



Investigating the Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Manipuri Hindus in 17th and 18th Century Manipur

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the socio-cultural transformations of Manipuri Hindus during the 17th and 18th centuries in Manipur, a region located in Northeast India. As a cultural crossroads between India and Myanmar, Manipur is home to diverse ethnic groups with various languages, religions, and customs. The region played a significant role in the transmission of Indian culture to Myanmar, China, and other parts of Asia. Influenced by both Tibeto-Burman tribes and Indo-Aryan Hindus, Manipur's distinct political landscape was shaped by the powerful Ningthouja dynasty. The expansion of Indian culture in this area was propelled by commercial activities and the efforts of religious missionaries. Additionally, members of the royal families and nobility sought alliances beyond borders to regain their political status, while the settlement of Brahmins contributed to the spread of Aryan culture in Manipur.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural Change, Manipuri Hindus, 17th Century, 18th Century, Manipur

Introduction

Manipur, nestled in the north eastern corner of India, stands as a vibrant cultural crossroads that links the civilizations of India and Myanmar. This unique region is characterized by a rich tapestry of ethnic groups, each contributing distinct languages, religions, and customs to the cultural landscape. Over the centuries, Manipur has not only absorbed various elements of Indian culture but has also played a significant role in transmitting these cultural attributes to neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, China, and other parts of Asia. The state's demographic diversity includes various Tibeto-Burman tribal communities, such as the Chins and Kachins who originate from South China, alongside the Indo-Aryan Hindus from the fertile Indo-Gangetic plains. This confluence of cultures has fostered a dynamic social fabric that reflects a history of interaction, exchange, and adaptation. Historically, Manipur was governed by the influential Ningthouja dynasty, which established a distinctive political identity in the region, marked by both autonomy and cultural richness. The expansion of Indian culture in Manipur was propelled by a combination of commercial activities and the influx of religious missionaries, who arrived with the aim of spreading spiritual teachings. These missionaries contributed significantly to the religious landscape of the region, promoting various sects and practices. Additionally, ambitious members of the royal families often sought alliances with neighboring territories in an effort to reclaim their influence and authority, further intertwining Manipur's cultural identity with broader regional dynamics.

The introduction of Aryan culture in Manipur was notably facilitated by the settlement of Brahmins, who brought with them Hindu traditions and practices. The earliest evidence of Hindu worship in the region is documented in a copper plate inscription discovered by W. Yumjao Singh in Chakpa village. This inscription, attributed to King Khongtekcha Yoiremba (763-773 A.D.), underscores the historical roots of Hinduism in Manipur. Literary sources, including the 'Bamon Khunthoklon', provide further insights into the migration of Brahmins from various regions such as Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Tripura, and Assam. The rulers of Manipur exhibited a remarkable degree of religious tolerance, particularly towards Vaishnavism, actively

encouraging the settlement of Brahmins through land grants and opportunities for integration. King Charairongba, who reigned from 1697 to 1709 A.D., was pivotal in the formal adoption of Vaishnavism in Manipur, designating Shri Krishna as the supreme deity while fostering an environment of religious inclusivity. His successor, King Garibaniwaz (1709-1748 A.D.), further entrenched Hinduism as the state religion, allowing it to flourish and permeate various aspects of Manipuri life. The devotion of these rulers – Charairongba, Garibaniwaz, and later King Bhagyachandra (1763-1798) – was instrumental in the proliferation of Brahmanism and Vaishnavism throughout the region. Their royal patronage led to the construction of numerous temples, the excavation of sacred tanks, and initiatives that promoted Aryan culture. This concerted effort culminated in the dominance of Hinduism in Manipur by the 19th century, shaping the spiritual and cultural identity of the state for generations to come.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are to explore the socio-cultural life of Manipuri Hindus during the 17th and 18th centuries in Manipur and to systematically investigate the historical facts associated with this period. Through this examination, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural dynamics, religious practices, and social structures that characterized the lives of Manipuri Hindus during this transformative era.

