

The Bishnupuriya Manipuri Language

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Abstract

The Bishnupurias or Bishnupuriyas, also known as Mayangs, Kalisha Manipuris, and Bishnupuriyas inhabit parts of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura in India, and also outside India in Bangladesh and Myanmar. The erstwhile kingdom of Manipur was in fact, the meeting ground of people belonging to diverse ethnic groups who migrated in various periods of its history. There are thirty-three officially recognised ethnic groups in the state today. The Manipur valley with a landmass of 11% of the total is inhabited by 61.54%, of the total population of the state whereas 38.46%.of the population resides in the hill areas. The word Bishnupuriya⁵ is referred to as a mother tongue in the Census of India, 1951. Subsequent records maintained by the British India Government as well as the Government of India Census Reports in independent India mention Bishnupuriya as a community speaking a language of the same name . It is a matter of grave concern regarding the nomenclature of the community as to whether they can be identified as Bishnupuriyas or Bishnupuriya Manipuris. This aspect has affected the identity of the language as Bishnupuriya versus Bishnupuriya Manipuri.

Keywords: Bishnupuriyas, Manipur valley, census reports, identity of language.

Introduction:

The Bishnupurias or Bishnupuriyas,¹ also known as Mayangs, Kalisha Manipuris, and Bishnupuriyas inhabit parts of Assam, Manipur,² Meghalaya and Tripura in India, and also outside India in Bangladesh and Myanmar. R.K. Jhalajit Singh refers to the Bishnupuriyas as ‘one of the main groups of people who inhabit Manipur, and that only a few of them now live in Manipur’³ The erstwhile kingdom of Manipur was in fact, the meeting ground of people belonging to diverse ethnic groups who migrated in various periods of its history. There are thirty-three officially recognised ethnic groups in the state today. The Manipur valley with a landmass of 11% of the total is inhabited by 61.54%, of the total population of the state whereas 38.46%.of the population resides in the hill areas. ⁴

The word Bishnupuriya⁵ is referred to as a mother tongue in the Census of India, 1951. ⁶ Subsequent records maintained by the British India Government as well as the Government of India Census Reports in independent India mention Bishnupuriya as a community speaking a language of the same name. G.A. Grierson⁷ in the Linguistic Survey of India, recorded that there were one thousand speakers of the Bishnupuriya language in two or three villages near Bishnupur in Manipur. They are now included in the list of Other Backward Classes (OBC) in Tripura.⁸ In Assam⁹ this community of speakers of the Bishnupuriya language have been demanding inclusion as OBC in the State list. In Assam, the community has been demanding introduction of the language as a medium of instruction at the primary level, that is, up to Class V. In the year 2001 C.E., the Government of Assam introduced Bishnupuriya language as a subject but not as a medium in 52 schools out of 149 schools enlisted. It is a matter of grave concern regarding the nomenclature of the community as to whether they can be identified as Bishnupuriyas or

Bishnupuriya Manipuris. This aspect has affected the identity of the language as Bishnupuriya versus Bishnupriya Manipuri.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

An overview of the existing and emerging body of knowledge is helpful in identifying gaps in the research undertaken. The literature review is categorized as follows:

I. Primary Source: In Vernacular

The ancient texts called Puyas¹⁰ form a very important source for the present research study. Encyclopaedic in nature, the contents may include subjects such as genealogy, charms and mantras, religious philosophy etc. The Puyas are treated as sacred texts and for this reason they were kept at a place in the home where they could be kept untouched, except on auspicious days when they were brought out. However, these texts are in the hands of a few custodians since many were lost on account of the aftermath of the infamous Puya Meithaba (Burning of Puyas) when they were ordered to be burnt by King Garibniwaz in the wake of coming of the new faith in the 18th century C.E.

A puya of particular relevance for Bishnupriya Manipuri history and culture is the Khumal Puran³⁴ edited by Navakhendra which has reference to the nomenclature of the community. Cheitharol Kumbaba,¹¹ the state royal chronicle of Manipur which is also categorized as a Puya refers to the presence of Mayang or Bishnupriya in the Manipur valley. But the term 'Mayang'¹² today is used in Manipur to refer to 'outsiders' or the people coming from the western direction which may include Hindus, Muslims etc.

II. Secondary Sources: In English

The subject of identity particularly the language of the Bishnupuriyas forms a very important aspect among the works written about the community. The works which mentions the 'Mayangs', as nomenclature for to the people include, E.T. Dalton's¹³ book titled Ethnology of Bengal, S.K. Chatterjee's¹⁴ book titled in Kirata-Jana-Kirti, and Ch. Manihar Singh's¹⁵ book titled A Clarification on the Bishnupriya in Relation to the Manipuris. Bhim Sen Singha's¹⁶ work titled Let History and Facts Speak about Manipuris is another useful work dealing with identity issues. In his book titled The Bishnupriya Manipuri Language K.P. Sinha¹⁷ discusses the issue of nomenclature and language of the community and opines that the use of the term 'Mayang' for the people is incorrect. K.P. Sinha's work titled¹⁸ The Bishnupriya Manipuris: Their Language, Literature & Culture is a comprehensive work which deals in details about the culture and literature of the community and the acculturation that have taken place. C.K. Sinha's edited volume,¹⁹ The Bishnupriya Manipuris before the Assam Backward Classes Commission, contains all the relevant details and documents regarding the efforts of the Bishnupriya Manipuri people to protect the identity, language and culture which is said to be under perceived threat. S. S. Tunga²⁰ explains in the book titled Bengali and the other Related Dialects of South Assam, that Bishnupriya Manipuri language is a hybrid of there languages viz; Bengali, Assamese-Manipuri. Pauthang Haokip²¹ also explains that Bishnupriya had close links with both Bengali and Assamese, in his book titled Socio-Linguistic Situation in North-East India." S. Gajrani's²² book titled History, Religion and Culture of India also discusses language issues in the context of the community and suggests that there are two distinct languages viz; Meitei language and Bishnupriya Manipuri language. Sipra Sen's²³ book titled Tribes and Castes of Manipur: Description and Select Bibliography is informative regarding tribes and castes of Manipur. The Meitei and the Bishnupriya authored by Wangkhemcha Chingtamien deals with history of the two ethnic groups, and opines that the groups came in contact only by the 14th century C.E.

