

Meitei Diaspora and the Identity Politics

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ABSTRACT The Meitei is the dominant group in Manipur, the eastern-most state of India. They formed their state in the early part of first century and played a role as an international actor in the Indo-Burma region. Their state was transformed to the state of Manipur in due course of history. The society became a Hindu society in 18th century, by synthesizing their traditional religion with the Hinduism. In the early 19th century, Manipur suffered seven year devastation (1817-1826), locally called *Chahi taret khundakpaa*, at the hands of the Burmese. Due to this devastation, there was a Meitei Diaspora. It caused a large scale migration of the Meitei to many places in Myanmar, Bangladesh and other Indian states of Assam and Tripura. Today, there are a number of Meitei villages in these states and countries. The paper tries to examine the people's percepts of their identity, relationship between Homeland (Manipur) politics and Diaspora communities in other states. Identity politics is not all homogenous throughout the Meitei world. The local socio-political settings and their immediate historical conditions shape the nature of politics. The homeland is in their cultural mappings but its politics is not part of the Diaspora communities' realities.

INTRODUCTION

The Meitei is the majority group in the state of Manipur, India. They are the dominant group of the state in demographical and economic senses. The State has three major human groupings: the Meitei, the Naga and the Kuki. The latter two are tribal peoples while the Meitei is not. The Meitei formed their state in the first quarter of 1st century in the fertile valley of Manipur. The Meitei state was transformed gradually to the state of Manipur. The people of Manipur are otherwise called the Manipuris since 18th century. So, in many literatures, the Meitei is synonymously referred to the Manipuri.

Originally, the Meitei consists of seven clans. But, the sphere of Meitei identity was expanded to cover Brahmins and Pangal (Meitei Muslims) who migrated to the state and absorbed in the Meitei social system in later periods of history. The Meitei adopted Hinduism as their state religion in early 18th century and synthesized with their traditional religion to form the Manipuri Hinduism. Since then, the Meitei retain their original clan system as well as adopt the Hindu system of *gotra*¹. The only non-Hindu Meiteis are the Pangal in Manipur. After the conversion to Hinduism, Meitei society became a caste based society. But, there are only two castes in their society, viz., the Brahmins (*Bamon* in Manipuri) and Kshetriya (all the clan Meiteis). There is one exterior caste, called *Lois*.

The Manipuri language, evolved from Meiteilon (Meitei language), belongs to Tibeto-

Burman linguistic family. The Manipuri has a literary history of about two thousand years. Their ancient texts include royal chronicles, literary works, historical accounts and many others. Manipuri language is the only Tibeto-Burman language in India having a written system.

In a long course of its history, the Meitei started settling in other parts of the world. There are a number of Meitei communities in neighbouring Indian states of Assam and Tripura and in countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The concept of 'Diaspora' is defined by many scholars in different ways. One of the most comprehensive features of Diaspora is given by Cohen (1996: 515). He listed a number of conditions for being a diasporic group. He, however, agrees that all common features of Diasporas may not manifest in one particular Diaspora. This list of common features helps in examining a particular Diaspora keeping it in a social, cultural or historical context.

In many Diaspora studies, the Diaspora is located as (a) a social form, (b) a mode of cultural production (Steven Vertovic 2000) (c) a type of consciousness. As a social form, Diaspora is considered as continued ties with a homeland despite separation from that homeland or the triadic relationship between the diasporic people, their homeland and the country where they now live. This view is expressed in works such as Baumann (1995), Safran (1991), and Sheffer (1986).

The second consideration of Diaspora situates diasporic communities in the context of

transnationalism and globalization. Appadurai (1990, 1996) is one of the theorists who see 'the possibility of diasporic communities' participation in the production and reproduction of transnational, social and cultural phenomena. In this line, Kay Koppearayyer also notes that "The impulse that informs this participation is not one of deferral to a distant homeland, or a mediation among multiple localities, circumstances or conditions, but rather is syncretic in its synthesis of cultures in circulation" (Koppearayyer 2005: 100).

In other studies in which Diaspora is taken as a type of consciousness, the authors give emphasis on the possibility of multiple references of the Diasporas. Notable such studies are Clifford (1994), Cohen (1996), Gilroy (1987) and Hall (1990). They use different notions such as 'awareness of multi-locality' (Vertovic 2000: 147), 'discrepant cosmopolitanism' (Clifford 1994: 312).

Aisha Khan (2007: 147) says that "Diasporic consciousness takes different forms of memorialization over time, in part because the historical conditions in which it is meaningful change over time, and in part because the discourses and practices in which is expressed also change". This consciousness is historically shaped and manifested in different ways in different historical contexts.

The concept of Identity politics has been used in various literatures of social sciences to mean the politics associated with identity assertion of minority groups in a state, country or nation. The percept of a group, may it be linguistic, cultural or otherwise, that the group has been marginalized in a political system is the driving force of the identity politics. The percept may be real or myth. The concept is expanded to the identity assertion of groups, identified on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. The political movements or moves such as lobby, pressure of a specific group are mainly based on their feeling of being marginalized or oppressed.

