

A Study on the Marginalised Loi Communities of Manipur

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Abstract

This paper makes a humble attempt to explore the marginalised Loi communities in Manipur, and historical discourses. It also attempts to examine the socio-religious movements of Lois, and their development challenges in contemporary Manipuri society. The study is based on the descriptive and analytical research. The Loi Communities settled in four districts of Manipur, and only eight villages were identified as Scheduled Caste by the Government under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Order Amendment Act, 1956. The post-independence period significantly impacted the Lois people's social, political, and economic life. Historically, they were found engaged in various industries to pay tribute to the king but considered these occupations degraded and hesitated to take them up. Agriculture was the primary driver of the Lois economy leading to poor economic growth. The study identifies a system of social stratification in Manipur as early as 18th century when Hinduisation process was strong during the successive periods of Kings. In the contemporary Manipuri society, there is marginalisation of Loi Communities due to a lack of job prospects, high rate of educated youth unemployment, lack of a proper market, with many villages lacking hospitals or primary health clinics. The present study also finds that despite sociocultural shifts and difficulties, the Lois has managed to preserve the pure tradition and culture of the Meitei. Modern education has allowed younger people to mix between classes and castes, and the Lois and Meiteis are now interacting and marrying each other.

Introduction

Manipur, surrounded by nine mountainous terrains endowed with natural beauty, is located in the north-eastern region of India with a total area of 22,327 sq. km. and a diverse population of almost 3 million people. Data showed that Meiteis constituted more than 50 per cent of the total population, while the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled

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Caste (mainly Lois) constituted approximately 40 per cent and 4 per cent respectively. Muslim community contributed about 8 per cent of the total population in Manipur. Studies revealed that in the early 18th century, the Meiteis, who had followed their ancient Meitei religion, started adopting Hinduism, while the tribal ethnic communities in the hilly regions, who followed their animistic tribal religion, converted to Christianity in the 19th century A.D. Tribal communities living in the hilly areas have their own unique cultures and racial identities. According to a study by Thiyam, S. Bharat and Ningthoujam Yaiphaba (2024), it is found that the caste system per se as prevalent in other parts of the country was a non-existent entity in Manipur in the past. In contrast, the Manipuri society was grounded on seven clans: Ningthouja, Khuman, Moirang, Angom, Leishangthem, Chenglei, and Luwang. The clans possessed their own position, dignity, and respect and formed the foundation of the Meities' social and political systems. In this context, it would be highly relevant to examine here how the word Meiteis has been derived. The word 'Meitei' has been interpreted differently by different scholars. According to Hodson, the word "Meitheï" or Meitei has been derived from *mi* = man and *thei* = separate. For Constantine, the term 'Meitei' applies to anyone belonging to the seven clans. To Kirti, the term "Meitei" primarily meant the people of the Ningthouja clan who had entered Manipur in 33 A.D. At present, the Meiteis can be classified into two religious categories: the Gouriya Meiteis and the Sanamahi Meiteis. Various scholars defined Lois in different ways. Maibam Mangoljao (2018), who studied on the socio-economic conditions of Lois in Manipur, said the word 'Loi' is generally associated with the degraded, subdued dependents, outcaste and low caste people of Manipur. N. Khelchandra (1978) defined the term Loi as those who either subdued or paid tributes to the sovereign. M. Kirti Singh (1980) opines that "Loi means subdued, dependent, outcaste, backward and to complete or to be completed". The Lois of Manipur has been designated the status of low-caste people as the Dalits of mainstream India and has been pushed to the divergent areas of Manipur. Social intercourse and intermarriage with the Hinduised Meiteis and higher order were prohibited. So, Lois is considered as a subaltern. The study by Maibam Mangoljao finds that the Lois inhabited in many villages such as Phayeng, Sekmai, Andro, Khurkhul, Koutruk, Tairenpokpi, Leimaram, Thongjao, Chairen, Kakching, Kakching Khunou, Heirok, Wangjing, Sugnu, Thanga, etc. Further, that there was a historical background for the emergence of the Lois. Original Lois was the inhabitants of this State long before Pakhangba- who ascended the throne in 33 A.D. Later on, they were subdued by the successive Meitei Kings. Then, the population of Lois gradually increased owing to the assimilation of migrants belonging to various ethnic groups--- war captives and those who committed crimes against the Kingdom to Loi villages.

