

Sanamahi Religion and Its Inclusion in India's Census Enumeration

Achom Roshan Kumar^{1*}

^{1*}Associate Professor Department of Sociology G.P. Women's College, D. M. University, Imphal Email: rkachom@gmail.com

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The more than a century-old census activities in the country still failed to include and recognise ancient religion such as Sanamahi in Manipur that predated the emergence of Hinduism in the 18th Century. This article explores the origin and features of Sanamahi religion, Meetei cultural identity, and the rationales for the inclusion of Sanamahi religion in the Census enumeration of India as a distinct religious category. Drawing from traditional manuscripts, scholarly works, and articles, this paper examines the reasons why Sanamahi religion should not be accorded recognition. As India is moving towards more inclusive governance, it is high time that indigenous faiths all over the country should not be overlooked or culturally marginalised. Keywords: Sanamahism, Cultural marginalisation, Census, Religious category.

Introduction

The first modern census operations in India began in 1881 during the colonial period, which clearly revealed the demographic, economic, and social characteristics of the then British India. The census in India is not simply a statistical exercise, but also a process that classifies India's demographic composition along linguistic, religious, and cultural dimensions. Religion has been consistently used as a category in India's census operations since the beginning, both as a demographic indicator and as a reflection of the pluralistic heritage (Bhagat, 2013). The use of religion as a category in census operations is important, as it highlights issues related to minority rights, cultural preservation, policy planning, and socio-political discourses (Kurien, 2007). Nevertheless, the issue of under-representation or mis-representation of indigenous faiths in India's census activities continues.

In the list of such indigenous faiths, Sanamahi or Sanamahism is one such religious faith that is considered one of the oldest, followed by the Meeteis of Manipur state in Northeast India (Hodson, 1908; Parratt, 1980). Despite the historical continuity, long-standing and living tradition, and growing recognition among the scholarly community, this age-old indigenous faith is still not enumerated as a distinct religious category in India's census operations. The followers of Sanamahi religion are required to register themselves under the categories of "Hindu", "Others" or simply "Not Stated", which leads to an inaccurate portrayal of their religious identity (Census of India, 2011).

This paper argues that India's census operations should include Sanamahi religion as a separate religious category. The study is based on library research, particularly drawing on secondary sources such as census data, historical texts, government reports, newspapers etc. The study aims to examine the major features of Sanamahi religion, cultural identity of the Meeteis, and the rationale for the recognition and inclusion of Sanamahi religion in Indian census.

Manipur and the Meetei Community

Manipur is located in the northeastern corner of India bordering Myanmar. The state has approximately 2.856 million people, which include various ethnic tribes such as Meeteis, Nagas, Kukis, Pangals (Meetei Muslims), and other smaller tribes (Census of India, 2011).

The Meetei tribe, which constitutes about 53 percent of the state's total population resides mainly in the valley areas (Parratt, 1997). The cultural heritage of the Meeteis include among others, classical dances such as Rasilila, martial traditions, indigenous games and sports, their own script called "Meetei Mayek", as well as a

strong oral and written historical accounts (Singh, 1982). Concerning religion, the Meeteis traditionally followed Sanamahi religion. But, in the first half of the 18th century, the royal patronage and adoption of Vaishnavism led to syncretism and a major transformation in their religious identity (Brown, 2001).

Features of Sanamahi Religion

Singh (1982) observed that Sanamahi religion is one of the oldest living indigenous religions of South Asia, whose origin predated the introduction of Hinduism in Manipur. Several Meetei sacred texts attributed the antiquity of Sanamahi religion to over 3500 years (Devi, 2015).

Deities and cosmology

Lainingthou Sanamahi is regarded as the supreme deity of Sanamahi religion. He is considered the creator and protector of the universe. Leimarel Sidabi, the mother goddess of Laininthou Sanamahi is another important deity who symbolizes fertility, earth, and creation (Singh, 1982). The Sanamahi religion is polytheistic and animistic in character, with several deities linked to natural forces, clans, and localities (Parratt, 1997).

Meetei sacred texts and institutions

The sacred texts of the Meeteis are known as “Puyas”. These manuscripts codify ancient and traditional knowledge on a range of subjects from creation, myths, laws, customs, astronomy, medicine, and genealogy (Singh, 1982). All matters on religion are looked after and taken care of by the “Maru Loishang”, which is a traditional council of priests and scholars that has functioned since the 7th century CE (Parratt, 1997).