The Meitei in Manipur, though majority group in the state, feel that they are marginalized in the national framework of India. They do not get due share in Indian social and political system mainly due to their lesser population size. They had been denied their due political position in India for long though it was one of ancient states in Indo-Burma region. They had been denied status of

Indian State till 1972. This injured the sentiments of the people for a quite a long time in post-independence period. On the other hand, their language has not been recognized as one of major Indian languages till 1992 though the language has a long literary history. The Manipuri language became one of languages, recognized by the Constitution of India and listed in its Schedule VIII. They have only three elected Member of Parliaments in India and hence, their voice is seldom heard of. The Meitei, the majority people of the state, has discontent in Indian system where they feel their lives are meaningless. So, there is a strong identity politics in the state longing for a 'dignified' people in the nation.

On the other hand, the Meitei identity politics in other states of India (Assam and Tripura) is very much associated with their cultural recognition in the state. The majority groups in these Indian states are Hindus as the Meiteis are. But, their social and cultural lives are not felt safe and hence, they have been demanding more political power in their respective states.

However, the Meiteis in neighbouring countries (Burma and Myanmar) are demographically and politically lesser communities. Their identity politics is very limited and is not very vocal. Their main concerns are respect by majority people (Burmese in case of Meiteis in Burma, Bengali Muslims in case of Meiteis in Bangladesh), economic and educational upliftment.

The identity politics of the group differs from context to context. The homeland politics is not linked with the identity politics of the Diaspora Meiteis as the immediate needs and context of their community lives differ. The concept of the identity itself differs from one group of the Meitei to another, though there share a pan Manipuri identity at cultural level. Their immediate socio-political contexts are different.

The present paper is on the consciousness of the relationship among the Meiteis – of homeland (Manipur) and diasporic communities in Myanmar (Burma), India and Bangladesh. It focuses on the Meitei Diaspora in Myanmar, India (Assam and Tripura) and Bangladesh². The different social contexts of the Meitei Diaspora are quite varied:

- a. *Myanmar*: The Meiteis in Myanmar are one of the Hindu minorities in a Buddhist dominated country. Unlike other Hindu communities in the state, the Meiteis are, in terms of physical features, more akin to

the Burmese. As neighboring states, Manipur-Burma relations were generally tense during the colonial period. Practically, the Meiteis in Myanmar had no contact with their homeland during the colonial period. Even in the post-colonial period, they could not establish relations with their Homeland, Manipur, due to political reasons. Visiting each other across the international boundary is restricted by the Myanmar Government.

- b. *Assam*: Assam is called *Tekhao* by the Meiteis. There are many Meitei settlements in Assam. The Meitei diasporic communities are generally Hindus in the Hindu dominated state of Assam, a neighboring Indian state. In Assam politics, the Meiteis play vital roles such as electoral politics, in certain parts of the state. Manipur has been having political and cultural relations with Assam since time immemorial. In certain districts of the state, the Meiteis have strong competition with the Bengali dominated districts. The Meiteis in Assam have relatively more social and cultural interactions with their Homeland, Manipur. There are a number of Manipuri associations, student unions and literary associations. Journals and magazines are published by them in Manipuri.
- c. *Tripura*: The Meiteis are one of the Hindu minorities in the state of Tripura, a state in Northeast India. The majority are the Hindu Bengalis. The Meitei and the majority Bengalis belong to the same school of Hinduism. Linguistically and racially, they are different from the majority. There was a political relation between the Manipur and Tripura in historical periods. The Meiteis called the state of Tripura as *Takhel*. They have less interaction with the Homeland in limited spheres. However, they have interactions with the Meiteis in Bangladesh more often. There are many Meitei literary associations. A few Manipuri journals are published in Tripura.
- d. *Bangladesh*: In Bangladesh, the Meitei is a minority; the majority people are the Bengali Muslims. The majority is not only different in religion, but also different linguistically. They have less interaction with their Homeland (Manipur) but have interaction with the Meiteis in Tripura.

A short period field work was conducted in between November 2005 and February 2006. It was exploratory in nature. For it, the author had eight Focus Group Discussions (FGD), two with each of diasporic communities in Assam and Tripura (both in India), Bangladesh and Myanmar. The FGDs with the Meiteis of Bangladesh and Myanmar were done in border towns of Manipur and Tripura. Each FGD session lasted for about one hour. And the whole proceedings were recorded and transcribed later in order to analyze qualitatively.

The study has its own limitations. One of visible limitation is that the informants were all males who were engaging in business across international borders. FGDs of the Meiteis in Indian states consist of different social leaders, educated elites, and elderly persons. Although their views represent only a segment of Meitei society, they do have value because they are respected ones in their own communities.

The main questions in the study are:

1. Though the diasporic communities in different countries share an emotional ties with their distant homeland of Manipur (now a state in India), shaped by culture, historical experiences, language, do they share the new identity of Manipur that became a part of India in 1949?
2. What is the nature of their relation with other 'Indian' communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh?
3. What is their response to contemporary political realities in their Homeland (Manipur)?

GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MEITEI

Manipur is situated in the northeast corner of India and bounded in the east by Myanmar (Burma). The present territorial area of Manipur is 22,327 sq. km. It lies within 23.83°N to 25.68°N latitude and 93.03°E to 94.78°E longitude. Manipur lies on an ancient trade route linking South Asia to Southeast Asia and beyond.

