INTRODUCTION

1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

The Manipuris are divided into two parts namely the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas. The Bishnupriya Manipuris claim themselves as the aborigins of Manipur. The present study is on the Bishnupriya Manipuris who are now spread over the wider areas in the region. Many eminent writers have supported this claim of the Bishnupriya Manipuris on the question of their origin by pointing out to the fact that their original homeland was the plain portion of Manipur Valley. The famed Loktak lake is located within the valley.

Raj Mohan Nath in his book “The Background of Assamese Culture” stated “it is quite probable that Khala Chais were the first cultured race in possession of the Manipur valley and they were connected more with the neighbouring kingdom of Kamrupa than other countries and that is why their language is more akin to Kamrupi. It is also likely that in very early times they were influenced by the Vishnu-cult, either from Kamrupa or other parts of India and they named their capital town Vishnupur. The Meiteis were the later immigrants. They were more akin to the Chinese or Thais and their language and habits are more Mongolian”.

E.T. Dalton in his book “Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal” at page 48 & 49 stated “present population of Manipur includes a tribe called “Meyang” who speaks a language of Sanskrit. The valley was at first occupied by several tribes namely Khumal, Luang, Moirang and Meitheis” (also spelt Meiteis).

M. Kirti Singh in his book “Religious Developments in Manipur in the 18th and the 19th centuries” at page 17 said “The Mongolian feature is predominant in Manipur. It is also certain that there has been a large
infusion of the Aryans among them. There are some predominantly of Aryans”.

At page 20 of the same book, Singh also stated “Among the Kshatriyas there is a community known as Vishnupriya Manipuris. They are more dark skinned than the pure Meitheis”.

G.A. Grierson in his linguistic survey of India observed, “the state of Manipur is very polyglot tract of the country. The principal language is Meithei but a number of other Tibeto Burman dialects are also spoken. A tribe known as Mayang speaks a mongrel form of Assamese known by the same name. The number of speakers is estimated at about 1,000. Except for their language, the Mayangs are indistinguishable from the general Manipuri population. All of them can speak Meithei. They are also known as “Bishnupriya Manipuris” or “Khalisa Manipuris” and are said to be comparatively numerous among the general Manipuri population of Cachar and Sylhet where their special dialect is still spoken in their homes as well as Meithei and Bengali. Probably 3/4th (22,500) of the supposed speakers of Meitei in Sylhet really speak Mayang (also spelt Meyang). We may therefore put the total number of speakers of the dialect at 23,500.’

The Imphal Valley experienced a new situation of state building when the new vaishnavite faith was brought to the court of Manipur through an enterprising evangelist Santa Das and the king accepted him with respects. The new religion heralded in a culture embracing the Mongolian and the Sanskrit inputs and it was a composite culture nurtured by the court. The Sanskrit group speaking dialects akin to Bengali were accommodated in the kingdom and were given shelter in the locality called Bishnupur in the Imphal Valley. Probably, it was the largest concentration of the Sanskrit group. The formation of the composite Manipuri culture derived from such associations took a firm shape through at the last three centuries. Though both the groups
mingled freely in the common cultural exercises, they kept their separate identities which after some centuries, still carry their own group identities. The very word Manipur, being a geographical expression, probably came from the court’s decree. The Kingdom attained the name Manipur which is carried through even though the kingdom was abolished long ago.

V.C. Allen in his book “Assam District Gazette” in the Chapter IX stated that according to McCullock there is a strong belief traditionally held that the valley was originally occupied by several tribes, namely the Khumal, the Luang, the Moirang and the Meithei, all of whom came from different quarters and among them the Khumals were the most powerful. The Moirangs were also powerful. But ultimately, it was the Meiteis who subdued all other tribes and under their rule, all the tribes merged to form a single people.

It may be mentioned here that the Bishnupriya Manipuris are divided into five clans namely Khumal, Moirang, Angom, Luang and Mongang in five regions of the Manipur valley and they were collectively known as “Pancha Bishnupriya”. Padmanath Vidyavinod in his criticism of the book “Gait’s History of Assam” published in 1908 said that “there is an Aryan dialect called “Mayang”, still spoken in Manipur, the head quarters of which are two or three plain villages near Vishnupur-the number of people in Manipur speaking this dialect is at present about 10,000.”

