Ngeikhong, Durpatuli, Machiinpur, Aat Dabol, Rajnagar, Bhagoragang, Sridharpur and Dudhpur.

(iv). **Silchar city:** Silchar, the district headquarter of Cachar, Assam witnessed Bishnupriya Manipuri bases at Bishnupur, Vivekananda Road, Jalupara, Police Lane, Reserve, Itkhola, Malugram, Tikorbasti, Ranghirkhari, Ghunghur and other parts of the city. Duwarbond has its Bishnupriya Manipuri people there.

(v). **Bikrampur pargona:** Bikrampur, Lakshmipur, Syedpur, Kalain, Baropuwa or Bhubaneshwar Nagar, Bihara, Tengaragang, Burunga, Longho, Bilorgang, Mohanpur, Sayaran and Dudhpur east and west.

**Hailakandi District**

In Hailakandi district, the population has a root at Hailakandi town, Sonapur, Khunou, Kshumel collectively known as Japirbond, Katakhali (Railway Junction), Nandirgang, Andurgang, a part of Chengooorie and Chungduwar, Chipa Sangom, Santipur, Bhatirgang are included in the Hailakandi district.

**Karimganj District**

Karimganj district of Assam has much more Bishnupriya Manipuri villages than that of Cachar and Hailakandi. The thickly populated laociities of the
district are Garerbond, Algapur, Kukitilla, Ali, Fechuakandi, Amarkhi, Dhalibil, Pechala, Tingari, Betubari, Dullabehara, Subhasnagar, Kamti, Aringtilla, Baskantilla, Awalala, Chamtilia, East Krishnapur, West Krishnapur, Gergaon, Rupa, Fetipat, Butuchera and Vidyanagar at the Dullabehara zone of the district, while Pratapgarh zone of the district has its Bishnupriya Manipuri populated villages of Patherkandi, Rajargang, Paruwagang, Gokila, Kachubari, Unam, Beturbon, Jarala, Katabari, Baithakhal, Lakshmi Mamila, Bhitorkhola, Kanai, Nuwagang, Bazarikhola, Hatikhira, Bilbari, Khambari, Sataralokei, Burunga, Luwarpuwa, Shiborkhol or Shiborgol, Keurgang, Rengti, Seipargang, Souralokey, Mambari, Nalugang, Nalibari, Hingari, Tinokhol, Keurgang, Barkaleigang, Narayanpur and Kholapar etc. Karimganj town, the district headquarters, had also a small Bishnupriya Manipuris population. Nuwa, Pipala, Rangamati, Damehara, Uzan, Bali-Pipala, Ishabeel and Nurkha fall under Rangamati sub-area.

Kamrup District

Guwahati, the capital city of Assam, it has a number of Bishnupriya Manipuri population much more than the Meiteis. They are residing at Maligaon, Sudarshanpur, Tetelia, Hengrabari, Kahlipara, Chailha Nagar, Bamni, Maidan, Beltola, Manipuripara, Rehhabari, Barabari, Dakshinmugaon, Kalapahar, Noonmati, Narengi, Basistha, Tarunnagar, Shaktigarh, Rupnagar.
Azara, Pandu, Mathuranagar, Motoria, Choymile, Raigarh road, Cheristhanbaig, Ganeshguri, Jatia, Nayanpur, South Sharamiya, West Sharamiya, Katiavari, Bakrapara, Hatigarh, Krishnanagar, Panjabari and other places.

**N.C. Hills District**

Hailong town and its adjacent places of N.C. Hills district of Assam has a considerable Bisnupriya Manipuri population.

**Nagaon District**

Laupam is only the Bisnupriya Manipuri populated village.

**Sonitpur District**

In Sonitpur district a village called Majbat (Chatribari) has also a small Bisnupriya Manipuri population.

**Tripura**

In Tripura, the Bisnupriya Manipuris are residing at the following places under Dharmanagar, Kailashahar, Kamalpur, Khowai. Sadar and Bishalgarh Sub-Divisions.

Kailashahar Sub-Division: Bisnupriya Manipuri villages are Nolen, Assambasti, Radhanagar, Krishnanagar (Gandhari tilla), Krishnanagar (Janjhargang), Sripur, Kailashahar town, Paitur Bazar (Padmar-Par), Tilakpur, Guldarpur, North Guldharpur, Choudhurypara, Kirtantali, Vidyanagar, Ishabpur, Mashawli (Tilla), Rajnagar, Banorgang, Kanchanbari, West Kanchanbari, North-East Kanchanbari, Manu, Betchara, East Betchara, Natun Bazar, Kanchanchara, Nepaltilla (Bazar), Indranagar, Bhumihin Colony, Tinghari (Kathalchara), East Kawlikura, West Kawlikura, Bhati Jalai, Uzan Jalai, Jalai, Bilaspur, Pechardahar, Mohanpur, East Fultali, West Fultali, Devipur, Dhanbilash, Jarailtali, Dalugaon and Nayapara.