A fertile alluvial valley extends north-south in the middle of Manipur and it is surrounded on all sides by hill ranges forming a part of the eastern Himalayas. Though constituting only about 12 % of the total geographical area, the valley is settled by more than 75 % of the total population of 2.3 million (2001 Census).

Waves of migration from the north and the east brought Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples to present-day Manipur from prehistoric times. According to archaeological evidence, the present Manipur valley was under water during the quaternary period, and the earliest human settlements in the hills gradually extended downwards and to the valley over the centuries.

A successful response by the Meiteis to the challenge of draining a waterlogged valley through a network of small waterways and their consequent transformation from food-gatherers and hunters to sedentary cultivators eventually gave birth to their rich culture and distinctive way of life in the early centuries of the Christian era. The valley was naturally the core region where a bigger and inclusive Manipuri culture and way of life also took shape later on.

Manipur was an independent kingdom until it was defeated by the British forces in the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. British colonial officers posted here took to Manipur's *Sagol Kangjei*, an indigenous form of vigorous polo, modified its rules somewhat, and popularized it all over the world as modern polo. The world's oldest polo ground situated in Imphal, the capital of Manipur, is still the venue for regular polo tournaments.

Manipur also occupies a special place in the hearts and minds of a fast diminishing group of people – Second World War veterans. From being a transit route for hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing from the advancing Japanese forces in South-east Asia and a huge camp for the retreating Allied forces, Manipur itself became a coveted prize for the two contesting armies. After fierce battles on Manipur soil in 1944, the Japanese advance was checked for the first time by Allied forces on the outskirts of Imphal and, in a decisive turn in the fortunes of the War in Asia, it was rolled back until the Japanese were defeated.

More than half a century ago, they may have fought as enemies in the opposite camps. Now, these old war veterans and increasingly their younger family members are united when they come to the war cemeteries in Imphal to pay homage to their departed friends and relatives.

After the British left the Indian subcontinent in 1947, Manipur regained her political status, though the Dominion Government of India was responsible for her defence, external relations, and communications.

After the end of British colonialism, the political history of the region changed in a dramatic way. Manipur became an Independent country in 1947. Myanmar attained its Independence in 1949. East Bengal (now Bangladesh) was partitioned from India as a part of then Pakistan in 1947. In the meantime, under a long and complex process of merger of Indian states, Manipur became part of India in 1949. From these political changes, the Meitei communities living in Myanmar, Bangladesh and India were further moved away from their homeland without having close interaction with each other.

After attaining its independence in 1947, Manipur drafted its own constitution and adopted in 1947. Under the newly framed constitution, elections were held on the basis of universal adult franchise in 1948 to elect a 53-member state legislature. A seven-member council of ministers responsible to it then took office to begin a democratic journey to peace and development. The Maharajah of Manipur became a constitutional monarch. An independent judiciary existed to safeguard the citizen's fundamental rights and, interestingly, ensure the citizen's duties as well.

Manipur became a part of India through the September 1949 Merger Agreement. It was kept as centrally ruled state since 15 October 1949. It became a Union Territory of India having a Territorial Assembly from 1963, and then later a full-fledged State of India from 1972.

It is needless to mention here that there are various Indian communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Major Indian communities in Myanmar are Bengalis, Tamils and Gorkhas (Nepalis). The migration of Indian communities to Myanmar dates back to ancient days. However, a larger number of Indian communities came to settle in different places of Myanmar especially in Rangoon and Mandalay areas during the British colonial rule.

The total Indian population in Myanmar is estimated to be 2.9 million, of which 250,000 are People of Indian Origin (PIO), 2,000 are Indian citizens, and 400,000 are stateless. They are concentrated largely in the two major cities (Yangon and Mandalay) and old colonial towns (Pyin U Lwin and Kalaw). They are largely barred from the civil service and military and are disenfranchised by being labeled as 'foreigners' and 'non-citizens' of Burma. This is despite the fact that all of them were born in Myanmar, belonging to the third or fourth generation. But

since they do not have any documents to prove their citizenship under the Burmese citizenship law of 1982, they are deemed to be “stateless,” a category of people in the country.

Historically speaking, large-scale migration of Indians into Burma occurred during the colonial period. It was facilitated by the geographical contiguity, with India sharing both land and maritime boundaries with Burma. Though the term Indians encompassed all sections of people who migrated from British India – which today consists of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal – the Indians were not a homogenous group. Religiously speaking, Indians are Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs or even Christians. The Indians speak Bengali, Hindi (mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh), Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam from the former Madras Presidency and Punjabi. They belonged to various caste groups and were also economically stratified, the rich Chettiers, the poor Tamils, and Hindi-speaking people, and the English educated middle classes from all parts of India. Thus, the Burmese perception of Indians depended upon which strata of society various Indian groups occupied in the Burmese society. The first Burmese Indians migrated to Burma in the glorious Bagan period (A.D. 1044-1287) when Indian, Persian and Arabian merchants went to Burma. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Golden Age of the spice trade attracted more Indian merchants to Burma. This migration continued until the British invasion.