Objectives and Methodology

This paper makes a humble to explore the marginalised Loi Communities in Manipur, and their historical discourses. It also attempts to examine the socio-religious movements of Lois, and their development challenges in the contemporary Manipuri society. The present study is based on the descriptive and analytical research. The data for the study is based on the secondary sources and, therefore, several literatures on the studies of Lois have been examined and reviewed. It included census data, reports, research papers,

Ph.D Thesis, journals, books, Manipur Gazette, articles on websites, encyclopaedia, manuscripts, etc. The present paper is organised into six sections. Section I provides the introduction. Section II and III present the objectives and methodology and historical discourses of the study. Section IV provides socio-religious movements. Section V provides development and challenges. The last section provides the conclusion of the study.

Historical Discourses

Scholars have different opinions on the origin of Lois in Manipur, with some identifying them as an independent tribe and others as part of the Meitei community. Historically, they were dislodged from the Meitei society as a retribution for violating social customs and traditions. In Manipur, the Loi paying tribute is called 'Loi-Pot-Kaba', signifying the Meitei Kings' subordination and the policy of exclusion. During King Pamheiba's reign, the religious faith of the Meiteis changed significantly, leading to the Hinduisation process. The archaic Meitei script 'Puyas' went up in flames, leading to the introduction of Bengali and Sanskrit languages. The new name 'Manipur' was introduced by King Bhagyachandra, who introduced the Ras leela, the highest divine articulation glorifying Krishna in the dance form in the land of aesthetic Meitei. A vestigial form of caste system was brought in during King Churchand's reign (1891-1941). The Hindu Meiteis, including Rajkumars and people belonging to the seven clans, were assigned as Meitei Kshetriyas, while the Lois, the depressed class, were considered untouchables or degraded. People were made mandatory to mark tilak on their forehead to prove their faith in Vaisnavism, which led to a religious tax called Chandan-Senkhai. The people could not raise any form of protest against the despotic monarchical setup, which allowed no democratic space. The Lois population in Manipur had different tributary groups determined by the items they paid tribute to the king. This system of tribute administered on the Lois contributed significantly to the economy of the state and facilitated the Hinduised Meitei to sustain their upper caste/class status. During King Bhagyachandra reign, the grandeur of Hinduisation reached its crest, with the Kings embracing Hinduism. All kings were given the Hindu names and the Kings correspondingly patronised the Hindu. A sacred ritual ceremony called 'Nongkrang Iruppa' was carried out in the process of conversion, wherein the performer underwent a dip into the sacred Nungjeng river holding a branch of a tree called 'Nongkrang'. The Sati system began to exist in the Meitei society, which was not there before Hinduisation. The Brahma Sabha was an interpreter of Hindu Smriti and they decided the religious fate of the Hindu Manipuris. The lifestyles and occupation of the lower Caste were trapped, and the people had to obey the rules of Hinduism fearing severe punishment and ostracisation. The study by Maibam Mangoljao finds that the term 'Loi' came to be recorded for the first time during the reign of Meidingu Taothimang, the Meitei king who ruled Manipur during the third and fourth century A.D. when Haokha Lokha, a Chakpa village, paid annual tribute to the king. With the adoption of Hinduism by the Meiteis, the social discrimination of the 'Lois' by the Meitei Hindus became more sharpened. The 'Lois', despite of their lower social status, could also attain higher status of Meitei Hindus if the reigning Meitei king was pleased and if they converted to Hinduism through performing some ceremonies associated

with it. Through the various works allotted to them, they were the backbone of the economy of Manipur during the native rule in Manipur.