Laishram Basanti Devi²⁴ in her thesis entitled, A Study of Political History of Manipur from Pakhangba to Khagemba (33 to 1652 A.D) explains that the section of people known as Bishnupriyas deserves special mention in the society of the valley of Manipur. The book states that previously they were known as Mayangs as some of them were the war captives captured by king Khagemba from Cachar in the early part of 1715 C.E. The Bishnupriyas are at present found settled in Ningthoukhong, Nachau, Ngaikhong Khullen, Ngaikhong Khunon near Loktak lake and in Wangjing, Heirok and Khangabok. The work suggests that they were descendants of immigrants from eastern Bengal who came to Manipur in different periods.

According to Morangthem Shantirani Devi,²⁵ the population of Manipur at a later period of its history came to be divided into different groups like the Meiteis, the Nagas and the Kuki chins, the Manipuri Muslims, the Mayangs, the Bishnupriyas, the Lois and the Manipuri Brahmins or Meitei Bamons which indicate migration of people and integration with the local populace. Andrew Dalby's²⁶, Dictionary of Languages has definitive reference to more than four hundred languages and is an important work which gives crucial information on this community. He refers to the Bishnupriya Manipuris as Mayangs and suggests that they have been historically linked to Manipur and later migrated out from there to Tripura, Cachar and Sylhet in Bangladesh in the early nineteenth century C.E. Matthias Brenzinger²⁷ in the book titled Trends in Linguistics: Language Diversity Endangered, suggests that the Bishnupriya Manipuri or Vishnupriya Manipuri is an Indo – Aryan language which is inadequately documented and that the Meitei language had influenced the Bishnupriya speakers in Manipur. Kh. Bidyapati Sinha's,²⁸ book titled The Mayangs Bishnupriyas or the Bangals: A Missing Link, is a small treatise yet attempts to study the language of the people based on the Linguistic Survey of India by G.A. Grierson. Sinha admitted that there is much scope for studying the Bishnupriya language. Mahendra Kumar Sinha's²⁹ work Manipurer Prachin Itihas, tries to trace the origin of the Bishnupriyas in the ancient history of Manipur supporting the Aryan theory of origin i.e., the Babrubahana legend. Naorem Sanajaoba's,³⁰ edited volume titled Manipur Past and Present: The Ordeals and Heritage of a Civilization includes aspects of Bishnupriya migration and attempts to bring out the theory of the community as coming from the western direction of Manipur before the reign of King Garibniwaz (1709-1748 C.E.). The same work explains that the community earned the nomenclature 'Bishnupuri' since their first settlement at Lamangthong in Manipur.

III. Encyclopaedia, Dictionary etc.

Some articles from journals, dictionaries and magazines that have contributed towards understanding the subject in general are: Jagaran, a literary magazine edited by Arjun Singha³¹ and K.P. Sinha's³² work titled An Etymological Dictionary of Bishnupriya Manipuri, and Encyclopaedic Ethnography of the Himalayan Tribes, Vol. 1, by Narendra S. Bisht and T.S. Bankoti. M.C. Arun's³³ article titled Ethnicity and Ethnic Fragmentation: The Question of Bishnupriya has made an attempt to explain Bishnupriya identity in Assam and Tripura. Khondon Singh Lisam's³⁴ work titled Encyclopaedia of Manipur, Vol.1, also tries to explain that the Bishnupriya community residing in Manipur possess a distinct cultural trait of their own. Yumnam Oken Singh and Khuraijam Gyanabati's³⁵ research paper on The Advent of Vaishnavism : A Turning Point in Manipuri Culture, is an important work on the impact of the advent of Vaisnavism in Manipur. The dissertation titled Understanding Practices of Marriage within Bishnupriya Manipuri by Suman Sinha's³⁶ provides useful information on the traditional practices of marriage of the community and the changes that have taken place due to modernization. Christopher Moseley's³⁷ book, Encyclopedia of the World Endangered Languages, is an illuminating work which brings together the highly detailed works of nine linguistic scholars. It highlights the fact that the Bishnupriya Manipuri language, an Indo – Aryan

language is considered to be an endangered language of the world which served as an Indo –Aryan contact as well as lingua franca between the 13th and 19th centuries C.E, in Manipur. James N. Stanford and Dennis R. Preston³⁸ in the edited volume titled Variation in Indigenous Minority Languages, provides a useful source on language and the question of identity crisis of the Bishnupurias in Manipur and in Assam.

RATIONALE OF STUDY:

The reconstruction of the history and culture of the Bishnupurias assumes utmost significance in the light of the increasing search for identity in the recent past. The Language Bill, 1968 which was passed by the Government of Manipur, made Meitei (a non-Aryan word) synonymous with Manipuri (an Aryan word) and Meitei language was included as Manipuri language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. This has had major ramifications for the Bishnupurias since their identity as speakers of a Manipuri language that is quite distinct from Meitei was perceived to have not been given due consideration; although The Linguistic Survey of India calls the language of Bishnupurias as Bishnupriya Manipuri. History reveals that the Burmese occupation of Manipur (1819-1825 C.E) for seven years led to political turmoil which uprooted the socio-religious and political life of the erstwhile Manipur kingdom and since then, majority of the population migrated to the neighbouring areas leading to cultural interaction between the various communities. The cross-cultural interaction took place in the places of settlement such as Cachar, Tripura and West Bengal, among others. Many people came back to their homeland in the subsequent years after the political situation in Manipur became more stable, but their stay with the Bengali Hindus in Cachar, for example created a new fusion which was introduced in Manipur.