When Burma became a part of India under the British colonial rule in 1824, a large number of Indian people moved to Burma. These included entrepreneurs, politicians and government employees. From 1855 to 1930 the area of the Irrawaddy delta used for rice cultivation increases ten times to roughly 4 million hectares. Coolies (Indian laborers) from southern India migrated continuously to Burma in search of work. In 1930 the number of Indians in Burma had grown considerably and in Rangoon 53 per cent of the whole population was Indian. In the following decades infrastructure initiatives by the British caused an unprecedented economic boom in Burma.

THE MEITEI DIASPORA

Manipur shares a long history with the Burmese and the Shans³. Though there are several peaceful and cordial relations with the Burmese, Manipur also had a number of wars with the

Burmese kings. Most crucial wars in the history of Manipur were fought in the 18th and the 19th centuries. Manipur defeated Burma in the first half of the 18th century. Manipur, under King Garibniwaz, won several wars with Burma. DGE Hall (1987: 407) notes that “Under Gharib Nawaz (1714-54) its expert horseman became the terror of Upper Burma. They destroyed villages and pagodas and got away with their loot before they could be intercepted. On more than one occasion they defeated Burmese armies sent to hold the frontier.” Though there were Hindu influences since ancient days, the Meiteis society became a Hindu society only in the first quarter of the 18th century. Earlier, they had their own religion having a supreme being, called *Sidaba Mapu*. As a result of the religious conversion in early 18th century, the Meitei society became a caste society. The Brahmins caste was introduced to the society with new Brahmin immigrants, mainly from Bengal. They were given Meitei surnames, allowed to settle in the Meitei villages. All other immigrants were settled outside the Meitei settlement areas. However, the caste system in Manipur consists of only two castes, viz., Brahmins and Kshetri. Besides these castes, there are exterior castes, locally called *lois*.

The newly introduced Brahmins incited them on with the promise that they would obtain blessing by bathing in the Irrawaddy at Sagaing. In 1738, they camped near Sagaing, stormed the stockade built to defend the famous Kaunghmudaw Pagoda erected by Thalun, massacred its garrison and burnt every house and monastery up to the walls of Ava.

There are records of defeats of the Burmese army at the hands of the Manipuris in the first half of 18th century under the leadership of king Garibniwaz. The wheel of history turned in counter-direction in the second half of the 18th century. Manipur faced several attacks by the Burmese during the second half of 18th century. The Burmese had the upper hand in these attacks. In 1819, Manipur was defeated severely by the Burmese and caused devastation for seven years (1819-1826). “The Burmese conquest of Manipur in 1819 was different in intention and character from the earlier invasions. This time, they meant to rule Manipur through their puppet rulers” (Kabui 1991: 288), all of who were Meiteis.

The Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826), locally known as *Chahi Taret Khundakpa*, was a turning point not only in the political history of

the state but also in the social and cultural history. A large number of the Meiteis migrated out to the then Kingdoms of Cachar, Assam and Tripura out of Burmese tortures and brutal killings. The Burmese killed several hundreds of Meiteis, including women and children. The migrant Meiteis fled to place up to East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Several thousands were taken as captives by the Burmese invaders to the Burmese country.

Prior to *Chahi taret khundakpa*, there was several waves of Meitei migration to Cachar, Assam and Tripura of India and Sylhet of present day Bangladesh. They went to various Hindu places in these areas on pilgrimage. Also the Meitei king had matrimonial relations with the kings of Cachar, Assam and Tripura in historical times. The Meitei kings sent off many individuals as royal retinue of Meitei princess who married princes of these ancient states. The Meitei retinue accompanying the royals had settled there. Such marriages were recorded since very early days. These countries, including Myanmar, had many Meitei settlements. Trading with these states also played a vital role in migration and settlements of the Meiteis outside the state. The scale of migration was very massive during the *Chahi taret khundakpa*. Since then, these Meiteis settled in their host countries.

Indian Identity, Diasporic Meiteis

With the emergence of new elites in the 20th century, the political consciousness of the Meiteis in Manipur underwent a drastic change. New elite groups consisted mainly of social leaders who got higher education in different parts of India. They were highly influenced by the then Indian Freedom Movement under Mahatma Gandhi. A few of them were associated with the communist movement in India. They shared the dream of New India and the imagined Indian Nation. This was further cemented by the fact that the Meiteis had a strong religious attachment to India. The Manipuri elites also took India's emerging democratic system as an alternative political frame to its age-old unpopular monarchy. So, they were heavily influenced by slogans like "I am Indian first, Manipuri second and Meitei third"

Manipur became a part of India in 1949 after the then King of Manipur signed the controversial Merger Agreement on 21 September 1949 and enforced on 15 October 1949. On the same

day, the state of Manipur was reduced to Part C state where the people could not elect their representative but ruled by a Chief Commissioner, appointed by Delhi. After a long struggle, Manipur was recognized as full-fledged state of India in 1972.

The new Indian Identity was not so sudden, however, to the Meiteis in their homeland. The new Meitei elite became devoted Indians, of course, culturally. This class of new elite desired integration of Manipur with India, even in the colonial period. Many Meiteis were educated in other parts of India, especially Assam and Bengal. The educated Meitei youth were very much influenced by the ongoing Indian Freedom Struggle in the 1930s and 1940s. When they returned home, they brought the new ideas of Indian nationhood. Many of them were followers of M K Gandhi and Indian National Congress. Some were socialists. In later period, many youth took part in communist movements. This is true, to a large extent, in the cases of diasporic Meitei communities in Assam and Tripura. The Meiteis in the Indian state of Assam also in the Princely State of Tripura involved very actively in Gandhi's national movements of 1940s.