Kamalpur Sub-Division: Bisnupriya Manipuri populated villages are Abhanga, Bara Lutma, Devichara, East Devichara, Chankap, Bhumihin, Halhali, Lutuma Colony, Jangthum, Tilagaon, Mohanpur, Rupaspur, Guwalmara and Ganganagar.

Khowai Sub-Division: Khas Kalyanpur and Khowai.

Sadar Sub-Division: Radhanagar, Abhoynagar, Dhaleswar, Banamalipur and Bardowali.
**Bishalgarh Sub-Division:** Kasba Colony, Gopinagar, Rangapamyra etc.

Kalkalia.

**Meghalaya**

In Meghalay also Bisnupriya Manipuri population is living scatteredly in the State. The localities are Forest Colony, Pynthorumkhra, Mulkia, Dhanksheti, Laitumkhra, Umpling, Oakland, Police Bazar, Alugudam, Nongthymai, Assam Rifle, Happy Valley, Tura, Langol, Garampani, Nongpoh, Dawki, Cherapunji, Mawsynram, Khleriat, Jowai and Ladymbai.

**Manipur**

The principal localities in Manipur where the Bisnupriyas are seen are Khangabok, Heirok, Mayang Yumphal, Bisnupur, Khunau, Ningthoukhang, Thamapokpi, Kakching, Nachou, Ngiekkhong, Jiribam, Babukhal.

**Foreign Countries**

In Myanmar Thangdut, Mawa Kalewa and Bumuk etc. are the Bisnupriya Manipuri localities. And in the United States of America, Canada, Germany, Middle East and Austria also there are a few Bisnupriya Manipuris recently settled there for livelihood.
4.5. POPULATION

The true population of Bisnupriya Manipuri has not been reflected in the census of India hitherto been conducted. The actual figure or number of Bisnupriya Manipuris has not been recorded. Nikhil Bisnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha, the highest organization of the people came in to being on 10 October 1933 which has been fighting for the cause of this minority ethnic group. It has branches in different states of India and abroad. In its annual conference the population of the people is also discussed inter alia other topics. As per non-official survey the population of the Bisnupriya Manipuris are as follows:-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>2,95,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura</td>
<td>28,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>82,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An attempt has been made by Dr. K.P. Sinha about the population of Bisnupriya Manipuris. The members of the speakers of this language, according to a random sampling held by him in 1966, was about 90,000 in India and about 45,000 in Bangladesh. Besides, there were about 50,000 people in Manipur, about 21,000 in Khangabok-Heirok area, about 22,000 in Ningthoukhang-Bisnupur area, and about 7,000 people here and there who spoke Meitei but were known as Bisnupriyas.

The figure of Bisnupriya Manipuri as per census of India is misleading is clear from the following example:

Bisnupriya Manipuri Population (as per census of India)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1961</th>
<th>1971</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>15169</td>
<td>33591</td>
<td>53812</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Moreover, 2295 numbers of Bisnupriya have been shown as the members under the distribution of growth of non-scheduled languages in the census of 2001 residing in other states of India.

This shows that there is no existence of Bisnupriya Manipuri in 1951 though GA Grierson found in 1891 the existence of a considerable number of Bisnupriya Manipuri population in Assam, Manipur, Tripura, etc.

This riddle is clarified from the report of A.C. Mitra, IAS. Registrar General and Ex-Officio Census Commissioner for India, who has stated on page 76 of the Census of India, 1961 Vol.1 Part 2C (ii) Language table "Meiteis/Manipuri population was shown inclusive of Bisnupriya."345.

4.6. DIVISION OF BISNUPRIYA MANIPURI

The present Bisnupriya Manipuris are divided into two sects viz. (a) Rajargang (Kings village) and (b) Madaigang (Queens village). Ch. Manihar Singh has also referred to the divisions. He writes, "If the present Bisnupriyas are divided into (a) Leimanai and (b) Ningthounai, their presence in Manipur can of course, be noticed at least since the times Garib Niwaj held ensigns of..."
rule (1709-1748 A.D.) for the Cheitharol Kumbaba (P-82) says that on the 12th day of Sajibu (Baisakh), Saka 1656, Moirang Ihananba Yumthangma, took up a course of river in the region of Mayang Leimanai. And the Ningthounai appears when Bhagya Chandra was in power (P-126). On Friday, the 3rd Langban (Aswin, Saka 1705, the Jubaraj (heir apparent) goes to the region of Mayang Ningthounai for hunting tiger. In Bisnupriya Manipuri Ningthounai means Rajargang while Laimanai means Madaigang. An episode on the division of Bisnupriya Manipuri into these two sects is described in Manipur Purāṇa which has been referred to by Nabadwip Sinha, the translator of Khumal Purāṇa. During the time of Srijut Karta Maharaja persons living on the bank of Loktak Lake were called Ningthounai and those living to the east of Loktak Lake were called Leimanai on the ground that they cultivated lands as tenants of the Maharaja. Their land was divided. Moirang and Ningthouna got the land of Loktak Lake and Laimanai got the land of the east of Loktak Lake.