UNIVERSE OF STUDY:

The study area of research include the villages in Assam and Manipur which has concentration of the Bishnupurias; the selection being based on purposive-random sampling.³⁹ The field work in Assam was done in Cachar District since the maximum numbers of the Bishnupurias are settled here. The district is located in the southernmost part of Assam and is also one of the oldest districts of the state. It covers an area of 3,786 sq. kms and is geographically located between longitude 92°24' E and 93°15' E and latitudes 24°22' N and 25°8' N. It is surrounded by hills on three sides viz; Borail in the north, Manipur in the east, Lushai in the south, whereas the western part is a plain area that faces Bangladesh. A hilly region, the greater part of the terrain is covered with forests which makes it largely inaccessible.⁴⁰ The undivided Barak valley has been the meeting ground of people belonging to different ethnic groups such as Manipuris, Barmans, Mizos, Riangs, Hmars, and Vaipheis. Majority of the Bishnupurias are Bengali speaking.⁴¹ The earliest inhabitants of Cachar district are believed to be the Kacharis, Manipuris, Muslims and low caste Hindu from Sylhet, Bengalis and Assamese mainly Hindus.⁴²

For the purpose of this research work, field study was carried out in Cachar district in the Bishnupuriya inhabited villages and also the Meitei inhabited villages located adjacent to the Bishnupuriya inhabited villages. In Manipur, field study was conducted in Bishnupur and Thoubal districts and some villages in Imphal East as 4.2 1.95 0.06 11.2 77.5 4.55 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 Meithei Bishnupriya Dimasa (Barmans) Hindustani Bengalee Others Total Population (in %) 23 well as Imphal West districts. The visits were aimed at collecting data on various aspects of life of the community and especially interview the people of both the states of Assam and Manipur concentrating on Bishnupriya inhabited areas. The interviews conducted with a cross-section of the community attempts to understand the perspectives of the people about their tradition and culture particularly in the context of folk narratives which may help to

fill gaps of Bishnupriya history. Another crucial aspect of the field work was to address issues of identity which has affected the contemporary society. The Bishnupuriya inhabited villages include Narsingpur Pargona, Meherpur Pargona or Meherpur Anchal, Bikrampur Pargona, Jatrapur Pargona and also some areas in Silchar town. Under Narsingpur Pargona the names of villages where the community is settled are Khunou, Katakhal, Shantipur, Batirgram, Panibhara, Rengti and Tuk. The Meherpur Anchal residential area falls under the jurisdiction of two Gram panchayats viz; Ambicapur and Bhajantipur. Under Ambicapur Gram Panchayat, the Bishnupuriya settlements are concentrated in Singari West, Singari East, New Bhakatpur, Bhakatpur, Rengti, Kalinjar, Chandrapur, Bagadahar, Kabirgram, Hatirpath, Nayagram etc. The villages under Bhajantipur Gram Panchayat are East Kachudharam, West Kachudharam, Chencoorie Bilpar, Shankarbasti and a small area of Bhajantipur where there are majority Bishnupuriya inhabited villages. They are also found in some other areas such as Srikona, Bikrampur, Baropua, Manpur, Machimpur, Bihara, Rajnagar, Tengara Gang, Kalain, Dudpur, Machughat, Dudhpatil, Ashami Basti etc. In Silchar town, the community resides at Vivekananda Road, College Road etc. Field work also conducted by visiting Baropua village also known as Bhubaneswar Nagar, the birth place of Bhubaneswar Thakur,* a guru of the Bishnupuriya community.⁴⁴ In Manipur the population comprise ethnic groups such as Meiteis, Meitei Muslims/Meitei Pangals, the Kukis and the Nagas. The migrant communities includes Nepalis, Bengalis, Marwaris, Biharis, Punjabis, Bishnupuriyas etc. The factors for migration may include conditions created by war /conflict, religious pilgrimage, economic needs, political implications, and nomadic character of communities. The migration of ethnic groups into Manipur can be chronologically divided into two groups, that is, those who entered Manipur before its merger with the Indian Union on 15 October 1949, and those who came after the merger. As per the Foreigners Act of 1946 of the Constitution of Manipur, those migrants who came to Manipur before the October merger were considered as foreigners. This has been a subject of debate in understanding the complex issue of migration in Manipur history, since the population figures of the migrants were not enumerated during the time. This has had significant implications for contextualising the Bishnupuriyas in Manipur and outside the state (Assam, Tripura, Myanmar and Bangladesh), leading to identity crisis. The strength of Bishnupuriya speakers in the state is only 188 as per the Census of India: 1971, the reason being that they speak the Meitei language at present and so included as Meitei speakers in census reports.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY:

The research follows an analytical method of investigation within the framework of historical methodology. The historical method comprises the techniques and guidelines by use primary sources and other evidence, such as secondary sources and tertiary sources, are used to research and then to write history. The study also makes use of sociological and anthropological approaches to understand the subject from a wider perspective. Both primary and secondary sources are being used for the research. Other primary sources include relevant materials from Archives, Government Proceedings, Census Reports, Journals etc. The ancient texts called Puyas form an important primary source. Secondary sources include books, articles in magazines, newspapers etc. related to the study. Oral sources such as myths and legends will also form an important source of information for study. E-resources such as e-books has also been consulted. The research work is also based on extensive field work conducted through questionnaires and interviews of a cross-section of the community residing in Manipur and Assam. Field work was conducted in Manipur and Assam where there are a good percentage of Bishnupriya Manipuris. In the Cachar district of Assam where the Bishnupriya Manipuris are settled, there are majority inhabited areas as well as there

are also some mixed villages where people belonging to other communities also reside. In Manipur, the villages are concentrated in an around Moirang in Bishenpur district.