"The Meiteis in Assam and Tripura even took part actively, more actively than the Meiteis of Manipur, in Gandhiji's Satyagraha movement. We were also Indians, not less than the Assamese and the Bengalis" [Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Assam].

The Meiteis in Assam and Tripura were not blind followers of Gandhi's movement. They took part consciously and voluntarily. Some of them (a few of the homeland) joined the 1857 Revolt. Later, even the Indian National Army (INA), under the leadership of Netaji Subhaschandra Bose, could enroll many Meiteis in the homeland.

In spite of their engagement in Indian struggle for independence in their homeland of Manipur, the feeling of the new Indian nationhood emerged in India and Manipur could not embrace the Meitei communities in the foreign countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Indian nationhood could not touch the hearts of the diasporic Meitei of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

"Our homeland becomes a state in Indian Union. For that matter, the Meiteis in Manipur become Indian citizens. We are also Burmese citizens. We are different from Indians. In short,

we are a different Meitei.” [FGD with Meiteis in Myanmar]

But, they have a strong emotional tie with their homeland, “where we would like to visit at least once in our life time”. Manipur is still referred by the Meiteis in Myanmar as *Sana Leibak* (Golden Land). Though *Sana Leibak* is also used by the Meitei communities in India and Bangladesh, their reference is more on the use of *Govindagi Leibak* (Land of Lord Govinda). More interestingly, the Meiteis in Bangladesh think the citizenship is quite different thing from their cultural relation with their homeland which is in India today.

“Indian Identity of the Meiteis is not contrary to Bangladesh citizenship. Culturally we are more Indian and legally we belong to Bangladesh. These two are of equal values” (FGD with Meiteis in Bangladesh).

Not subscribing to the view, a sharp opinion over Indian identity is expressed by some Meiteis in Bangladesh. To them, identity is not a mere question of political affiliation but of a strong cultural consciousness. They say:

“We cannot be identified as Indians because Meitei identity is outside the purview of political position of our homeland, Manipur.” [FGD with Meiteis in Bangladesh]

To them, the Indian identity of the Homeland Meitei and their foreign citizenship do not matter much. They are first Meiteis having common cultural and historical experiences.

The Meiteis in Myanmar and Bangladesh feel that “We can survive in foreign countries because we follow the social rules, set by the Manipuri Hinduism”. All the Hindu Meiteis follow a synthesized version of Chaitanya Vaishnavism of Bengal. This synthesized version is qualitatively different from its original religious system, found in Bengal.

Though the religious ties with India are very strong through history, the religious consciousness of being a unique Hinduism is stronger among the Meiteis across their present settlements. India is situated in their pilgrimage space but at every place of their pilgrimage, there are their own sacred complexes.

“We visit sacred places such as Nabadwib (West Bengal), Vrindaban (Uttar Pradesh) in India. Such a visit is always a long cherished dream. Touching the soil of such places is part of our religious life. But, we worship gods at the temples which are constructed and maintained

by the Meiteis there. We prefer our own Bamons (Meitei Brahmins) [FGD with Meiteis in Myanmar]

Indian Diaspora and Meitei Diaspora

The Burmese had contempt for the poor Indians, who monopolised jobs such as scavenging, rickshaw pulling, and other menial jobs, which the Burmese themselves were reluctant to do. They hated the Chettians, who lent money at exorbitant rates and gradually became absentee landlords in Lower Burma (see Suryanarayan 2009). *Kala Lumyo* is the word the Burmese call the Indian who live in Burma. The word *kala* literally means degrading, disgusting and to look down upon. The word “alien” is also used by Burmese people to describe the Indians (Butkew 2005, 2).

The situation is well reflected in the following:

“The relationship between Burmese and Burmese Indian is not always cordial. Though, there is no overt hatred and tense between the two, sometimes, ‘Indians’ (Burmese Indians) are treated by the Burmese in an unfriendly manner” [FGD with Meiteis in Myanmar].

This Burmese attitude towards the Indian communities does not extend to the *Kathe* (the term the Burmese use to denote the Meiteis in Myanmar). The *Kathe* is not considered by the Burmese as stateless peoples, because they had been recognized as a minority community in Burma since pre-colonial times. They enjoyed certain privileges in the Burmese kingdoms. The *Kathe* lost their due respect and dignity in Burma after the latter lost its sovereignty to the British and subsequent formation of modern state after Independence. In the changing scenario of South and Southeast Asian states, the two nations came up, Indian and Burmese after Independence. Though their Homeland (Manipur) became a part of Indian nation, the Burmese take the *Kathe* in Burma as an integral part of larger Burmese nation. The Meiteis in Burma do not feel that they are treated as one of ‘stateless’ peoples by the Burmese authority and Burmese society. “Burmese never treat us as Indians” (FGD with Meiteis in Myanmar). In the FGD, it is observed that while using the word ‘Indian’ in the expression, the Meitei stressed the word to the tune of a Burmese.