But Bisnupriya Manipuri historian Mahendra Kr Singha has given a different account of the sub divisions of the Bisnupriya Manipuri quoting the history of Manipur. “In course of time the Bisnupriyas segregated into two sects— (a) Rajargang and (b) Madaigng corresponding to the Meitei words Ningthounai and Leimanai respectively. According to this description, once
Maharaja Bhagya Chandra asked, “Where have the subjects of the king lost?”. The people of the land replied, “The people have lost shifted to Assam, Tripura and Mayang land (sylhet and cachar)”. The people who have shifted to other land is known as Leimanai which means the subjects of the other and those who were still in Manipur was known as Ningthoumai among the people of the Meitei king.

From the above description, it is understood that the meaning of *manai* is subject. The meaning of Laima is land, not the princess. The Rajargang is mainly a community of Khumal and Moirang. The kingdom of the above two kings are located at the western part of Manipur valley and at the eastern part of the Luwangs. When the Shans invaded Manipur during the reign of king Bhagya Chandra, the people of the Luwang who were on the side of Manipur-Burma highway had to escape first of all. The Meiteis of those areas also fled away, but came back after the Shans were dispersed. The Bisnupriyas did not return recollecting the persecution of the Meiteis. There were also huge exodous of the people of the Meitei, Khumal and Moirang during the reign of the descendants of king Bhagya Chandra and they took refuge in other lands. Majority of the Meiteis came back to Manipur when the condition was improved but majority of the Bisnupriyas did not return to their own land. As a consequence, the Manipuris including the Meiteis and
Bisnupriyas have setup their settlement outside Manipur. A great majority of the Bisnupriya Manipuris fled from Manipur during the 18th century when the country was in serious turmoil and then during the early part of 19th century when there was the onslaught of Burmese invasion in the land. Now to a small fraction of the people left, it was impossible to retain their mother tongue which was therefore, gradually heading towards extinction and they adopted Meitei language. The matrimonial relationship generally does not take place with other than Bisnupriyas, therefore, they have been able to maintain a state of separateness till today.

4.7. DIALECTS OF THE BISNUPRIYA MANIPURIS

The language spoken by the Bisnupriya Manipuris is called Bisnupriya Manipuri language. Bisnupriya Manipuri is a compound word. Some scholars write this as Bisnu-Priya Manipuri or Bisnu Priya Manipuri. But the present researcher thinks that the hyphen between the words Bisnu and Priya is not necessary. The scholars like, G.A.Grierson, Dr. S.K.Chatterjee, Dr. K.P.Sinha etc. hold that Bisnupriya Manipuri language comes under the group of Indo-Aryan languages. The structure of this language is a proof in this respect. Morphologically languages may be divided into four classes: (a) Isolating (b) Agglutinating (c) Agglutinative Inflectional and (d) Inflectional. Bisnupriya Manipuri belongs to ‘agglutinating’ group of language for its structural
features. An agglutinating language follows generally the style of Sanskrit grammar.

Majority of the words, roots, pronominal forms, conjugational and declensional endings are of Indo-Aryan origin. This language has developed from the Māgadhī Prākrta and ranks with Bengali, Assamese, Oriya and Hindi as conceived by Dr. K.P. Sinha. The main characteristic of the language is its syntax. It is similar to Sanskrit, Bengali, Assamese and Hindi. Agreement or concord, Government and order these are followed in this language like the above languages.

As has already been stated Bisnupriya Manipuri has two dialects, namely (a) Rajargang and (b) Madaigang. From the view point of phonetics Madaigang is more akin to Assamese and Meitei whereas Rajargang is more akin to Bengali, Hindi and Assamese. In respect of vocabulary Madaigang is more influenced by Meitei while Rajargang is more influenced by Bengali, Hindi and Assamese. Morphological differences between these two dialects are negligible. The difference between these dialects is somewhat like that of between American and British English.
4.8. VOCABULARY OF BISMUPIYA MANIPURI

Dr. K.P. Sinha, a pioneer in the linguistic study of Bismupriya Manipuri language has assessed the vocabulary of the language. According to him there are about thirty thousand words. On rough calculation these are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Vocabulary</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tatsama (Sanskrit)</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-tatsama</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tadbhava (words derived from</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanskrit/OIA) found in other languages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi, Bengali, Assemese etc.</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tadbhava (peculiar to BPM)</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meitei</td>
<td>3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perso-Arabic</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deshi and Others</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The language is highly influenced by Sanskrit. Some characteristics of Hinu, some denoting terms of Meitei and a little influence of Bengali and Assamese are incorporated.