Socio-Religious Movements

As anti-colonial and caste movements in India awakened people to realise social, religious, economic, and administrative practices of injustice, Hijam Irabot Singh, a prominent social reformer and other political parties emerged in Manipur, demanding responsible government, democratic form of government, and integration of people in hills and plains. The British Colonial rule ended with the hostage of the 'Pakhangba' Flag, leading to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy with democratic, equality, and fraternity elements. Under Naoria Phullo's leadership, a new socio-religious awakening among the Meiteis of Cachar in Assam emerged, aiming to revive traditional Manipuri Meitei culture and tradition. The movement sought to reclaim traditional deities and return Meiteis to their traditional religion, using their own archaic Meitei script for worship. The Loi Caste, which has been subjugated as an age-old tradition, got a Scheduled Caste status after India's independence. However, due to its originality, population strength, and socio-cultural connectivity, the Lois occupied an exceptional post among other Scheduled Castes. Particular mention may be made here that the European anthropologists perceived the same origin of the Meiteis with the tribes of Manipuris as the Aryan theory of the origin of Meiteis. However, Phullo had a contrasting view with them and had developed a distinct theory of his own on the question of the origin of Meiteism. To him, Meiteis were descended from God, Lainingthou (King of all Gods) and the religion of the Meiteis was the worship of the Supreme God. The manufacturing of local rice beer was encouraged as customary law of Meiteis. For their revivalist activities, the Brahma Sabha ostracised 38 members during the movement in 1947 and was declared polluted. Discovery of the Puyas, reviving the cultural heritage of the Meitei, undertaking research into the traditional religion and culture of the Meiteis and advocating hill-valley unity tracing the common origin were all set as programmes of the movement. The resurgence of Lai Haraoba (rejoicing of Gods), the revival of archaic Meitei script etc., were some of the profound impacts of the movement. At present, the Lois and Hindu Meities have the same cultural identity, and worship the same traditional Meitei Deities 'Guru Sidaba', Sanamah'i and 'Leimaren'. However, the Hindu Meities also worship Hindu deities along with Meitei Gods but the rituals they performed differed from one another and some of the Lois converted to Christianity.

Thus, the Loi caste has been subjugated as an age-old tradition and so, they were enlisted in the Scheduled Caste status after India's independence. There are six other Scheduled Caste in Manipur besides Loi, viz., Yaithibis, Dhobi, Patni, Namsudra, Ruchi or Ravidas and Sutradhar. However, due to its originality, population strength and socio-cultural connectivity with other communities, the Lois occupies an exceptional post amongst other SCs. They settled in four districts of Manipur viz., Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur, Thoubal and other 32 Loi Villages. Among these, only 8 villages of Lois are identified as Scheduled Caste by the Government under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Order Amendment Act, 1956, acknowledging that these villages

are socially, economically, educationally, and backward communities (which followed a conflict between the Scheduled Caste Loi villages and non-Scheduled Caste Loi villages as the latter demanded for the inclusion of them in the Scheduled Caste and issuance of Scheduled Caste certificate to them). Later, three villages were included into the Scheduled Caste of Manipur. For instance, Kakching was included in 1992 Marc, Thanga in 1995 August and Chairen in 2005 May, respectively³.