However, they also face hardship in their so-

cial lives in Myanmar. They should have a Burmese name. Their Meitei or Hindu names are used in their communities or in certain rituals. Officially, their names cannot be used. Their difficulties are tremendous and are shared by other Indian communities there. As reported by Pradip Phanjoubam, Editor, *Imphal Free Press*, Eigya Sayacharan, a resident of Mandalay, Myanmar, expresses of "A burning love for Manipur, the home of our ancestors." Eigya said, in what may be one of the most touching tributes to the Meitei identity and its tremendous survival instinct. The odds that Eigya Sayacharan's generation and so too all generations of orthodox, zealous, new convert Hindu Meiteis before him would have faced, is visible even today. Just the example of food habit of the place should be able to give a picture of the magnitude of this disconcertment. Myanmar is a country difficult for vegetarians" (Phanjoubam 2008). The Meiteis are non-vegetarian with an exception of fish only. In many parts of Burma, the hotels and restaurants serve mainly non-vegetarian food. To a Meitei, serving vegetarian foods along with non-vegetarian foods is considered as religiously polluted. The Buddhist Burmese who are the majority people in Burma like pork very much. This is shown in their traditional saying: "A thee ma, thayet; a thar ma, wet; a ywet ma, lahpet" (meaning, Of all the fruit, the mango's the best; of all the meat, the pork's the best; and of all the leaves, lahpet's the best).

The Burmese negative attitude towards Indian communities in Myanmar is deep rooted in the nationalist movement in Burma. In the later phase of the movement, it took an anti-Indian turn. The alienation of vast tracts of agricultural land to Indian Chettiars, the Burmese entry into the labour markets following the depression of the 1930s, which was hitherto an exclusive Indian domain, the opening of the University of Rangoon and consequent turning out of Burmese graduates searching for clerical jobs – all these brought out anti-Indian sentiments. There were large scale riots against the Indians in the 1930s, due to social, economic, and cultural reasons. The Burmese nationalists wanted freedom not only from the British political domination but they were also equally keen to throw out the yoke of Indian economic stranglehold (Suryanarayan 2009).

As the Meitei in Myanmar had different historical experiences and they could not adapt to

the changing socio-political changes in the colonial period, the Burmese did not have any anti-Meitei sentiment. Burmese do not consider, today, the Meitei as part of Indian diaspora. On the other hand, Indian communities in Myanmar look at Meitei as a different people. Indian diasporas in Myanmar avoided seeing the Meitei as one of Indian diasporic communities in Myanmar. *Kathe* is not part of Indian Diaspora in the eyes of the Burmese Indians. The Tamils are more distant than Bengalis and Gorkhas to the eyes of the Meitei there. The Meiteis in Myanmar, too, do not consider other Indian diasporas as one to which they belong.

The social distance between the Meitei and other Indian diasporas is well expressed in one of the Focus Group discussions with the Meiteis in Myanmar.

"Bengalis are very similar to us. We observe same religious festivals, worship same gods, and have more or less similar foods. We use their scripts. But, the Bengalis do not consider us as one of the groups originated from India. To them, we are just one of Burmese ethnic groups" [FGD with Meiteis in Myanmar].

The Meiteis in Myanmar are mainly peasants and artisans. There are some businessmen in Rangoon and Mandalay. A few of them are in government service. Their localities are mainly in the Burmese dominated areas. Hence their interaction with the Bengalis or other Indian communities in Myanmar is less frequent.

The situation is slightly different in Bangladesh. Strong religious fraternity is observed with Bengali Hindus and the Meitei Hindus. They attend each other's religious ceremonies. However, a linguistic consciousness is very strong among the Meiteis and distinguishes themselves from the Bengali Hindus with it.

"In spite of our religious affinity, the Bengalis keep a distance because of the linguistic difference. We also do not like to mix with them at the cost of our (linguistic) identity" [FGD with Meiteis in Bangladesh]

There are about 133,600 (estimated, 2000) Meiteis in Bangladesh. Most of them live in the district of Sylhet in northeastern Bangladesh, bordering the Indian state of Meghalaya. Main places where the Meiteis live are Kamalganj, Sreemongal, Kulaura, Baralekha thanas, Moulvi Bazar, Chunarughat thana, and Chhatak thana.

Manipuris migrated to the Bangladesh area and settled here at different times due to wars,

conflicts and socio-political reasons. Their migration started during the reign of Rajarshi Baghyachandra (1764–1789) and the process was accelerated by the Manipur-Burma War (1819–1825) which is a black chapter in the history of Manipur. After the war with Burma, Manipur was ruled by the Burmese invaders for about seven years. During that period, King Chourajit Singh along with two younger brothers, Marjit Singh and Gambhir Singh took refuge in Sylhet. A hoard of Manipuri subjects followed them. A palace was built at that time at Mirzajangal of Sylhet town (Islam 2003: 409).

Most Meiteis in Bangladesh are farmers. Their primary crop is rice, but they grow a variety of other crops, including sugarcane, tobacco, oranges, and pineapples. They eat fish, but in accordance with Manipuri Hinduism, they abstain from eating any meat. In rural areas, to protect their homes from flooding, the Meiteis build their houses on wooden bamboo poles. The houses have reed walls plastered with mud, and the roofs are made of thatch or tin. The villagers are divided into several clans (extended family units). People are not permitted to marry within their own clan. They must find a spouse from another clan. The Meiteis have only one exterior caste, corresponding to the Indian exterior caste of “untouchables.” These people have no prestige and are dominated by higher castes.