Result and discussion: The Bishnupuriya Language:

From the linguistic point of view, G.A. Grierson⁴⁵ and Suniti Kumar Chatterjee⁴⁶ has placed the language spoken by the Bishnupuriyas besides two other languages, viz; Bengali and Assamese under the category of 'Magadhi Apabhramsa'. This ethnic group exhibit a sharp contrast to the Meitei / Manipuri community in language and culture. Those who do not favour the nomenclature 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' believe that Bishnupuriya relates to the language as well as the mother tongue of people of the same name recorded and that the ethnic group should be understood in the context of the historical background of Bishnupur,⁴⁷ located in the Bankura district of West Bengal. The Bishnupuriya speakers now settled in different states of North East India is therefore believed to have migrated first from Bishnupur of West Bengal and entered into the valley of Manipur beginning from 16th to 18th centuries C.E. onwards due to various factors such as economic, historical, political, religious etc. This school of thought which connects Bishnupuriyas to Bengal finds support from the accounts of the British, Meitei and Bishnupuriya. N. Khelchandra opines that the 'Mayangs or Bishnupuriyas' who came to Manipur were war prisoners captured in the reign of Thingol Hanba, king of Khuman clan. They were allowed to live near Nongyai Leikoipung, the erstwhile capital of the Khumans. That place was known as Mayang Yumpham. The present Mayang Yumphal or Mayang Imphal is a corrupted term for Mayang Yumpham. The royal chronicle of Manipur Cheitharol Kumbaba refers to Mayang Yumpham during the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652 C.E).⁴⁸

It must be noted that in the official history of Manipur the Bishnupuriyas are not mentioned till the time of king Bhagyachandra (1759-1798 C.E) who is believed to have married a maiden of this community, thereby leading to birth of his son who later on became to be known as Kalaraja. In Manipur, the Rajkumar families of Ningthoukhong village therefore trace their origin to Kalaraja. But during the Manipur-Burmese wars (1819-1825 C.E.), the community left Manipur in large numbers and migrated to Cachar, Tripura and Sylhet. In Manipur, the Bishnupuriyas are said to have settled first at Mayang Imphal,⁴⁹ than in Ningthoukhong, Nachou, Ngaikhong Kulen, Ngaikhong Khunou near Loktak lake and in Wangjing, Heirok and Khangabok.⁵⁰ J. Roy⁷⁸ asserts that in Manipur at different periods of its history, the Naga, Kuki and Shans Chinese came and merged into local communities and there are some Aryan and Dravidian features. E .T. Dalton opines that, "By degrees, Meithei became dominant, and that name was applied to the entire colony , and now that they have adopted the Hindu faith , they claim to be of Hindu descent. It is highly probable that these hordes overran a country that had been previously occupied by people of Aryan blood known in Western India and to the bards. The present population of Manipur includes a tribe called Meiung who speak a language of Sanskrit derivation." The Aryan people referred to by Dalton were presumed to be the Bishnupuriyas.

It is likely that the Mayang Kalishas got the name of Bishnupriya during the reign of king Gambhir Singh in the first half of the 19th century C.E. and the name Bishnupur was given to Lamangtong during the reign of king Bhagyachandra in the 2nd half of the 18th century C.E." ⁷⁹ The centre of culture of this people being at Bishnupur, so they were named Bishnupuriyas (inhabitants of Bishnupur). There are references to the people known by other names such as Bishnupuriya,⁸⁰ Mayangs,⁸¹ Kalisa Manipuris,⁸²

There are as many as 146 villages in the Barak valley and the composition of population according to Census of India:1961 are: Bengali (1,085,287), Hindustani (142,402), Meithei (75,116), Bishnupriya (15,055), Dimasa Kachari (10, 959), Assamese (4,542), out of a total population of (1,378, 576).⁴³ There

are a few other communities such as the Khasis who are very small in number. The following table shows the population figures as per the Census of India: 2001:

Table 1.1:
Population of Barak Valley Districts
(Ethnically and Linguistically, Census of India: 2001)

Community	Cachar District	Population (in %)	Karimganj District	Population (in %)	Hailakandi District	Population (in %)
Bengali	10,89,826	75.57	8,50,015	84.69 4	46,654	82.26
Manipuri (Meitei)	99,796	6.92	3,312	0.33	13,954	2.57
Bishnupriya	14,421	1.00	22,483	2.24	543	0.10

Source: Directorate of Statistics, Assam: Cachar Branch, Silchar.

From the table shown above, it is observed that as per Census of India 2001, in Barak Valley Districts, the Bengali speakers formed the largest group, followed by Meitei and Bishnupriya. The Bengali speakers constituted 75.57% in Cachar district, 84.69% in Karimganj, and 82.26% in Hailakandi. The second majority group were the Manipuri (Meitei) constituting 6.92% in Cachar, 0.33% in Karimganj and 2.57% in Hailakandi districts. The Bishnupriyas formed the third largest group with 1.00% in Cachar, 2.24% in Karimganj and 0.10% in Hailakandi districts respectively.

The following table indicates the numbers and percentages of the people belonging to different linguistic communities on the basis of linguistic distribution of Census of India: 1971 and the national decadal growth rate from 1991-2001

Table 1.2:
Estimated Linguistic Distribution Based on Community (1991-2001):

Linguistic Community	Population	Total Population (in %)
Meitei	1,26,984	4.2
Bishnupriya	58,956	1.95
Dimasa (Barmans)	18,141	0.06
Hindustani	3,38,625	11.2
Bengalee	23,43,158	77.5
Others	15,02,566	4.55

Source: Statistical Handbook of Assam, Government of Assam 2004, Guwahati, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam.

The above table reveals that the linguistic distribution based on Community (1991-2001) the percentage of Meitei community was 4.2%, Bishnupriya 1.95%, Dimasa (Barmans) 0.06%, Hindustani 11.2%, Bengalee 77.5% and Others 4.55%. In Cachar district of Assam, the predominant language spoken by the people is Bengali (particularly Sylheti, a Bengali dialect). The other languages spoken include Hindi, Manipuri (Meitei), Bishnupriya, Dimasa, Rongmei-Naga, Mizo, Hmar, Khasi and others. The Special

Report by Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities in India: 2006, records that the highest number of Bishnupriya speakers is noticed in Karimganj (24,475), followed by Cachar (12,397), and 18,361 speakers are reported from North Tripura. The Census of India: 1971 records that that out of 43,813 Bishnupriya speakers, 33,591 were from Assam, 9,884 from Tripura and only 188 from Manipur .

