



Resilience and Identity: The Cultural and Historical Journey of Pangals in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

The story of Manipuri Muslims or '*Pangals*,' is an intricate narrative woven through centuries of adaptation, integration and resilience. This community's history reflects a compelling process of identity formation influenced by significant historical events, socio-cultural interactions and religious practices. From their origins as prisoners of war in the 17th century to their current status as an integral part of Manipur's socio-political fabric, the journey of the *Pangals* encapsulates both unity and differentiation. This paper delves into the origins, integration, cultural evolution, challenges and identity assertion of the Manipuri Muslims, exploring how they have navigated through various external and internal influences to form a distinct identity.

Origins and Early Integration

The roots of the *Pangal* community can be traced to the early 17th century during King Khagemba's reign (1597–1652). A decisive military confrontation with the joint Cachari-Muslim forces resulted in the capture of approximately 1,000 Muslim soldiers. King Khagemba settled these prisoners in Manipur to prevent further incursions and to bolster the kingdom's socio-economic fabric with their skills. This marked the beginning of a unique integration process where the prisoners, now part of the local society, were given *Meitei* wives and land to cultivate, thus laying the foundation for a community that maintained Islamic beliefs while adopting local customs.

By granting Muslim prisoners a place in society, King Khagemba ensured their loyalty and leveraged their skills in various trades such as blacksmithing, craftsmanship and agriculture. These Muslim settlers, known as *Pangals*, quickly adapted to the local environment and contributed significantly to the kingdom's economy and defence. The early integration laid the groundwork for a syncretic identity that blended Islamic practices with *Meitei* social structures and traditions.

Social and Cultural Synthesis

The social life of the *Pangals* developed under the influence of the *Meitei* culture, resulting in a synthesis that shaped their community identity. This syncretic blend was evident in the adoption of the *Meitei sagei* or clan system. Each *Pangal* clan, similar to *Meitei sageis*, was named based on occupation, place of settlement, or significant events. This lineage-based structure reinforced social cohesion and regulated practices such as marriage, ensuring exogamy within the community.

Marriage customs among the *Pangals* further showcased the interplay of Islamic law and *Meitei* tradition. While Islamic teachings framed marriage as a civil contract, *Pangal* practices incorporated *Meitei* rituals such as *kwa-khaiba* (engagement) and *heinaba/thijaba* (negotiation). The practice of *chenba* (elopement), a culturally significant method of acquiring a spouse, was popular among the *Pangals* and mirrored *Meitei* customs. Additionally, *Meitei* women who married early Muslim settlers brought aspects of their culture into the community, contributing to shared practices such as dance and music during weddings.

The integration of *Meitei* customs into *Pangal* social life extended beyond marriage. Festivities such as *Thabal Chongba*, a traditional dance performed during marriages, became part of *Pangal* celebrations. Music and dance were influenced by *Meitei* traditions and highlighted the deep cultural exchange between the two communities. This fusion of cultural practices illustrated the *Pangals'* adaptability and their efforts to maintain communal harmony while preserving Islamic faith.

The Impact of Hinduisation

The 18th century marked a period of significant change with the rise of King Garib Niwaz (1709–1748), whose campaign to Hinduise the *Meitei* population influenced the socio-religious landscape of Manipur. This era of forced religious conversion and the imposition of Hindu orthodoxy created divisions between the Hinduised *Meiteis* and the *Pangals*, who continued to practice Islam. Hinduisation introduced strict social hierarchies and concepts of purity and pollution, which marginalised the *Pangals* and other non-Hindu communities, positioning them as 'impure.'

The Hinduisation movement reshaped the interactions between the *Pangals* and the *Meiteis*. The imposition of Hindu orthodoxy reinforced the *Pangals'* distinct religious identity, limiting their participation in the newly Hinduised social order. Despite these challenges, the *Pangals* retained their syncretic practices and continued to engage with Meitei culture while reaffirming their Islamic roots. This period underscored the duality of their identity: integrated yet distinct.

The Burmese Occupation and Its Aftermath

The *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*, or 'Seven Years of Devastation' (1819–1826) marked another turning point in the history of Manipuri Muslims. The Burmese invasion led to widespread destruction, population displacement and significant social upheaval. Many Manipuris, including the *Pangals*, fled to neighbouring regions such as Cachar, Tripura and Assam, seeking refuge. Those who remained in Manipur faced violence, forced labour and captivity.