For recreation, the Manipuri enjoy polo, boat racing, drama, and dancing. They are famous throughout the world for their beautiful expressive dances. The dances are actually dramas interpreted by a narrator who chants dialogue and gives descriptions of the action. Themes are generally taken from the life of the god Krishna (Bethany World Prayer Center 1997).

They, both males and females, are involved in income generating activities. However, most of them are poor. Therefore they engage themselves in different economic activities simultaneously. Their main economic activities are: Agriculture, handloom weaving, government employee, non-government employee, teaching, carpentry, automobile mechanics, goldsmith, business, Ayurvedic treatment, livestock rearing, tailoring.

They have more cordial relations with other linguistic and religious minorities. They also have pride in their own language, literature, dance and music. *Ras Lila* dance is considered to be a gift to the Bangladesh cultural life by the Meiteis.

This sense of pride is ‘the foundation on which we can live without fear’.

“The Bengali Hindus’ superiority complex is obvious. We also think, at the same time, we are not inferior to them. This is not explicitly expressed in our relation with them. But, that is in the hearts. We are the minority in a Muslim dominated land. But, minority does not mean inferior. After all, the Hindu Bengalis are also minority here” [FGD with Meiteis in Bangladesh]

Diaspora and Homeland Politics

In order to know if the Meitei Diaspora is aware of contemporary political realities in their homeland and their attitude towards them, the author took up the issues of insurgency in the state of Manipur. Insurgency is one of the major social problems in the state of Manipur. The state of Manipur is witnessing insurgency for more than six decades. The prolonged armed conflict is going on since the day of the merger of Manipur against the Union of India.

There are a number of insurgent groups in the state. The largest, oldest and strongest among them is the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) which was founded in 1964, under the leadership of Arambam Samarendra on November 24, 1964 to achieve independence and a socialist society. It was a secessionist organization and was the culmination of several movements like the shadowy Pan-Mongoloid movement and the *Revolutionary Nationalist Party* (RNP), which raised the banner of independence in 1953. UNLF remained a social organization for a decade after this, and took to arms again only in the early nineties. By mid-1990, the front decided to launch an armed struggle for the ‘liberation’ of Manipur from India. In the same year, it formed an armed wing called *Manipur People’s Army* (MPA) (Global Security Org). The ongoing armed conflict between the Government of India and the insurgent groups in the state is the most serious homeland crisis. Many issues came up around the conflict including human rights violation, special powers given to the Security Forces.

The ongoing conflict in their homeland is well known to all the diasporic Meitei communities. They have heard about the insurgent groups. But, they are more concerned with the stories of human rights violation in the course of Counter-

Insurgency operation in their homeland. Some of them are well informed of the details of some cases of human right violations, especially of rape and torture.

"We are shocked when we heard of state atrocities on civilians. We can feel the nature of such atrocities. We also see such atrocities in Myanmar too." [FGD with Meiteis in Myanmar]

"We heard news of human rights violations in Manipur and protest against such violations. We share the pain and sorrow of the people of Manipur" [FGD with Meiteis in Bangladesh]

Beyond human rights, many of them are less concerned with the politics of insurgency which is one of the prime concerns in their homeland. To them, Meiteis of Manipur have their own political ambition which is far removed from the practical challenges of Meitei diaspora.

"We cannot say anything about Manipur's politics. But, as Manipur is our homeland, Manipur government should support us in solving our problems here (Tripura)" [FGD with Meiteis in Tripura]

Politically, the diasporic Meiteis expect many things from the government of their homeland. They look towards homeland when they face a crisis in the relationship with other ethnic groups in their respective countries. They face a number of hardships in economy as well as in their identity assertion. In such cases, they like the Manipur government to help them. Since they do not get what they expect from the homeland government, many a time, they feel isolated and excluded. There is an ambivalence attitude towards their *Sana Leibak*.

"Manipur neglects us. The people of Manipur do not help us in our agitations for a better position in Assam" [FGD with Meiteis in Assam]

Thus, homeland politics does not have any hard impression on these diasporic communities. They look very skeptically at the use of arms in the homeland politics. Their voice over the political conflict is well expressed in the following statements:

"We know many insurgent groups operating in Manipur. But we cannot understand why these groups engage in violence. Government of Manipur should solve the problem, sooner the better." [FGD with Meiteis in Myanmar]

"The Government of Manipur should be ready to have peace talks with the insurgent groups.

The peace talk is the only solution to every political problem" [FGD with Meiteis in Bangladesh].

Diasporic communities have their own political considerations which have their merit. Politically, they are less concerned with Pan-Manipur or Pan-Meitei political nationalism. They are more involved with their immediate hardship because they are minorities and often politically marginalized in their respective states/countries. But, they try to keep a constant relationship with the homeland in the domain of art and literature. Many diasporic writers attract homeland with their literary works and creative imagination of their homeland. They also write on their hard life in their respective country as a minority group. However, there is still less interaction between the homeland writers and diasporic writers.