Development and Challenges

The post-independence period significantly impacted the social, political, and economic life of the Lois people. They engaged in various industries to pay tribute to the king, including silk manufacturing, salt manufacturing, blacksmithing, coin manufacturing, carpentry, pottery manufacturing, and fishing. However, the Meiteis and others considered these occupations degraded and hesitated to take them up. Agriculture was the primary driver of the Lois economy, and they began incorporating contemporary methods into the age-old practice of bullock ploughing. However, poor farmers could not afford modern methods including fertilisers, leading to poor economic growth. The development of Scheduled Caste villages was hampered by the lack of suitable locations for trading and marketing. Village officers, such as 'Khullakpa', 'Luplakpa', 'Khunjahanba', 'Yupalba', 'Telloihanjaba', 'Telloihidang', 'Heijanglakpa', 'Pakhanglakpa', 'Naharakpa', 'Loumilakpa', 'Loumidang', 'Chabolhanjab', and 'Laiselungb', guarded the majority of Loi settlements. Institutions like Singlup, Leirup, and Keirup were present in the hamlet, but they ceased to operate properly after Manipur joined the Indian Union and a new administrative system was implemented. The new administrative structure has somewhat distorted the power and status of the village, as the traditional authorities are now solely involved with Lai-Haraoba religious matters. The Panchayati Raj System which is a local self-government institution in Scheduled Caste villages is governed by the Panchayat members and Pradhan. But some villages, like Phayeng and Koutruk, lack the electoral strength to elect a Pradhan of Panchayat, limiting development opportunities. Thus, Loi villages have limited participation in General or Assembly Elections due to their small population. The majority of Loi people believe that political representatives serve their interests rather than the advancement of the Scheduled Caste. There is a severe social crisis in Loi society due to a lack of job prospects and a high rate of educated youth unemployment. There is lack of proper market and many villages lack hospitals or primary health clinics.

Conclusion

The study identifies a system of social stratification in Manipur as early as 18th century when Hinduisation process was strong during the successive periods of Kings. The term 'Loi' came to be recorded for the first time during the reign of Meidingu Taothimang, the Meitei king who ruled Manipur during the third and fourth century A.D. when Haokha Lokha, a Chakpa village, paid annual dependent tribute the king. With the adoption of

³ Maibam Mangoljai (2018). Socio-Economic Conditions of the Lois of Manipur before the 19th Century. International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts, Volume 6, Issue 1 March 2018, ISSN: 2320-2882. pp. 1183-1188.

Hinduism by the Meiteis, the social discrimination of the 'Lois' by the Meitei Hindus became more sharpened. The 'Lois', despite of their lower social status, could also become higher status Meitei Hindus if the reigning Meitei king was pleased and if they converted to Hinduism through performing some ceremonies associated with it. Through the various works allotted to them, they were the backbone of the economy of Manipur during the native rule in Manipur. The study by Thiyam, S. Bharat & Yaiphaba Ningthoujam (2024) finds that the Lois are a group of people who were discriminated, degraded, socially excluded and out casted in the earlier Manipuri society for certain reasons. They were looked down upon and were treated as inferior to the others and hence bore the brunt of paying tributes for the effective functioning of the state for centuries. After independence, some Loi villages have become Scheduled Caste while others have been left behind. Affirmative state actions and changing perceptions of the society have gradually pulled them within the ambit of the mainstream society. However, the scars of past discrimination still persist and majority of them are still in the firm grip of poverty due to lack of literacy and their traditional occupational patterns. The present study also finds that despite sociocultural shifts and difficulties, the Lois has managed to preserve the pure tradition and culture of the Meitei. Modern education has allowed younger people to mix between classes and castes, and the Lois and Meiteis are now interacting and marrying each other. The Indian Constitution provides specific protections for the interests of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SCs and STs) in areas such as education, appointment or post-reservation, economic interest, and the removal of untouchability. The Government of Manipur's Department of Development of Tribals and SC employs three-pronged strategies: safeguarding SC/ST individuals from crimes, improving their socioeconomic standing through developmental programs, and preventing the loss of their rich cultural heritage. In areas like Kakching, the Scheduled Caste has made some progress, but the majority of Lois and Scheduled Caste villages are still in poor financial condition and they are lagging behind in many developmental areas. They are aware of the various privileges accorded to them, but they are unaware of the laws protecting them. Inclusive policy or social inclusion in terms of government welfare programs and schemes are required and this includes post-matric scholarships, reservations in government agencies and educational institutions, political consciousness, housing grants, and support for farming, weaving, and raising animals.

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