



Between Tradition And Reform: The Impact Of Islamization On Manipuri Muslims

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ABSTRACT

The process of Islamization within the socio-religious context of Manipur, as highlighted by S.C. Misra and other scholars reveals a multifaceted journey marked by both adaptation and resistance. This paper will explore the nuances of Islamization in Manipur, tracing its roots, motivations, impact on identity and the challenges Muslims face in maintaining a balance between religious and cultural identities.

The Concept of Islamization and Indigenization

S.C. Misra's analysis emphasizes that understanding religious change solely through the lens of Islamization is overly simplistic. Instead, the concurrent process of indigenization plays an integral role. Indigenization signifies the adaptation and integration of Islamic values within the existing cultural milieu. These processes often pull in different directions leading to significant socio-cultural shifts.

Islamization is essentially the progression of Islam as the dominant cultural and social force, functioning as a means of preserving identity. In the context of the Meos of Rajasthan and Haryana, Pratap C. Aggarwal documented how Islamization led to a shift from complete integration with non-Muslim communities to a more isolated religious identity, particularly during and after the partition of India and Pakistan. The case of the Muslims in Manipur shares similarities, reflecting an increasing emphasis on religious distinctiveness.

Causes behind Islamization

The drive for a distinct identity among Muslims in Manipur was influenced by multiple factors. Mattison Mines, in his exploration of Islamization and ethnicity in South India, posits that Islamization might be either a reaction to religious tolerance and freedom or a response to hostility. In Manipur, the hospitable attitude of the Maharajas and subjects allowed Islam to flourish without coercion. The 1606 A.D. appointment of a Qazi to adjudicate among Muslims exemplified this acceptance, underscoring the importance of self-regulation under Muhammadan Law.

During the 19th century, the Burmese occupation of Manipur, known as 'Chahi Taret Khuntakpa' or the Seven Years of Devastation (1819-1826) brought profound changes. This period marked the arrival of new cultural practices as Manipuris interacted with people from neighbouring regions like Cachar, Tripura and West Bengal. There was a significant reconsolidation of Hindu orthodoxy in Manipur, as well as the adoption of Brahminical values in post-devastation period. These changes heightened religious orthodoxy and introduced socio-religious friction between communities.

The religious reform among Muslims mirrored the socio-religious shifts occurring among the Meitei population, which included stricter adherence to Hindu practices such as vegetarianism and concepts of purity. Consequently, Muslims faced increased discrimination and social isolation, reinforcing the need for a distinct Muslim identity. The establishment of mosques and the emphasis on Islamic practices contributed to a stronger religious self-identification.

The Sanamahi movement among the Meiteis, initially aimed at countering Brahminical dominance, soon transformed into a broader socio-political assertion of Meitei identity. This movement instilled a sense of insecurity among other communities, including the Muslims, fostering a fear of subjugation. The resulting identity consciousness led to the formation of various socio-religious organizations among different communities, each striving to promote their unique cultural and religious identity.

Efforts by educated Muslim elites and political leaders played a significant role in advocating for community rights and reservations. Syed Ahmed argues that these efforts catalyzed the emergence of organizations that connected Muslims in Manipur to national bodies, fostering community consciousness. However, it remains debatable whether Islamization provided tangible political or economic advantages.

Islamization in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were transformative for Muslims worldwide, marked by a purist approach to religious practices. Movements like the Wahhabi, Deoband, Ahl-i-Hadith, and Tablighi Jamaat gained prominence. These movements sought to purge non-Islamic elements and emphasized monotheism, urging Muslims to adhere strictly to Quranic teachings.

Manipur was not immune to these reformist trends. In the early 20th century, scholars who studied in major madrasas across India returned with newfound zeal for Islamic reform. These individuals played pivotal roles in reshaping religious practices, emphasizing the core tenets of Islam—Kalima (faith), Namaz (prayer), Roza (fasting), Hajj (pilgrimage), and Zakat (charity).

The maulvis, such as Abdul Jalil of Thoubal Moijing, were instrumental in this process of revival. Jalil's teachings led to increased religious orthodoxy, including restrictions on women's social mobility and new dress codes for men and women. The influence of returning scholars led to practices like the adoption of the burkha and the standardization of religious rituals, contributing to an emerging 'Islamic Revivalism.'