CONCLUSION

The diasporic Meiteis have a strong sense of their belongingness to the Pan-Manipuri identity or a Meitei society. Their cultural identity is asserted in Buddhist or Muslim dominated country. Hinduism (Manipuri Hinduism, to be precise) is considered as the fundamental base which they would differentiate themselves from others, even from other Hindu communities in their respective country. Though there are religious sects among the Meiteis, they are proud of their contribution of Manipuri *Ras Lila* to the Indian Hindu performing traditions. The Manipuri dance is one of Indian classical dances, the others being Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, and Odissi. Among the diasporic Meiteis, all forms of Manipuri dance are performed, though there are certain variations among them. These dances are universally performed in all sacred and secular functions of the Meiteis.

Moreover, they have a pride that their language is recognized as one of Scheduled Language of Indian Constitution. The Manipuri language that evolved out of the Meitei language is lingua franca of the state of Manipur. As their population in host country is very small in relation to other populations, the Manipuri language is not recognized or placed in a respectable position. This is source of discontent among the diaspora Meitei. Their discontent is channelized towards the Manipur Government as the latter does not help in bringing up the issues at proper

forum. This type of discontent is well observed among the Meiteis of Cachar and Tripura (both in India).

The question of the Meitei-identity – in Myanmar and Bangladesh – is complex. They cannot identify themselves as a part and parcel of Indian Diaspora in their respective countries. This negation to Indian Diaspora identity is partly due to racial differences and partly different historical experiences. Indian communities also do not consider them within wider Indian Diaspora. The Meitei- and the Indian identity in Myanmar are sharply divided because the Indian communities have less interaction with the Meiteis there. In spite of the fact that both have a religious affinity, the Meiteis in Myanmar do not interact with the Bengalis too. The Meitei feeling of ‘a different Hindu’ is stronger though their Vaishnavism⁴ is of the Bengal School.

Contrary to the situation of Myanmar, in spite of close interaction with Bengali Hindus in Bangladesh, the Meiteis do not consider themselves as of the Indian community. Their base of identity is Manipuri Hinduism in relation with the majority Muslim. Simultaneously, their linguistic identity is distinctive from the Indian communities there. The Manipuri language belongs to Kuki-Chin group of Tibeto-Burman Family in Sino-Tibetan Division; whereas, the Bengali language is an Indo-European language. Interestingly, the linguistic and cultural roots bind the Meiteis and the Meitei Muslims (*Pangan*, in Meitei language) in the country. In all practical sense, the linguistic identity is more profound in Bangladesh. The religious similarities between the Hindu Bengalis and the Meitei become secondary in the Meitei-Hindu Bengalis-Meitei Muslims.

In terms of political aspirations, they are more engaging in their ethnic assertion movements in their host countries based on religious and linguistic bases. They are less concerned with the homeland contemporary political realities. Their concerned with homeland (Manipur) politics, if there is at all, is more concerned with the human rights violations and humanitarian crisis. They do not concern much with the political goals and political aspirations of insurgents in their homeland.

The strong cultural ties do not necessarily bring a political relationship between the homeland and the diasporic Meiteis. The political realities of the diasporic communities are differ-

ent from the homeland politics. This difference may be because of the poor economic condition of the diasporic Meiteis. Moreover, there is no active political interaction between homeland and diasporic Meiteis.

Diasporic Meiteis are citizens of different countries, i.e., India (in case of Assam and Tripura), Burma and Bangladesh. And homeland Meiteis are Indian. In their respective countries, they are looked upon as ‘foreign-origin’, though they are citizens of the country. The citizenship-nation relationship among the diasporic Meiteis is interestingly unique in the sense that their ‘nation’ in their respective countries does not accept them fully and their homeland is in India whose nation is not internalized by them. Still they cannot accept the hard political conflicts in the homeland too. So, their consciousness is mainly based on the 19th century culture. The long gap in time and interaction among diasporic Meiteis and homeland, however, do not affect their cultural ties, memorialization of their historical experiences.

NOTES

- ¹ A *gotra* is the lineage or clan assigned to a Hindu at birth. In most cases, the system is patrilineal and the *gotra* assigned is that of the person's father. Other terms for it are *vansh*, *vanshaj*, *bedagu*, *purvik*, *purvajan*, *pitru*. An individual may decide to identify his lineage by a different *gotra*, or combination of *gotras*. According to strict Hindu tradition, the term *gotra* is used only for the lineages of Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya Varna. Brahminical *gotra* relates directly to the original seven or eight *rishis* of the Vedas. Later, the term *gotra* was expanded beyond Brahmin (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gotra>).
- ² It excludes the Meitei migration and Diaspora in various states such as UK, US and South East Asia countries.
- ³ The Shan is an ethnic group in Burma. They had an independent state in historical period. There were conflict between the Burmese and the Shan over political supremacy. Later, the Burmese put them down under the former's political rule. Now, the Shan is part of Burmese Nation that came into existence after British left Burma in 1949.
- ⁴ Vaishnavism of the Bengal school is otherwise known as *Chaitanya Vaishnavism*. The school was founded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534) in Bengal. The Meiteis are following the basic tenants of Chaitanya Vaishnavism which had been synthesized with their traditional religion and religious practices.

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