In this connection, it should be pointed out that from the very early stage, Bishnupriya Manipuri people have been known as ‘Mayang’ or “Kalisa Manipuris” or “Kala chaiya”. It is mentioned that S.K. Chatterjee, Asstt. Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner for linguistic minorities in India communicated to the Government of Assam, through an order dated May 22, 1981, the acceptance of the nomenclature “Bishnupriya Manipuri” by the Central Government and
instructed the Government of Assam to consider this view. The text of
the order reads thus'----'

In the state of Assam, the Assam Backward Classes
Commission was empowered to examine a complaint relating to non-
inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri in serial 13 of the list ‘other backward
classes’ as notified in the Government of Assam’s order dated
27.11.75. This order was challenged in the court of the Assam
Backward Classes Commission by several organisations, the Manipuri
Language Protection Committee, the United Manipuri Organisation,
the All Assam Manipuri Students Union and the All Assam Women
Welfare Association. In response to the complaints of the above
mentioned organisations, the Assam Backward Classes Commission
deliberated on the issue afresh where the representatives of both the
groups put forward their arguments for and against the order. But the
Commission reiterated in the end their previous stand through another
communication dated 29.9.95 in case no 1/94 and recommended that
serial 13 of the ‘Other Backward Classes’ list be amended so as to
include Bishnupriya Manipuri as part of the Manipuri Community.
Justice S Haque, the Chairperson of the Assam Backward Classes
Commission made the following comment in course of awarding the
status to the community ‘--- the position thus stands that the different
clans of the Mongoloid people and the Mayangs / Bishnupriyas lived
side by side in Manipur for centuries before 15th century. The Meitei
language was formed after 15th century. The Bishnupriya language
was formed towards the 15th century AD, both on the soil of Manipur.
Though the kingdom gave shelter to both the languages in the court,
the Meitei language acquired primacy. The Bishnupriya Manipuri, by
its grammar and diction, is clearly close to the Sanskritic group,
opposite to the Meitei which is Mongolian. The word ‘Manipuri’ came
into use in all probability, after this period, i.e. towards the 17th century
when the land was on way to full Aryanisation. Therefore, the terms
‘Manipur’ and ‘Manipuri’ have been in use by both the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas commonly with equal right to them and practically the people of both the groups used these two terms ‘Manipur’ and ‘Manipuris’ without any reservation to identify their land and themselves respectively. In Assam, since long past, both the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas had common recognition and identity as ‘Manipur’ without any reservation and they have been maintaining their recognition /identity as such for all practical purposes. But the Meitei section of people follow their language identifying as ‘Manipuri’ language whereas the Bishnupriya section of the people follow their language identifying as “Bishnupriya Manipuri” language. On the basis of the said recommendation of the Assam Backward Classes Commission, the Department of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes, Government of Assam, issued a corrigendum no TAD/ONC/92/91/Pt/3 dated 10.3.96 to serial 13 of the list as notified by the notification dated 27.11.75 stating that serial would read as follows:-

“Manipuri including Bishnupriya Manipuris, Manipuri Brahmins and Manipuri Muslims”.

Challenging the nomenclature “Bishnupriya Manipuri” as declared by the Assam Backward Classes Commission, a suit was filed on the Gauhati High Court by K. Kumardhan Singha of Lakshipur, Cachar, who belongs to the Meitei Manipuri Community.

The petitioner argued that the word ‘Manipuri’ should not be used as prefix or suffix with Bishnupriya. Here it should be mentioned that on the basis of the judgement of the Supreme Court of India in Indra Swahay Vs Union of India given on 16.11.92, the National Commission for Backward Classes was formed in 1993 to examine the requests for inclusion of any class of citizens as a backward class in the list and hear complaints of over inclusion or under inclusion of any
backward class in such list and tender such advice to the Central Government as it deemed appropriate. Similarly in the state of Assam, the Assam Backward Classes Commission was formed by Assam Backward Classes Commission Act, 1993 to examine the requests for inclusion of any class or classes of citizens as backward in the list and hear complaints of over inclusion of or under inclusion of any backward class in such list and tender such advice to the government as it deemed appropriate.