4.9. SCRIPT OF BISNUPRIYA MANIPURI

The orthodox Bisnupriya Manipuri claims that they have their own script that is Devanāgarī which was used to write Bisnupriya Manipuri language till 1617 A.D. R.M. Nath is of the view that "Bishnupriya with its Devanāgarī script had been the court language of Manipur and was replaced by king Khagenba". Since Bengali has influenced Bisnupriya Manipuri culturally and linguistically to a great extent, now-a-days they have accepted the Bengali script to express their thought.

4.10. SOCIAL STRUCTURE

(a) Caste: The Bisnupriya Manipuri has only two castes, namely Brāhmaṇa and Kṣatriya. They also follow the Hindu system of gotra which is a type of ancestor worship. The Kṣatriya use ‘Singha’ or ‘Sinha’ as their surname. But the Brāhmaṇas use titles like ‘Sarmah’, ‘Chatterjee’, ‘Banerjee’, ‘Mukherjee’, etc. The clan or lokeis and gotra act as a means of social control by regulating marital alliances and preventing incest. The people are aware of
the Varna system and claim themselves to be Candra Vamsa Chakravartis or Kshatriyas.

(b) Family: The Bisnupriya Manipuri family is usually a monogamous family consisting of a man and his wife. Sometimes one may find two wives, i.e., a polygamous type of family. But they are just exceptions and not the rule. A few extended families also exist. The eldest male member of the family occupies the position of the head of the family. The Bisnupriya Manipuri families are patriarchal. The relationship of untouchability exists between a woman and her husband's elder brother and maternal uncle.

The women have relatively low status in the family. They participate in the economic, social, ritual and political activities and contribute to the household income. Sometimes their opinion may be sought regarding family matters. However, the final decision is always taken by the man.

(c) Dwelling House: A traditionally Bisnupriya Manipuri house faces the east and is built as an oblong structure under one roof. It consists of different sections. On the eastern side there is a large porch locally referred to as Māṇkol (Mangol in Meitei) which is used as parlour. Across the compound there is a long shed 'sāṅg' (sāngoi in Meitei) with a roof and walls on three sides. The 'sāṅg' is like a multipurpose room used by residents for a variety of domestic activities. In between the 'Sāṅg' and the house there is the vaishnavite
(d) Marriage: The Bisnupriya Manipuri considers marriage ceremony as one of the *samskāras*. Adult marriage and monogamy are the marriage norms. Consanguineous marriages are not allowed. Community endogamy is also the norm. Marriages are arranged through negotiations. However, marriage on mutual consent also takes place. The usual marriage is that which is known as *Prajāpati* or *Brāhma* in the *Smrtis*. After the parents have settled the preliminaries, the announcement of the forthcoming marriage takes place. This is followed by offerings of sweatmeats or *heiching* from the bride-groom’s family to the bride’s family. The actual ceremony is held at the bride’s house. A large party assembles and a Hari Kīrtana is held, the bride sitting in front of the bride-groom. Mantras are recited by the priests and the ancestry of the pairs up to the great grand parents is repeated with *goṭra*. The *Śapta Pradaksina* (hepta round) follows. Just as the earth revolves round the sun, the bride goes round the groom seven times ceremonially. On completion of each round, the bride throws flowers on the head of the groom. When the 7th round is over, garlands are placed by the bride on the neck of the groom and then the bride takes her seat by the left side of the groom. Then the groom and
the bride exchange flower garlands. The hands of the bride and the groom are tied up by seven strands or sacred threads placing the bride’s hand on that of the groom. On the hands so tied the ‘dānar kupāng’ (which normally consists of rice, bunch of plaintain fruit bearing even number etc. placed in a flat dish) is placed. All the persons who attend the wedding ceremony make their gifts or presents touching this dish pouring sanctified little water on the head of the groom with blessing. Then the innaphi (upper garment of women) of the bride and chadar (upper garment of men) of the groom are fastened together by the priest Led by the bride, the groom then enters from nuptial place to the house of the bride, where presentation of sweets and betelnuts is made by the relatives of the bride and groom with blessings for their long life and prosperity. Then the couple salutes the domestic deities and also the parents of the bride. After completion of ceremonial formalities the party marches to the bridegroom’s house. There the bride salutes and worships the domestic deities of her husband’s house. With all this traditional formalities being followed, the marriage is over. On the fifth day following the date of marriage there is a feast at the house of bride’s family when the groom is made acquainted with siblings of the bride side with gifts and then the ceremony is complete. There is no system of dowry. The women use vermillion on their forehead and conch-shell bangles as marriage symbols. Marriage is prohibited within the sub-clans or same gotras in Bisnupriya Manipuri.
(c) Dress and Garments: As regards the dress of males, dhuti and punjabi(kurta) were not familiar to the people before the reign of king Gauri Niwaj. Small apparels were used by them in general. After the advent of Sri Caitanya Vaisnnavism, ‘dhuti’ and ‘punjabi’ became the principal dresses of the males. Upto the last quarter of 19th century, the males, like the females, used to put locks of long hair on the head and ear rings in the ears. Towards the beginning of 20th century, this fashion became obsolete. Dhuti and Punjabi have become formal dress which they use during social ceremonies, rites and other festivals. But at home they use ‘iruphi’ which is a cloth about five feet long manufactured by them. The upavita, the sacred thread, is an essential garment of the male, which arches from the left shoulder down to the right waist.