Ritual practices

Sanamahi religion and its practices are closely intertwined with the daily life of its followers. According to Hodson (1908), every Meetei household maintains a shrine of Lord Sanamahi in the Southwest corner of the house, where daily offerings and prayers are made. Birth, marriage, death, and agricultural cycles are also accompanied by elaborate rituals (Singh, 1982). Festivals such as “Lai Haraoba” that celebrate creation and fertility, and “Sajibu Cheiraoba” or Meetei New Year are occasions of rich cultural and religious synthesis of the Sanamahi religious practices.

Sanamahi religion and Meetei cultural identity

Sanamahi religion is both a strong belief system of the Meeteis as well as a cultural backbone of their identity. The Sanamahi religion permeates customary laws, oral literature, performing arts, and social organisation (Devi, 2015). Brown (2001) says that the traditional dances, music, and festivals of the Meeteis are deeply infused with Sanamahi symbolism.

The followers of Sanamahi did not fade away, and their practices continued even after the royal adoption of Vaishnavism (Parratt, 1980). This dual religious orientation is evident enough to understand the resilience of Sanamahi identity despite mounting royal pressure and external cultural influences. Sanamahi religion still survived after three hundred years of royal decree to abolish it from the kingdom of Manipur. Today, Sanamahi revivalism focuses on cultural preservation, revitalisation of “Meetei Mayek” script, and transmission of traditional practices and rituals to the new generations (Singh, 2020). Hence, it is clearly visible that the Sanamahi religion serves as both a spiritual practice and a marker of ethnic continuity.

Demographic dimensions

According to the Census of India (2011), the total population of Manipur was 2.856 million, of which the Meeteis constitute 1.52 million. Out of this 1.52 million Meeteis, the 2011 Census recorded 222,422 followers of Sanamahism with the vast majority of 222,315 living in Manipur. These followers accounted for roughly 7.8% of Manipur’s total population or 14.6 % of the Meetei population, and are categorised under the “Other Religions and Persuasions” group in the census.

At the same time, these figures are contestable as many Meetei who practice Sanamahi rituals identify themselves as Hindu in the Census due to administrative categories or cultural syncretism (Brown, 2001). Consequently, the census data underrepresents the actual spread of Sanamahi practices.

Constitutional and Legal Perspectives

Article 25 of the Constitution of India provides its citizens with the freedom of religion and protects the minority and indigenous rights. Further, the census operations had already given recognition of distinct religious identities in India. Here, it would be pertinent to note that Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism have long been separately enumerated despite overlaps with Hinduism and its traditions (Viswanathan, 2010). In Jharkhand too, there are ongoing demands to recognise the Sarna religion, reflecting indigenous tribal faiths (Xaxa, 1999). Various tribal religious groups in central India are also continuously demanding distinct recognition (Xaxa, 1999).

The Sanamahi religion has all the criteria required for recognition as a distinct religious category for census enumeration, which may include historical continuity, distinct theological framework, institutional structures, and a practicing population base (Singh, 2020).

Rationales for the inclusion of Sanamahi religion in census enumeration

1. Preservation of Indigenous Heritage

Giving its long due recognition to the Sanamahi religion will ensure the protection of cultural and religious diversity. This will help prevent assimilation into larger religious groups and maintain its unique charm and glory.

2. Accurate Demographic Representation

Inclusion of Sanamahi religion as a distinct category in census enumeration would reflect the actual religious representation of Manipur.

3. Policy and Developmental Relevance

Educational, cultural, and developmental policies are mostly based on census data. Hence, recognition could facilitate state support for Sanamahi temples, institutions, and cultural centres and activities.

4. Community Aspirations

The followers of Sanamahi have consistently demanded recognition of Sanamahi for the past several decades.

5. Academic and Research Benefits

Census recognition will enhance the scope for academic work in various field of studies.

Conclusion

The Sanamahi religion, with its deep historical continuity, distinct cosmology, enduring practices, and relatively large following, is an important component of Manipur's cultural and spiritual heritage. However, Sanamahi religion continues to be sidelined, underrepresented in census operations, which resulted in demographic inaccuracies and cultural marginalisation. Acknowledging Sanamahi as a distinct religious category and giving due recognition would uphold constitutional values, respond to community aspirations, and contribute to the preservation of India's indigenous traditions. It would be a step towards reflecting the true diversity of India and symbolically affirming India's pluralism.

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