The Preamble of the Impugned Assam Act, 1993 which is to the following effect – “Whereas it is expedient to provide for the constitution of a commission for backward classes other than the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes to streamline and rationalise the procedure for inclusion or over inclusion of any class or classes of citizens in the list of backward classes including more other backward classes to provide reservation of vacancies in services and posts of the members of socially and economically backward sections of the society and for a matter connected therewith or incidental thereto.”

Mr. Pachu Gopal Barua, the learned Advocate General of the state of Assam, argued that the Assam Backward Classes Commission Act, 1993, which made the provision for composition of the Assam Backward Classes Commission, was implemented to grant reservation for backward classes in the public services of the state and the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community was also enlisted as a backward class of the state. According to Mr. Barua, the learned Advocate General, the impugned Assam Act is really an Act made by the state legislature in exercise of its power and entry – 41 of list – II read with entry 45 of list – III of the seventh schedule to the constitution and cannot be held to be ultravires.

The Gauhati High Court on the basis of the recommendation of Assam Backward Classes Commission directed that Bishnupriya
Manipuri will be included in the list of other backward classes as notified by the notification dated 27.11.75 of the Government of Assam under a serial separate from serial 13 of the said list for the purpose of reservation in public services in the state of Assam under Article 16 (ii) of the constitution. The Gauhati High Court approved this community as Other Backward Class by the judgement issued on 9.11.99 under Civil Rule No. 346/96.

Challenging the judgement of the Gauhati High Court, a civil appeal was made by K. Kumardhan Singha and the state of Manipur to the Supreme Court of India vide Civil Appeal Nos. 4796, 4797/2000 and Civil Appeal Nos. 4798 / 4799 / 4800/ 4801/ 2000. The appeals were referred to the court No. 2 of the Supreme Court of India under the judgements of Justice Ruma Paul and Justice Dalveer Bandar.

The Judges in their judgements dated on March 8, 2006 decreed that Civil Appeal Nos. 4796-4797/2000 and C.A. No. 4798/2000 are dismissed as withdrawn. Regarding C.A. Nos. 4799/2000 4800/2000, 4801/2000, the judges found no reason to interfere with the order under challenge. These appeals are accordingly dismissed.

Internal conflicts among the princes of Manipur and repeated Burmese invasion during the 19th century on Manipur had compelled a large number of the Bishnupriya Manipuris to leave their homeland and to migrate to Cachar, Tripura and Sylhet now in Bangladesh. Now a large number of Bishnupriya Manipuri people are settled at Patharkandi, Dullavcherra, Anipur, and Ratabari of the Karimganj district, Nityanandapur of the Hailakandi district and also at Meherpur, Narsingpur, Kalain and Bikrampur of the Cachar district.

Moreover by virtue of Government service and business, many Bishnupriya Manipuri people are now settled in Guwahati, Haflong, Diphu and many other places of Assam and North Eastern region and
they are scattered throughout the state. In Tripura Bishnupriya Manipuri people are settled at various places such as Dharmanagar, Kailashahar, Kamalpur, Kumarghat and Bishalgarh. In Bangladesh, a large number of Bishnupriya Manipuri people inhabit mainly in Sylhet and Bhanubil pargana maintaining their social existence.

To know the present population strength of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha with its headquarters at Silchar, conducted a self-census operation in Assam, Tripura and also in Bangladesh in 2005. According to this self-census report, the Bishnupriya Manipuri population in Assam is 1,43,712 in Tripura is 1,10,256 and in Bangladesh is 1,25,160. The number is an approximate figure. The geographical maps of the Barak Valley of Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh are exhibited in order to know the residential areas of the Bishnupriya Manipuri people through the indication of the mark - ©

This community gradually came to terms with itself in the context of the changes they faced after the independence. The societies, which live around them, too faced socio-political convulsions which affected the smaller communities directly and indirectly. A gradual growth of awareness of their existence in the socio-political environment gripped them and they began to organise themselves properly. With the rise of education, the people began to take part in the social development maintaining close liaison with other communities.

1.1 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE:

For a small community as such the Bishnupriya Manipuris, the literature bearing the historical and political values are small but my endeavours are always to collect information from disparate sources with reference to the community. As a researcher, I have gone through these literatures including books, monograms, articles, research
MAP OF BARAK VALLEY OF ASSAM

BISHNUPRIYA MANIPURI INHABITED AREAS
papers, commentaries etc. of renowned authors and researchers in order to have an in depth understanding of the research question. A brief sampling of the above mentioned exercise is produced below with credible reference.