As regards the female dress, upto the first part of 20th century unmarried girls used to wear two pieces of garments. The principal garment was hung from the waist and the second one was worn around the breast known as ‘ya beruni’ (Kanculi in Bengali). For the married women, the principal garment is hung from the breast and another one equally big but finer is hung from the head over the back. Towards the first quarter of 20th century, the ya beruni used by the unmarried girls was replaced by blouse and the married women also began to use blouse in addition. During the forties of 20th century the
unmarried girls also began to use 'cadar' in addition. The ordinary type of garment is called 'Anāluri' or 'lānuri': a single coloured coarse cloth with laces on both sides lengthwise, while the other type of garment, the more gorgeous one is called 'telāphuti' or 'cāksābi' which is also coarse cloth with lengthwise stripes and embroidered on both sides lengthwise.

But now-a-days the male who are young and office goers also wear shirt, coat and trousers, while the girls use saree, shalawar kamiz and the women also wear sarees in addition.

The costumes used in Bisnupriya Manipuri dance is colourful, attractive and richly bedecked. The costumes used in Rāsa dance and Rākhowāl dance (of the boys) deserve to be mentioned. The female dancers use the following

(i) Pallei (potlei in Meitei)− A Rasa costume of Sri Radhika and the Gopis
(ii) Pasual− A short flair of silver gauze over the kumbhir (Kumin in Meitei)
(iii) Konnam (Koknam in Meitei)− A gauze over the head embossed with silver jari.
(iv) Meikhumbi− Transparent and thin veil through over the head.
(v) Thabret− A griddle round the waist
(vi) Khabal−Small rectangular belt over the pasual.
(vii) Leitreng–Golden ring round the head.
(viii) Thakumbi−A white piece of cloth wrapping the breast and belley
(ix) Chura - It is made of peacock feathers, wore on top of the head.

(x) Ghungur - Ornament for foot.

(xi) Feichom-Dhoti is used by male dancer in Rākhuwāl.

(f) Ornaments: The Bisnupriya Manipuri women are fond of different types of ornaments. Of the principal ornaments of women, ‘hekurum’, ‘bhiya’, ‘thapak’ etc. are meant for the neck. These are made of gold or silver with different stones and having several beautiful designs. Besides these, they also use nacika for the nose, jamka or camei for the ear. In addition, they also use several types of wristlets, armlets etc. There are mainly five types of ornaments for Bisnupriya Manipuri women i.e., for fingers, nose, ear, neck and arms. Besides the above, other ornaments are: Anghthi (Ring), Khunam (bangle), Khonanakpi (Necklace), Kanberi (Ear ring), Kathisuri (A type of garland made of golden beads) etc.

(g) Food and Drink: The ancestors of the Bisnupriya Manipuris used to take non-vegetarian food like fish, meat and also vegetables in the ancient times before their conversion to Caitanyaite Vaisnavism i.e. before the middle of the 18th century. Drinking was also familiar to them. Stories relating to eating of meat are handed down through oral tradition. After their conversion to the religion of Sri Caitanya, Bisnupriya Manipuris gave up meat and drinking. Now, their principal food consists of rice, vegetables and fish.
religious and social feasts, however, fish is never used. Majority of the
vegetarians while some eat both live and dried fish, but they do not eat meat. Onion is also avoided. Rice is the staple food. They eat all kinds of pulses, local seasonal vegetables, roots, tubers and fruits. Mustard oil is used as the cooking medium. They take tea and milk. Their dishes are very spicy. They are fond of their traditional items like Irolpa, Paltoy, Chinehri etc. and also of Lonchak (a kind of long bean) which is believed to have medicinal properties acting against gastritis, acidity etc. All spirituous liquor or intoxicants are accursed. As a delicacy they sometimes cook rice inside a hollow bamboo which is called the ‘utongchak’ (u=Bamboo, tong=to cook, chak=cooked rice). Both male and female are inveterate chewers of pan and supari (betel leaves & arecanuts). Men also smoke tobacco.

**(h) Economic Activities:** In earlier periods the main economic activities of the Bisnupriya Manipuris were agriculture and weaving. Though the Bisnupriya Manipuris are of warrior caste, the profession continues to be agriculture though now the educated folk also seek official jobs and some engage themselves in different kinds of business. Most of them practise settled cultivation but a marked occupational mobility has been observed. The landless among them work as daily wage earning labourers or agricultural labourers. They also rear cattle like, cows and buffaloes only for milk and
ploughing land. It is forbidden to keep animals like pigs, hen, duck etc. in the house as these are considered to be unclean.