The post-occupation period was one of rebuilding and adaptation. As the surviving *Pangals* and other Manipuris returned, they brought back cultural influences from their places of refuge, introducing new elements into Manipur's socio-cultural fabric. This period also witnessed the reinforcement of religious practices among the *Pangals*, as their experiences during displacement highlighted the need for community solidarity and resilience. The *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* deepened the *Pangals'* awareness of their minority status and fostered a stronger sense of communal identity.

The Rise of Islamic Reform Movements

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the emergence of Islamic reformist movements in Manipur, mirroring trends in the broader Muslim world. These movements aimed to purify Islamic practices by removing non-Islamic accretions and promoting a return to orthodox teachings. Reformist leaders, including *maulvis* educated in mainland India, played a significant role in transforming the religious landscape of the *Pangal* community. They introduced teachings based on the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, emphasizing core Islamic practices such as *Kalima* (faith), *Namaz* (prayer), *Roza* (fasting) and *Zakat* (charity).

The establishment of *madrassas* became a central aspect of this reformist wave. These institutions provided religious education and promoted a unified understanding of Islamic teachings. *Maulvis* travelled between villages, preaching the importance of following Islamic principles and encouraging the adoption of practices such as wearing traditional Islamic attire and observing gender segregation. This reformist movement marked a shift from the syncretic traditions of the earlier *Pangal* generations to a more orthodox expression of their Islamic identity.

Despite these changes, the reformist efforts faced resistance from those within the community who valued the syncretic practices that had defined *Pangal* identity for generations. The tension between traditionalists and reformists illustrated the complexity of identity formation, as the community grappled with maintaining cultural heritage while embracing religious orthodoxy.

Socio-Political Dynamics and Identity Assertion

The early 20th century brought further changes as Manipur underwent significant socio-political shifts. Ethnic identity movements among various communities, including the *Meiteis*, *Nagas*, and *Kukis*, became more pronounced. These movements were often driven by political aspirations, cultural revival and competition for resources. The *Pangal* community, aware of their minority status, responded by asserting their identity through religious, educational, and cultural means.

The formation of organizations such as the *Jamiat-ul-Ulama* and the *Tablighi Jamaat* exemplified this response. These organizations aimed to strengthen religious education, promote Islamic values and foster a sense of unity within the *Pangal* community. The *Tablighi Jamaat*, for instance, emphasized a return to the basics of Islam and community solidarity. This period also saw the growth of *madrassas* and the publication of Islamic literature in the Manipuri language, making religious teachings more accessible to the local Muslim population.

Economic factors further influenced *Pangal* identity. Despite their integration into Manipuri society, many *Pangals* faced economic marginalization, limited to trades, small-scale entrepreneurship and self-employment. The community's representation in white-collar jobs remained low, contributing to a sense of

socio-economic exclusion. This economic disparity fostered a greater sense of solidarity among the *Pangals*, as they sought communal support and advocated for better opportunities and representation.

Cultural Revival and Modern Challenges

The latter half of the 20th century witnessed new identity movements in Manipur, particularly the rise of the *Sanamahi* revival among the *Meiteis*. This movement, rooted in a return to pre-Hindu religious and cultural practices, aimed to reclaim *Meitei* heritage and assert their distinct identity. While the *Sanamahi* movement sought to strengthen *Meitei* identity, it also posed challenges for the *Pangals*, who viewed it as a potential threat to their inclusion in the broader Manipuri identity.

The *Sanamahi* revival highlighted the complexity of identity politics in a multi-ethnic society like Manipur. The movement's emphasis on cultural and religious distinctions underscored the *Meiteis*' desire to differentiate themselves from both Hindu orthodoxy and the minority communities, including the *Pangals*. This development heightened the *Pangals*' focus on maintaining their religious and cultural identity while navigating the socio-political landscape.

In response to these challenges, the *Pangal* community has continued to assert their identity through education, religious practice and participation in socio-political discourse. The growth of educational institutions and the involvement of *Pangal* leaders in political and social activism have contributed to a more pronounced and confident expression of their identity. The community's efforts to preserve their heritage and advocate for their rights reflect their resilience in the face of shifting social dynamics.

Conclusion: The Duality of Integration and Differentiation

From their origins as prisoners of war to their integration into the social fabric of Manipur, the *Pangals* have maintained a balance between embracing local customs and preserving their Islamic beliefs. Their journey has been marked by significant challenges. Each of these events has contributed to the evolution of a dynamic and multifaceted identity. They have successfully navigated the pressures of modernization and cultural revival, carving out a space for themselves within the complex tapestry of Manipur's society. The history of the *Pangals* is a testament to their adaptability, resilience and determination to forge a unique identity amidst changing socio-political and religious landscapes.

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