The Bishnupuriyas after their huge exodus from Manipur have settled down in several areas in Assam, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Tripura, and at present they are found in almost all the states of India etc. Based on their settlement areas, the culture and language of the people have also undergone some changes. This acculturation phenomenon is even noticeable among the Meiteis who have migrated from Manipur after the Manipur - Burmese war and settled in several areas of Assam, Bangladesh, Myanmar, India etc. The acculturation process of the Bishnupuriyas has involved the acquiring of cultural traits of Bengali, Meitei and Assamese either through direct or indirect contact by an individual or group. The strategies adopted were basically assimilation and integration in Manipur, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Tripura and Assam. But the Bishnupuriyas are still retaining its cultural markers in language, customs and food. In case of language many of the Meitei, Assamese (Kamrupi) and Bengali words have been incorporated in Bishnupuriya language (Table 1.3).

Table 1.3 :

Some Loan words from Meitei, Bengali, Assamese (Kamrupi) Incorporated in Vocabulary of Bishnupuriya

Meitei	Assamese (Kamrupi)	Bengali
Ima	Ut	Chesta
Khuttei	Aha	Tumi
Nungshi	Hai	Dhanuk
Harao	Bhut	Talwar
Ngatang	Kukur	Ballam
Yamung	Putok	Pani
Chakam	Bainek	Thaliti (thaligo in Bishnupuriya)
Iche	Durai	Kalamti (kalamgo in Bishnupuriya)
Ine	Bapak Agor	Bhater hari (Batar ari in Bishnupuriya)
Oja	Tumi asila	Thamano (Them karia in Bishnupuriya)

Source: Personal interview with a cross-section of people from the Meitei, Bishnupuriya, Assamese and Bengali speakers in Assam from 12/5/15 to 4/7/15.

From the above table, it shows that the Bishnupuriya speakers in Assam have incorporated some of the Meitei, Bengali and Assamese vocabularies while speaking at home and interacting with the people outside. This has resulted in the formation of a mixed dialect in many of the Bishnupriya inhabited areas in Assam. The following are some of the Bishnupuriya vocabularies which have become obsolete due to the dominance of other major languages and integration of Tibeto-Burman vocabularies (Table :1.4)

Table 1.4:
Some Bishnupuriya Vocabularies which have become Non-existent

Bishnupuriya	English
Nou	Nine
Ak hou	Hundred
Uda	Friend
Bae	Mother
Udak	Friendship
Githei	Younger sister

Source : Field Survey from 12/5/15 to 4/6/15.

The Bishnupuriya language has developed from Magadhi, it has more similarities with Assamese and Bengali and so some scholars are inclined to call it a dialect of Bengali or Assamese. K.P. Sinha has put forward the following viewpoints: “First, mere similarities of a few elements are not sufficient to prove that it is a dialect of one or the other language. The similarities have, actually, accrued from their commonness of origin, Magadhi Aprabhramsa being the origin of these three languages. Secondly, as there are similarities, so there are dissimilarities and distinctive marks.

The distinctive features of Bishnupuriya are as follows :

(a) The difference in verbal forms, according to difference in gender distinguishes Bishnupuriya from Modern Bengali and Assamese e.g., ta jarga....he goes, tei. jeiriga... she goes, ti karar....you (male) are doing, ti karauri.....you (female) are doing, ta gechilga.....he went, tei gechilga.....she went.

(b) The difference in verbal forms, according to difference in number vanished from Bengali before the 10th century A.D. while Bishnupuriya retains this characteristic. Of course, these forms are not inherited from older ones, but are later formations (vide Ch.XIII.).”⁵¹

K.P. Sinha had collected around 30,000 Bishnupuriya words and classified them into eight groups mentioning the number of loan words taken from Assamese, Bengali, TibetoBurman, Hindi etc. (Table :1.5)

Table 1.5 :
Loan Words in Bishnupuriya

Word Groupings	Number of Words
Tatsama or Sanskrit	10,000
Semi- tatsama	1,500
Tatbhava (occurring in other languages like Hindi, Bengali, and Assamese)	7000
Desi or non- Aryan native words	1,500
Hybrid	1000
Tibeto-Burman	3,500
Foreign words	2,700
Obscure origin	1,300

Source : K.P. Sinha, The Bishnupuriya Manipuri Language, 1981, p.8.

The following observations of K.P. Sinha are significant for the study of the change in the language characteristics .He suggests as thus:” From the study of the characteristic of this language, it can be said that towards the 13th century, it was very much similar to Assamese and Bengali. As time passed, it was more and more influenced by Meitei and, towards the 16th century, numerous Meitei words were incorporated into Bishnupriya. During the second half of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century, this language underwent another great remodelling. During this period, various groups of Aryan-speaking people entered Manipur from different parts of Eastern India and the Vaishnavism of Sri Caitanya began to gain popularity among the people. As a result Indo-Aryan words began to be incorporated into the language again.”⁵² The Bishnupuriyas share some cultural affinities with their neighbouring communities like the Bengalis, Meiteis and Assamese. But still this ethnic community has its distinct cultural traits being very much similar to Bengali.

U.C.Guha⁵³ has stated that the Bishnupriya language has close similarities with ancient Bengali language. Some of the Bishnupriya and Bengali vocabularies are shown in Table 1.6 below:

Table 1.6:
Comparative Vocabularies of Bishnupriya and Bengali Languages

Bengali	Bishnupriya	English
Amra	Mi	We
Tumi	Ti	You
Pustak	Lerik	Book
Chandra	Jun Khan	Moon
Surjya	Belihan	Sun
Megh	Boron	Cloud
Pahi	Uchek,Pakhia	Bird
Krishak	Aluwa	Farmer
Ishwar	Ishwar	God
Bhoot	Bhootgo	Ghost
Bhal	Hoba	Good
Manab	Manu	Human Being
Bhai	Beyok	Brother
Pita	Bapok	Father
Nak	Nakgo	Nose
Stree	Milokgo	Woman
Agun	Ji	Fire

Source: U.C.Guha, Cacharer Itibritta, Assam Prakashan Parishad, Guwahati, pp.146-147.