The agricultural implements used by Bisnupriya Manipuris are the ‘langol’ or plough, Ukei or smooth harrow, Kanci or Sickle, Kadal or spade. Huja or a carrier made of bamboo or wood (to carry harvested paddy in bunch from the field). The agriculture through animal traction has been long back introduced by them. The only production of any importance is rice. Both male and female folk according to their capacity make labour for production of crops. After tilling the land, women help planting rice saplings and harvesting the crop when matured. Women are hard working. In rural areas their main engagement is work in fields.

Weaving is another main occupation of the Bisnupriya Manipuri women. The Bisnupriya Manipuris use a traditional type of loom for weaving. Each and every Bisnupriya woman is a good weaver. Their quality of weaving is superb which consists of classical design and wonderful colour combination. They manufacture different kinds of cloths for their own use and sale. This weaving industry is a good cottage industry from economic point of view.

(i) Tradition and Superstitious beliefs: Like the Meities, the Bisnupriya Manipuris are superstitious. Many superstitious beliefs are current among them. They are superstitious with regard to days and dates for setting
out on journeys in different directions. The following are unlucky days and dates for traveling in different directions.

Monday............................................................... East

Tuesday............................................................. North and East

Wednesday........................................................ North and East

Thursday.......................................................... South and East

Friday.............................................................. West

Saturday.......................................................... North and East

Sunday............................................................. West and South

North-Eastern is a land which is liable to seismic disorders; earthquakes often occur here. When earthquake occurs the Bisnupriya Manipuri people throw some dry fish and rice (ngachak) on the compound of the house in order to propitiate evil force. This belief has been ingrained in them since long past when they lived with the Meities.

Eclipses are believed to be due to the attack of a demon dog upon the sun and the moon.

While erecting the first post (vātrā/Isān in Bisnupriya Manipuri) of a house the Bisnupriya Manipuris believe that it should be erected on a lucky
day irrespective of the fact whether materials are ready or not. The post is bound on the top with a band of cloth over which is tied a wreath of leaves and flowers. The number of bamboo poles used as pillars for the roof must not be equal on the both sides. The Bishnupriya Manipuris believe that if some specific birds like heron, owl etc. sit over the roof of the dwelling house then it is ominous. On such events, the house is sanctified by the Brahmins priest averting any future evil with mantra.

(j) Singlup (Caste Council): The Bishnupriyas generally like to live in cluster or groups. They have high degree of social cohesion and social identity. This is mainly due to the gift of traditional structure. Socio-religious disputes are settled through the traditional caste council which is known as 'singlup'. The self-governing institution is an important factor of their disciplines and unity. The council does not have any office bearers. It is just the village elders who assemble at the mandapa to discuss and settle the disputes. It exercises social control and co-operation of religious rites. This singlup or council also regulates, co-ordinates and co-operates in the performance of rites, festivals like pālā or nata kirtana. kirtana for marriage ceremony, funeral ceremony etc. Every village is organized on the basis of mutual help and co-operation. When a member of the society is dying other members are present at his house day and night for laikal (to guard and do necessities upto the death); when be
dies other members contribute firewood for burning his dead body. Two or three persons watch the house of the deceased at night until Sraddha is performed. They wash and clean places where the last rite or Sraddha is to be performed. The village people contribute in cash and kind to the deceased family for post funeral ceremony.

(k) Festivals: The Bisnupriya Manipuris are Hindu and belong to the Vaisnava sect as has already been mentioned. They perform all the important festivals connected with Hinduism, particularly with the cult of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. There are, however, some peculiarity in the performance of some of these festivals by the Bisnupriyas. One may know about their philosophy, their talent in fine arts and creativity and their society by observing these festivals. The most important festivals of these people are as follows:

(i) The 'Bisu' festival starts from the last day of the Bengali year and continues for five days. On the first day of the festival, cooked eatables are exchanged among the families of the neighbourhood as a token of goodwill. Each family first offers cooked food on a spot properly clean outside the home with frankincense and tambula (betel nut and leaf). This is known as worship of 'lamardou' (Lamlai in Meitei). The principal games played in 'Bisu' are those played with cowries and with 'gilla' - a flat and round piece of horn or wood.
Another equally important festival of the Bisnupriyas is the Kartika festival, which continues for a month from the Lakṣmi Pūrṇimā (full moon day in the month of Asvina) to the ‘Rāsa Pūrṇimā’ (the full moon day of Kartika). During this period, āratis (prayer) are performed gorgeously in the evening and in the morning everyday in temples. Sacred books like Śrimadbhāgavata, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata are recited and explained in every Mandana in the evening. Moreover, at this time, competitions of dance with dhols or drums, ‘Jhals’ (big cymbals) etc. are held almost everyday. These cultural competitions are called ‘Kartikar Phangna’.