Establishment of Religious Institutions

Religious institutions like the Jamiat-ul-Ulama and the Tablighi Jamaat played a significant role in consolidating Muslim identity. The Jamiat-ul-Ulama, established in Manipur in 1961, worked to safeguard religious rights, promote communal harmony and support the development of madrasas. The rapid expansion of madrasas across the state provided structured religious education and reinforced Islamic values.

The Tablighi movement, known for its focus on da'wa (inviting others to Islam), became particularly influential in the 1980s. This movement encouraged Muslims to embody Quranic teachings and fostered a sense of global Muslim unity. The Tablighi Jamaat's emphasis on personal transformation through religious commitment resonated with many Manipuri Muslims, further deepening their religious identity.

Cultural Adaptations and Religious Reforms

The return of educated scholars from prominent Indian madrasas brought significant cultural shifts. The introduction of Arabic and Urdu language instruction allowed Muslims in Manipur to access religious texts in their original script. Maulvis travelled extensively, using folk songs and community gatherings to disseminate religious teachings. The spread of Islamic literature in the vernacular language played a crucial role in the religious awakening. Books and stories adapted to Manipuri addressed key Islamic principles, making religious knowledge more accessible. The use of folk songs - marifat and jang-nama conveyed religious teachings in a culturally resonant format. This approach bridged the gap between high religious ideals and the lived experiences of Manipuri Muslims.

Islamic dress and etiquette were promoted to align with broader Muslim practices. This included the adoption of salwar-kameez by women, veils for modesty, and specific attire for men. The influence of these changes extended to architecture, with new mosques and madrasas featuring Islamic motifs such as domes and minarets.

The Tablighi movement emphasized the collective aspect of faith, fostering unity through group activities and religious expeditions. By encouraging Muslims to travel, share experiences and immerse themselves in communal learning, the movement strengthened internal cohesion and distinguished the Muslim community from non-Muslims. This sense of belonging to a global Umma (community) solidified a dual identity: as Muslims connected to the larger Islamic world and as Manipuri Muslims.

Challenges and Limitations of Islamization

Despite its significant impact, Islamization faced limitations. Islamization was particularly prominent among the educated and middle-class Muslims who had more exposure to dominant cultures. Younger Muslims, who interacted frequently with the Meiteis, were more engaged in the Islamization process, while older generations remained rooted in traditional practices.

The rise of modernization and Western influences posed challenges to strict adherence to Islamic practices. The coexistence of syncretic and Islamic elements within Muslim communities suggested that Islamization was not the sole force driving change. Instead, it coexisted with other social forces, creating a complex tapestry of cultural adaptation.

Identity Dilemmas and the Role of Pangal History

The Pangal community or Manipuri Muslims faced a unique dilemma. Unlike other ethnic groups like the Meiteis and Nagas, the Pangals lacked a distinct pre-Islamic culture to return to. This absence of an ancestral cultural heritage meant that their identity was primarily defined by religion. Scholars like Shakil Ahmed noted that while Meiteis and Nagas could draw on Hindu and Christian traditions to reinforce their identity, Pangals turned to Islamization as a means of asserting their distinctiveness.

Anthony Smith's criteria for ethnic identity—shared ancestry, historical memories, language, culture, and attachment to territory—highlight the challenges faced by Pangals. Their identity was often subsumed under broader labels like 'Meitei-Pangals' or simply 'Muslims,' emphasizing their religious affiliation over ethnic distinctiveness.

Conclusion: The Dual Nature of Islamization and Identity

The process of Islamization in Manipur was not just a religious journey but also a quest for identity in the face of socio-political pressures and cultural isolation. While it strengthened the religious identity of Muslims and connected them with the larger Indian Muslim community, it also underscored the dichotomy between being Muslim and being Manipuri. The challenge of reconciling these identities continues to shape the socio-religious landscape of Manipur today.

The story of Islamization in Manipur is emblematic of the broader dynamics at play in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. It illustrates how communities navigate their dual roles—integrated within local cultures while simultaneously asserting a broader religious identity. For the Manipuri Muslims, Islamization was both a tool for survival and a pathway to asserting their unique place in the region's complex social fabric.

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