Krishna Mohan Singha of the Meitei group in the monthly magazine 'Yakairol' Imphal, 1933 said “To speak the truth, there is no language in existence as Manipuri. There are two languages in vogue, one is the Meitei language and the other is the Bishnupriya language”. R.N. Acharya in his book “Manipur in the eyes of foreign historians” said “Khalachai refers to the race of people who lived in the plain portion of Manipur.”

Arthur Paliot in his book “History of China” stated that the Chinese invaded Manipur in about 700 A.D. and won over the war. They called the Manipuris as Khalachais or sons of the wide lake ‘Loktak’ and described them as highly civilized.

Mohendra Kumar Singha in his book “Manipurer Prachin Itihas” said that Meiteis have possibly termed Bishnupriyas as Miyam-Mi-people and Yam-large number.

W. Ibohal Singh in his book “The History of Manipur” said that the dialect of the Vishnupriyas clearly belongs to the Indo- Aryan group of languages and has similarity with the Bengali, Oriya and Assamese. It also contains words of Manipuri origin. Grierson, the famed linguist, used the term ‘Khalachaiya’ and some scholars think that it is derived from the words ‘Khe-la-Chai’ where the words Khe-La-Chai- means Lake wide children indicating ‘Khalachaiyas’ were the inhabitants of the great Loktak Lake.

Sipra Sen in her book “Tribes and Castes of Manipur’ said that the Bishnupriya or the Bishnupuria are of exogamous origin. The ancestors of the present day Bishnupriyas had colonised the central
part of the valley in the first century AD and occupied the marshy less fertile lowlands around the lake Loktak. The average village population of Bishnupriya village is higher than that of the Meithei village. Sudhanghsu Sekhar Dutta in his article “Cacharer Kayekti Apradhan Bhasha (Some minor languages of Cachar)” said that the Bishnupriya Manipuri language is the largest language among other minor languages of the Cachar or Barak valley on the basis of the number of population. Kaliprasad Sinha in his book “Bishnupriya Manipuri Dui Shatabdi” (Two centuries of the Bishnupriya Manipuris) explained the general socio-cultural picture of the Bishnupriya Manipuris in the 19th and 20th century.


Haridas Sinha in his book “Geetiswami Gokulanandar Jibani Baro Korpek: Vol-I” explained the role of the Bishnupriya Manipuri
minstrel poet, Gokulananda Geetiswami who mainly evoked social consciousness of the Bishnupriya Manipuris and advocated women empowerment. Geetiswami was the title given to him for his contribution to the society. He was an itinerant ballad singer similar to the fame of Mukunda Das in Bengal.

These comments coming from different authors gave the clear indications that the community existed for centuries as a distinct entity, which was disturbed under compelling historical circumstances. Their current socio-political consciousness is circumstance induced. The ferment within the community before and after the independence of our country are recorded in such books, monographs and commentaries.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH:

Research on “Evolution of Socio-Political Consciousness Among the Bishnupriya Manipuris of Assam Since 20th Century” has been undertaken with a view to fulfill certain objectives. These are:

i. To record systematically the process of evolution of the Bishnupriya Manipuri as a distinct social group since 20th century.

ii. To produce evidences and records of social and political events concerning this community for deeper understanding and appreciation of their problems.

iii. To identify the role of this community in the political struggle before and after Independence.

1.3 METHODOLOGY:

I have undertaken with the help of following methodology

a. Questionnaire method through which the current opinions of the cross sections of the population shall be helpful.
b. Historical method shall help us in finding out the origin and development of the community as a socio-political entity.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The study will respond to the following questions:

a. How did the position of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community establish in the larger socio-political environment in the state?

b. How did this community respond to the challenges faced by it in the contemporary period?

1.5 CHAPTERISATION:

The community consciousness and the mental trait are directly influenced by the material conditions in which the community lives. Their social and political functions exhibit responses to the challenges the community face from time to time. The scope of the study will try to find out the gradual unfolding of an ethnic group which brought it into the present day.

This work “Evolution of Socio Political Consciousness Among the Bishnupriya Manipuris of Assam since 20th Century” will be explained by the following chapters.

1. Social consciousness
2. Economic consciousness
3. Literary & Linguistic consciousness
4. Religious & Cultural consciousness and
5. Political consciousness