‘Rathayātra’ or car festival of Lord Jagannātha is another important festival performed with great enthusiasm for nine days. On the first and last days of the festival, Chariot procession with the idols of Lord Jagannātha, Lord Balarāma and Goddess Subhadra is taken out. In every evening of this period of nine days devotional songs, particularly those from Jayadeva’s ‘Gītāgovinda’ are sung along with dancing by the people in the Mandapas. Feasts consisting of ‘khechuri’ (medley) are given everyday by the people by turns.

‘Phāguvā’ or Holi-festival is performed by the Bisnupriyas with great jubilation during the month of March. The festival is enjoyed not only in the memory of Spring festival of Lord Kṛṣṇa but also as birthday of Śrī Caitanya.
On the first day of the festival, sheds are constructed in the open fields with poles of flags raised in every house. In the evening of the day, the idols of Gourânga are placed in those sheds and āratis are offered to him. Afterward, the sheds are put into fire. From the second to the fourth day, groups of persons irrespective of age, sex or rank collect alms which are utilized for religious purposes. During these four days, boys and girls play together openly with phâguva or holy powder.

(i) Fine arts:

(i). Râsalilâ: It is the epitome of Manipuri classical dance. It is linked with thematic concept of Râdhâ-Krṣṇa episodes as depicted in Bhâgavata. The performance of Râsalilâ dance is the superb synthesis of the essence of art and religion. Râsa dance is performed consisting of aṣṭagopîs (eight mates) or sôdaśagopîs (sixteen mates). In all cases one Râdhâ and one Krṣṇa role by dancers is essential. Râsalilâ is pre-eminently a dance by the females in the costumes of gopîs. The Bisnupriya Manipuris perform Râsalilâ in mandapa in front of the temple and is considered as reverence to the deity. Râsa performances are seasonal and usually take place in autumnal full moon (śârada pûrṇimā) and vernal full moon (vasanta pûrṇimā) nights in serene atmosphere. This is a dramatic performance with singing and dancing in a circular way. Râsalilâ starts initially with the dance of Vrûndâdevî.
Pic.1:- Vṛṇḍadevī dances illuminating the Rāsa maṇḍala.

Pic.2:- A scene of Bisnupriya Manipuri Rasalīlā dance.
(ii). Rakhowal: This is modelled on the life of Kṛṣṇa and are performed mainly by the boys in the costume of the gopālas (cowherds). It is a group dance by a group of boys with colourful dresses and ornaments. The theme of the dance is taken from the Bhāgavata where Lord dances with his mates. It is Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s game in association with pastoral boys. The highly stylised form of dance has sublimity, subtlety and grandeur.

![Pic.3:- A scene of Rakhowal dance.](image)

These are some of the cultural events which denote the keen interest of the Bisnupriyas for fine arts.

(m) Musical instrument: The peculiarity of the Bisnupriya Manipuri is that all musical instrument are only played or used in devotional songs. In the
Nātā Kirtana, Kartān (small size cymbals), dāk or Mṛdanga (cylindrical drum), maipung (conch-shell), Jhāl (big size cymbal), Shelpong (trombone), Jaydulak (big size drum) etc. are played in the evening and in the morning while performing ārati (prayer) in front of the temple. The Bisnupriya Manipuri is expert in classical dances in which the instruments are central part of the dance rather than a side accompaniment. The main musical instruments in dance are Kartān (cymbal), mañjirā (mini cymbal), dāk (Drum) etc. The instruments themselves are objects of veneration. Mañjirā (tiny round size cymbal) is used by the female specially in Rāsa Dance, Khupā-Khusi and other cultural programs.

(n) Pregnancy and child birth: The Bisnupriya Manipuris follow some rules for pregnancy and child birth. In Bisnupriya Manipuri the ‘hādā’ ritual is performed at the ninth month of pregnancy. The pregnant mother is entertained with a special feast consisting of the preparations she likes most. The elders bless her for having a trouble free delivery. After child birth a practice called ḫedāṇi (means basking the fire) which requires that the mother be placed for some days near a fire is adopted. The goal appears to be protecting the mother from evil influences. But actually has some therapeutic value. On the sixth day after child birth Saṣṭhī pūjā is observed. A Brahmin priest conducts the rituals. Naming ceremony is also done along with this pūjā. Moreover the
maternal uncle shoots arrows on all directions in order to check the evil spirit on the neo natorium.

The new born baby and its mother have to observe a month long pollution period called 'ghar mānami' (aśaeca) in Bisnupriya Manipur. During this period the mother and the child have to live in seclusion in a room called 'chāpakpā ghar' (labour room). The end of the period is marked with a purification bath for both. The head of the new born baby is shaved by a barber. On the same day 'ghar seispā' (sanctity of home) ritual is performed to wash out the profanity that occurs in the event of child birth. This is also known as 'jananāśauca'. Thereafter the horoscope of the child is drawn up.