Materials and Methods

This study utilizes early manuscripts and other literary sources as key resources. Unpublished manuscripts and archival materials provide valuable insights into the social, religious, artistic, and political life of the region. The research interprets these literary sources alongside information gleaned from inscriptions, coins, and fieldwork, aiming to synthesize and compare these findings. Temples, religious images, rituals, and various literary sources contribute essential information to the study. In summary, this research employs both primary and secondary sources to comprehensively examine the topic.

Conceptual Framework

Vaishnavism, one of the prominent Brahmanical sects, is centered on the worship of Vishnu as the supreme deity. A notable aspect of Vaishnavism in Manipur is the veneration of the Avatars, or incarnations, of Vishnu. Since the 17th century, two primary forms of Hindu Vaishnavism have thrived in the region: Ramandi Vaishnavism and Gauriya Vaishnavism. Ramandi Vaishnavism was founded by Ramananda, a significant Bhakti saint of North India from the 15th century, who advocated for a universal approach to devotion that transcended distinctions of birth, caste, creed, or gender. He emphasized love for God and human brotherhood. During the reign of King Garibaniwaz, the Brahmins promoted the Ramandi cult as the highest religious practice, ultimately establishing it as the state religion with the encouragement of the Brahmin priest Santidas.

Gauriya Vaishnavism, on the other hand, was introduced during the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra and traces its origins to Chaitanya (1486-1533), a revered saint who preached intense devotion to Krishna, free from ritualistic constraints. His followers later systematized his teachings, forming the Gaudiya sect, which Maharaja Bhagyachandra successfully integrated into Manipuri society. This was a significant aspect of his religious reform efforts. Many Vaishnava missionaries from Bengal came to Manipur during Bhagyachandra's rule, effectively spreading the Vaishnavism of Bengal. A notable figure was Ram Narayan, a relative of Chaitanya, who also visited during this period, helping to facilitate the cultural exchange. The Brahma Sabha, a key religious institution established under Bhagyachandra, served as a committee of Brahmins that guided Hindu rites and rituals. It played a critical role in promoting Vaishnavism, initiating disciples, and organizing religious festivals. The Sabha held considerable authority over religious affairs, with the power to excommunicate individuals who violated Hindu tenets.

The influence of Indian merchants and missionaries extended beyond religious practices; they introduced Indian customs, literature, arts, and philosophies to the local population, fostering intermarriages that led to the assimilation of Indian culture. Over time, a new composite culture emerged, reflecting both indigenous and Indian elements. This cultural evolution occurred in two distinct phases: the first from the 15th century to the first half of the 18th century, and the second from the latter half of the 18th century to the early 20th century. The initial phase saw significant contributions from King Garibaniwaz, while Maharaja Bhagyachandra's reign was crucial for further cultural development. Notably, traditional cults such as Meiteism and Sanamahism continued alongside Hindu practices, with many converts maintaining their worship of indigenous deities. Scholarship, literature, and the arts flourished as the two communities influenced each other. Meitei scholars delved into Hindu philosophy, medicine, and astrology, adopting Sanskrit and Bengali scripts alongside the Meitei script. King Garibaniwaz was instrumental in issuing bell-metal coins inscribed in Nagari and Bengali scripts, reflecting this linguistic exchange.

The rulers of Manipur, particularly Bhagyachandra, were significant patrons of dance and music. Bhagyachandra introduced Nata-Sanskirtan and developed the classical Rasa Lila dance, which evolved from early ritualistic performances and Vaishnava Bhakti traditions. The royal court supported many musicians and dancers, and various Sanskrit and Bengali works on music were translated into Manipuri. With the arrival of Hinduism, several festivals were introduced, such as Krishna Janma, Durga Puja, and Diwali, while some traditional festivals were replaced. The Meiteis adopted new social orders, including the caste system, with Brahmins emerging as the highest caste and enjoying various privileges in society. The influence of Hindu culture permeated the upper echelons of Meitei society, impacting dress, food, and social customs. Ritual sacrifices were replaced by vegetarianism, and the participation of women in religious and social activities was notable, with many women achieving prominence in worship and temple activities.