Controversy over nomenclature as well as linguistic identity of Bishnupuriyas as Bishnupuriya and not Bishnupuriya Manipuri

The nomenclature of Bishnupuriya and Bishnupriya Manipuri for the community is closely associated with issue of identity. There is a view that the Bishnupriyas are not Manipuris or belonging to Manipur. Naorem Sanajaoba thus dismisses any connection of the community with Manipur. He opined⁵⁴ : “Since the 1950’s, the Bengali speaking people who hailed from Assam- Bengal trans-border areas, who had been in exile in Manipur due to Moghul invasion in Bengal in the medieval age, claimed themselves as a

Manipuri clan. They call themselves as Bishnupuriyas [now corrupted into Bishnupriyas] and some of their leaders demand that they should be known as Manipuri....". He further states: "The Bishnupuriya leadership is disseminating numerous concocted propaganda literature thereby attempting at a complete dislocation of the two millennia old cultural and even the political history of the Manipuri people in Asia. A concocted monograph entitled, Let History And Facts Speak About Manipuris doctored by Bhimsen Singha and published by Bishnupuriya Sahitya Parishad in January 1984, a concocted book entitled 'Khumal Puran' written by Navakendra Singha and small propaganda booklets propagate to the mass an organised disinformation campaign claiming that they are the Manipuris and the genuine Manipuris are aliens."⁵⁵

The use of the nomenclature Bishnupuriya Manipuri and recognition of the community as such by the Governments of Assam and Tripura has been a matter of debate in the context of establishing identity of the community. It may be mentioned that the Government of Manipur does not recognise them as Manipuri. In this context the letter written by E.H. Pakyntein, Superintendent of Census Operations, Assam addressed to the Special Secretary to the Government of Assam, Political (B) Department, reference to letter No. PLB. 145/61/18, Dated, 22/7/1961 is significant which is as thus:

"... no classes or communities other than those of the scheduled tribes and schedule castes were recorded in the 1961 census. The question of separate enumeration of the Manipuri people as a class or community does not ariselanguages or dialects other than those recognised in Sir Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India will not be recognised and will simply be dumped as 'Unclassified'Meitei and Bishnupriya are both recognised languages or dialects ..."

The Registrar General of India, in a letter addressed to the General Secretary, Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha, 26th June 1980, had given the following instructions:

"Record mother tongue in full, whatever be the name of the language returned by the respondent and do not use abbreviations. Please note the following: (a) You are not expected to determine if the language returned by a person is a dialect of another language. (b) You should not try to establish any relationship between religion and mother tongue.(c) You are bound to record the language as returned by the person as his mother tongue and you should not enter into any argument with him/her and try to record any language other than what is returned and (d) If you have reasons to suspect that in any area due to any organised movement, the mother tongue is not being truthfully returned , you should record the mother tongue as actually returned by the respondent , and make a report to your supervisory officers for verification. You are not authorised to make any correction on your own."

The letter further stated that is clear from the above Government of India records and documents that no relationship can be established between religion and mother, but the present use of the nomenclature 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' cannot be accepted as the term 'Bishnupriya' signifies a religious group as lovers of Vishnu and the suffix Manipuri is also unacceptable as 'Manipuri or Meitei' is a recognised scheduled language of the Manipuris. It explained that G.A. Grierson had studied and documented both the Mayang or Bishnupuriya and Meitei languages as belonging to two distinct linguistic groups, i.e. Meitei as a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Chin nomenclature Bishnupriya Manipuri, according to this notification was a 'product of the conspiracy of the NBMM.' It reiterated that 'nothing is written for any language or dialect as Bishnupriya Manipuri or Kalisa Manipuri in the Linguistic Survey of India. Thus, it opined that the suffix 'Manipuri' was used in the Linguistic Survey of India to identify the group as migrants in Manipur. Grierson had specified that 'there is no use of studying here for such a dialect spoken by the immigrants who actually had lost their own language'.

A point of view which is propounded by a major section of the Bishnupuriyas is that they claim that they should be recognised as Bishnupuriyas whose origin is traced to Bishnupur in West Bengal, and not to be called as Bishnupriya Manipuri. They claim that this has been a deliberate creation of some Bishnupuriya leaders and intelligentsia by to misinterpret and misrepresent the records of the Census of India as well as the Linguistic Survey of India. This movement is believed to have been started since the 1950's by a group of leaders for political and economic benefit, first by changing the nomenclature 'Bishnupuriya' to 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' in order to remain as a sub-group of Manipuri.

As per Article 29 (1) of the Constitution of India, the conservation of the nomenclature 'Manipuri' i.e. the Meitei language 'is a guaranteed Fundamental Right of the Meiteis. The community also demanded inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri in the State OBC list in Serial 13 as a sub-group of Manipuri along with Manipuri along with Manipuri Brahman and Manipuri Muslims. In Assam, The Assam Backward Classes Commission was constituted in 1993, also known as 'The Assam Act', issued a corrigendum dated 18-3-96 upon complaints raised by the NBMM, NBMU and the Samaj Santha, Guwahati relating to non-inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri in Serial 13 of the lists of OBC. Thereby, the Commission issued a notification dated 27-11-75 of the Government of Assam by its order dated 29-9-95 in Case No.1/94 recommending inclusion of Bishnupriya Manipuri along with Manipuri Brahmins and Manipuri Muslims in Serial 13 of lists of OBC. A writ petition was filed by one K. Kumardhan Singh under Article 226 of the Constitution of India praying for declaration of the Assam Act as unconstitutional and praying for quashing the aforesaid order. The Meiteis also filed Special Leave Petitions in the Supreme Court. Ultimately the Gauhati High Court stated that it cannot issue a declaration that the word Manipuri cannot be prefixed or suffixed to the word Bishnupriya as the dispute was not a matter relating to reservation issue in favour of OBC. Moreover adjudication of the said dispute will require a study of the origin, history and culture of the two communities. Under Article 226 of the Constitution, the court was not the competent authority to settle the dispute and so the order was quashed. In Tripura, the Bishnupuriyas have been included in the Central list of OBC, but in Assam or in India, they are yet to be included in the OBC list. The records maintained by the British India Government as well as the Government of India mention Bishnupuriya as a community speaking a language by the same name.