When the baby is 6th month old, the Annaprāśana (first feed of rice) ceremony is observed. The boys have to wear upavīta (sacred thread) on attaining puberty. Conferring of sacred thread is conducted by the kulapurohita (family priest) on an auspicious day. But the girls do not have to wear such sacred threads though they are given āksā like the boys.

(o) Death and disposal of the dead: Throughout the history and in every human society, the disposal of the dead has been given special significance. The Bisnupriyas Manipuris cremate their dead. Immediately after death or little earlier than the actual death of the person, the person is laid on
banana leaf near the *tulsi pong* (basil rostrum) at the yard placing the head towards the northern direction where the dead rests for a while before taking to the pyre (*Koo* in Bisnupriya Manipuri). Pieces of sacred threads are thrown from the yard to the pyre while the dead is being taken. This is considered to be the way for tracing the previous abode of the dead. The body is given a ritual bath and dressed in the reverse order of the living world before taking to the cremation ground. *Pinda* (ball of food made of powdered rice) and water are offered to the deceased with the assistance of a Brahmin priest chanting Mantras. Thereafter, the dead body is carried to the cremation ground on a bier (*Kai* in Bisnupriya Manipuri language) accompanied by funeral song as homage to the supreme God playing musical instruments like simple cymbal and drums. The pyre is framed with six poles which are the symbols of *Sad Gosvāmis* (Six Vaiṣṇavite Gosvāmis of Vṛndāvana) hanging a canopy above. The canopy hangs above the position of the navel of the dead body. The body is then placed on the pyre. The eldest son acts as the chief mourner and lights the pyre at the mouth cavity of the dead after going round dead body for seven times pouring water each time. On completion of the burning, the people who attend the cremation take bath and are sanctified by touching the cow-dung, iron and tulasī water. The frontal bone is taken out at the time of cremation and preserved and afterwards immersed in water bodies. Primarily, this is kept inside a hollow bamboo closing its mouth and placed under water
in ponds etc. and brought out on the day of ‘asthi-saṅcayani’ after ceremonial sanctification by the priest. The “chief mourner” is called ‘kirā-dhāri’. The canopy also is burnt in the pyre ultimately but a piece of it is kept apart to wrap the sickle which is held by the ‘kirā-dhāri’. There is a practice of constant holding of ‘iron sickle’ by the ‘kirā-dhāri’ throughout the period of asāra (pollution) which ends on the 12th day since death. This sickle is considered to be guarding weapon against evil spirits or the pretāmā. The ‘kirā-dhāri’ also remains untouchable to others during the pollution period. The mourning period lasts for eleven days. Twelveth day is the day of purification (Gharsenpā in Bispensiya Manipuri). The barber comes and shaves the heads of all junior members of the dead and pares the nails of the siblings also. The ‘kirā-dhāri’ hands over the sickle to the barber. For the first three or five days the sons of the deceased can only take milk and water. After performing the asthisāṅcayani or chaturthapūraka ritual on the third or fourth day since the death they are allowed to eat Havisyāma (boil sun-dried rice with clarified butter). From this day onwards holy books like The Mahābhārata, The Gītā, The Rāmāyana etc. are read daily in the evening in the house of the dead up to the twelfth day. The villagers or neighbours attend the ‘pāthas’ (the reciting of holy books) giving company to the family of the dead. This is a good system in this community and it helps to dispel the grief or bereavement of the family. On the southern side of the yard a ‘Delta’ like shape has to be made of clay or
which ‘pinda’ (ball of food) is to be offered by the ‘kīrā-saṅhār’ since the day of asthi-saṅchayini or the day of first pūraka (pūraka in Bispupriya Manipuri language) ceremony twice daily in the noon and in the evening to the departed soul calling forth with mantras up to the day of ghar seīpā.

Srāddha (funeral ritual) takes place on the last day of the mourning period at the village Maṇḍapa. All the relatives and villagers are invited on the occasion. After the Srāddha ritual ‘Kīrtana’ is recited by a traditional cultural troop with musical instruments so that the deceased soul may rest in peace.

In case of unnatural death which this society of Bispupriya Manipuri abhors, there is the observance of a rite called ‘suksā’ (chupsaba in Meitei). Death by accident, death by committing suicide, death by drowning, death by burning, death caused by lightning etc. are considered sinful and unnatural. In such cases, the dead body is not burnt but floated in river. ‘Suksā’ is conducted for them by a ‘Maipā’. This is done with due offerings so that such undesirable deaths do not occur in the clan in future. But now-a-days the dead bodies of un-natural death cases are also burnt.

The Bispupriya Manipuris are reputed to be a highly conservative race devoted to strict Vedic culture and tradition and have still now retained their culture without the least deviation. The social discipline and ideas are even now very rigid. They have high social orderliness and a rigid structure of the
social discipline. Even in the 21st century, the Bishnupriya Manipuri people cannot dream of polygamy and intercaste marriage. Such cultured community is rarely found in the world now-a-days, though the number of people of this community is very negligible because of the strictness of their social order.

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