Art, architecture, and crafts flourished under Hindu influence, resulting in the construction of temples and structures guided by Hindu architectural principles. The introduction of Hindu sculpture saw Manipuri artisans create intricate depictions of deities, blending Hindu elements with local characteristics. Temples became central to religious and social life, serving as venues for public worship and community gatherings. The integration of worship with local sports and games helped to further embed Hindu practices in the cultural fabric of Manipur. The Manipuri Vaishnavas contributed significantly to the performing arts, particularly through Kirtan and the Ras Dance, with the latter emphasizing devotion as a central theme. Temple visits, pilgrimages, and participation in devotional music and dance were viewed as meritorious acts integral to Manipuri cultural identity. Throughout the year, temples buzzed with socio-religious activities, underscoring the profound intertwining of faith and daily life in Manipuri society.

Findings

This study highlights Manipur as a culturally vibrant region that functions as a bridge between India and Myanmar, featuring a rich demographic tapestry of various ethnic groups, including Tibeto-Burman tribal communities and Indo-Aryan Hindus. This diversity has cultivated a dynamic social fabric shaped by historical interactions and cultural exchanges. The early introduction of Hinduism, particularly through the settlement of Brahmins and the patronage of influential rulers such as Kings Charairongba and Garibaniwaz, was pivotal in establishing Vaishnavism as the predominant religious practice. Royal support for Hindu traditions facilitated the construction of temples, the promotion of festivals, and the integration of these cultural elements into everyday life. The establishment of key institutions, like the Brahma Sabha, played a crucial role in guiding religious practices and promoting the spread of Vaishnavism. The findings reveal a significant cultural exchange between indigenous practices, such as Meiteism, and Hindu beliefs, resulting in a composite culture enriched by both traditions. Evidence from literary sources and inscriptions indicates that Meitei scholars adopted Sanskrit and Bengali scripts, further demonstrating this cultural evolution.

Additionally, the research underscores the importance of royal patronage in the arts, particularly in dance and music, with Maharaja Bhagyachandra significantly advancing classical forms like the Rasa Lila. The transition toward vegetarianism and the formal introduction of the caste system reflect broader societal changes influenced by Hindu practices. Women emerged as key participants in religious life, actively contributing to temple activities and rituals. The findings illustrate how the interplay of cultural, religious, and social elements in Manipur has forged a unique identity that integrates indigenous and Indian influences, with Hinduism playing a central role in this transformation. Temples have become vital centers for community life, and the blending of worship with local traditions has solidified Hindu practices within Manipuri society, making them essential to its cultural identity. Furthermore, the migration of various cultural groups into Manipur has had a profound impact on the region's religious outlook and cultural life, contributing to the emergence of a composite culture and new social dynamics. This assimilation process, coupled with political stability and economic prosperity, has led to significant cultural transformations among the converted Meiteis and their integration with the Hindu community.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the intricate tapestry of cultural and religious life in Manipur, showcasing its evolution as a vibrant intersection between indigenous traditions and Hindu influences. The establishment of Vaishnavism, particularly through the influential roles of Brahmins and royal patrons like Kings Garibaniwaz and Bhagyachandra, significantly shaped the region's spiritual landscape. The promotion of Ramandi and Gauriya Vaishnavism fostered a unique religious identity, integrating devotion to Vishnu with local customs. The findings reveal a dynamic cultural exchange that facilitated the emergence of a composite society, where traditional Meitei practices coexisted with new Hindu beliefs. Institutions like the Brahma Sabha played a crucial role in regulating religious practices and fostering community engagement, while the flourishing arts, particularly in dance and music, reflected this cultural synthesis. Furthermore, the migration of diverse groups into Manipur enriched its cultural fabric, leading to profound social transformations and the introduction of new customs, such as vegetarianism and the caste system. The participation of women in

religious and community activities marks a significant shift towards inclusivity in temple life. To sum up, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how the interplay of various cultural and religious elements has shaped Manipur's unique identity. The findings not only contribute to the historical discourse surrounding the region but also serve as a valuable resource for future scholarship on its socio-religious dynamics, highlighting the enduring legacy of these transformative processes in contemporary Manipuri society.

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