Conclusion:

The issue of an appropriate nomenclature of the Bishnupuriya community must be understood in the context of identity politics. This notion signifies a wide range of political activity and theorising founded in the shared experiences and injustice of members of certain social groups. It attempts to attain empowerment, representation and recognition of social groups by asserting the very same markers that distinguished and differentiated them from the others and utilise those markers as an assertion of selfhood and identity based on difference rather than equality. These markers include language, culture, ethnicity, gender, tribe, religion, race etc., institutionalised in jargons, metaphors, stereotypes, and academic literature and reinforced through practices of positive discrimination or affirmative action. The adherents of identity politics utilise the power of myths, cultural symbols and kinship relations to mould the feeling of shared community.²⁶ In North East India, politics of ethnicity emerged since 1970s and 1980s caused by several perceived grievances and the attempt to safeguard the ethnic identity.

The nomenclature Mayang, Mayang Kalisha, Kalicha, Khalachai have nonMeitei connotations, the people being 'outsiders' or mayangs. The local text Kaalisalon, the Sangai Phammang²⁷ Mayang Leima Ningthounai (account of immigration of Mayangs) mentions that the community was named Mayang Kaalisha, but that soon after the installation of the Visnu image at Lamangthong, they were given the name

of Bishnupuri or Bishnupriyas. This suggests that the name Bishnupriya is derived from Bishnupur, the name of a place in Manipur, the suffix 'iya' is taken from Sanskrit word 'ika' which means 'relating to'. This view was supported by K.P. Sinha in *An Etymological Dictionary of Bishnupriya Manipuri*, 1986. Sinha supports the origin of the term Bishnupriya with the coming of Ramauti School of religion through the efforts of King Garibniwaz and the vaishnava saint Santidas Goswami. It is said that the king, inspired by the teachings of the saint ordered that everyone of his subjects should undergo a purification ritual in Nongkhrang lake. However, the Khumal clan, did not follow the king's direction asserting that they were already Vaisnavites and need not be subjected to another purification rite. And from that time onwards, these people of the Khumal kingdom were known as the Bishnupriyas. In the Kaalisalon it is also recorded that they were formerly Kali worshippers and the Mayang Kalishas were christened as 'Bishnupriyas', invested with the sacred thread during the reign of Gambhir Singh in the 19th century C.E. There is a view that after the installation of the Visnu temple at Lamangdong, the place was renamed as Vishnupur by the 'Bangals' and the worshippers of Visnu were then called as Visnupuriya. 28 Kh. Bidyapati Sinha's work on *The Mayangs Bishnupriyas or the Bangals: A Missing Link* attempts at an analytical study on the Mayang Bishnupriya language based on linguistic and phonetics elements. He came to the inference that the Bishnupriyas have an alternate name called Mayangs and were also given the name Bangals by the Assamese speaking people as they emigrated from Bengal. The term Mayang was used to differentiate between 'locals' and 'non- locals'. Another version²⁹ suggest that Bishnupriya is taken from the name of wife of Chaitainya, is actually a corruption of Bishnupriya. However, the nomenclature Mayang or Khalisa for the community has been refuted particularly by local scholars such as K.P. Sinha. In contrast, the nomenclature Mayangs or Khalisha have been used widely in the works by E.T. Dalton in *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), S.K. Chatterjee in *Kirata –Jana-Kirti* (1974), Ch.Manihar Singh in *A Clarification on the Bishnupriyas in Relation to the Manipuris* (1987), G.A. Grierson in *Linguistic Survey of India* (1891), and Padmanath Vidyavinode in *Gait's History of Assam* (1908). The Bishnupuriya Language and Development Organisation formed on 25th August 2013 claimed that the correct nomenclature of the Bishnupriya Manipuris should be Bishnupuriya, based on documents of the Government of India such as Census reports. The argument is that Bishnupriya represents an 'ism', a religious group of Vishnu worshippers, a colloquial term which they claim cannot represent the name of a community.³⁰ W. McCulloch³¹ studied the vocabulary of the Bishnupuriya language studied and inferred that: "The Meeyangs are descendants of people from the Western Plains who were captured in arms against Munnipore, and of some who immigrated of their own accordThey amongst themselves always speak their own language which is a dialect of Hindee, but they all understand and most of them can speak Munnipore." The Bishnupriyas called Meeyangs coming from the western plains with a distinct language had similiarity with Bengali and Hindi dialect but with no resemblances with the Meitei dialect. Table 4.8 shows the comparative vocabulary of some English, Munniporee, Undro and Sengmai, Charel and Meeyang languages:

Endnote:

1. The nomenclature Bishnupriya Manipuri has been recognised by the Government of Assam in 1983 and Tripura in 1985 which is still controversial . Appendix I: Document issued by Deputy Commissioner, Cachar shows Bishnupriya Manipuri as a Recognised Community in Assam. Manipur, one of the states in North East India, is bounded by Nagaland (north), Mizoram (south), Upper Burma

- (east) and Cachar district of Assam (west). It has an area of 22,347 sq.kms with a population of 2,388,34 (Census of India : 2001).
2. R.K. Jhalajit Singh, A Short History of Manipur, From 33 A.D. to the Present Time, O.K.. Store, Imphal, 1965, p.9.
 3. Th. Suresh Singh, The Endless Kabaw Valley: British Created Vicious Cycle of Manipur, Burma and India, Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, Delhi, 2014, p.1.
 4. The Bishnupuriya language is spoken by the inhabitants of Bishnupur, and Bishnupriya is a contracted form of Bishnupuriya. Kali Prasad Sinha, The Bishnupriya Manipuri Language, Firma KLM Private Limited, Calcutta, 1981.
 5. R.B. Vaghaiwalla, Census of India, 1951, Vol XII, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, Part II. A,D.Series Table, p.86.
 6. G.A. Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India, Vol V, Part I , Indo-Aryan Family, Eastern Group, Specimens of the Bengali and Assamese Languages, Office of the Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta, 1903, p.419.
 7. In Tripura, the Bishnupriyas are included in the Central List of Other Backward Classes (OBC) with serial no. 10; the entry number in the Central List is 37(a).
 8. In Assam the Bishnupriyas are demanding inclusion in the State OBC list in Serial 13 as a sub-group of Manipuri along with Manipuri Brahmins and Manipuri Muslims who are both speakers of Manipuri language.
 9. The Puyas may be defined as written records handed down to posterity by the forefathers of the Meiteis. They are a particular kind of old narrative which form a definite class in Manipuri literature. The texts are in the possession of various individuals and organizations. The State Kala Academy library in Imphal itself has collected more than a thousand such manuscripts covering various aspects of Manipuri culture. Rena Laisram, Early Meitei History: Religion, Society and the Meitei Puyas, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2009.
 10. L.Ibungohal Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh (ed.), Cheitharol Kumbaba, Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Imphal, 1989, p.28.
 11. The chronicles of Manipur use the term Mayangs to refer to the Kacharis.
 12. .T.Dalton, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, 1872.
 13. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Kirata-Jana-Krti The Indo-Mongoloids: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1998 (reprint).
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 17. C.K.Sinha (ed.), The Bishnupriya Manipuris Before the Assam Backward Classes Commission, Nikhil bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha, Silchar, 1984.
 18. .S. Tunga, Bengali and Other Related Dialects of South Assam, Mittal Publicationa, New Delhi,1995.

19. Pauthang Haokip, Socio-Linguistic Situation in North-East India, Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Limited, New Delhi, 2011.
20. . Gajrani, History, Religion and Culture of India, Vol. 6, Isha Books, Delhi, 2004, p.141.
21. Sipra Sen, Tribes and Castes of Manipur: Description and Select Bibliography, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1992.
22. Laishram Basanti Devi, A Study of Political History of Manipur from Pakhangba to Khagemba (33 A.D.-1652 A.D.), Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Department of History, School of Social Sciences, Manipur University, Imphal, 1988, p.14.
23. Moirangthem Shantirani Devi, The Evolution of the Political System of Manipur from the earliest times to the 18th century A.D., Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Department of History, Manipur University, Canchipur, 1998.
24. Andrew Dalby, Dictionary of Languages: The Definitive Reference to More than 400 Languages, Bloomsbury Publishers, London, 2015.
25. Matthias Brenzinger (ed.), Trends in Linguistics: Language Diversity Endangered, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, New York, 2007.
26. Kh.Bidyapati Sinha, The Mayangs Bishnupriyas or the Bangals: A Missing Link, Nilmani Sinha Publication, , Hatirpath, New Bhakatpur, Silchar, Cachar, 2014.
27. Mahendra Kumar Sinha, Manipurer Prachin Itihas, Vol.1, POURI (Manipuri Information and Research Centre), Ghoramara, Moulvibazar, Bangladesh, 1968.
28. Naorem Sanajaoba (ed.), Manipur Past and Present: The Ordeals and Heritage of a Civilization, Vol.4, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2005.
29. Arjun Singha (ed.), Jagaran, Bishnupriya Manipuri Students Unit, Murarichand College Sylhet, Bangladesh.
30. K.P. Sinha, An Etymological Dictionary of Bishnupriya Manipuri, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1986.
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32. Khomdon Singh Lisam, Encyclopaedia of Manipur, Vol.1, Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, 2011.
33. Yumnam Oken Singh and Khuraijam Gyanabati, The Advent of Vaishnavism: A Turning Point in Manipuri Culture, European Academic Research Journal, Vol.1, Issue 9, Kogaion Publishing Centre, Bucharest, Romania, European Union, December 2013.
34. Suman Sinha, Understanding Practices of Marriage within Bishnupriya Manipuri, Unpublished Dissertation, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Gauhati Campus, 2017.
35. Christopher Moseley (ed.), Encyclopaedia of the World Endangered Languages, Routledge, London, 2008.
36. James N. Stanford and Dennis R. Preston (eds.), Variation in Indigenous Minority Languages, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2009.
37. A purposive sample is selected based on features of population and objective of study. It is also known as judgmental, selective and subjective sampling. Appendix IV: Bishnupriya Manipuri villages in Cachar district, Assam.
38. Charles Knight, The English Cyclopaedia: Geography, 1866, p.209.
39. A.R. Barbhuiya et.al., 'Diversity and Conservation of Medicinal Plants in Barak Valley, Northeast India', Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge, Vol 8 9(2), April, 2009, p.169.

40. B.C.Allen, Assam District Gazetteers: Cachar, Government of Assam, Guwahati, 2013 (2nd Edition), pp.48-49.
41. District Census Handbook: Cachar, Directorate of Census Operations, Assam, 1961, p.234.
42. Known popularly as Sadhu Baba, his extreme devotion to Krisna and the Bhagavat Gita, also earned him the title of 'Thakur'. Appendix III: Image of Bhubaneswar Sadhu Thakur at Bhubaneswar Sadhu Thakur Temple, Baropua Village of Cachar district, Assam.
43. G.A. Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India, Vol.V, Part 1, Indo-Aryan Family, Eastern Group, Specimens of the Bengali and Assamese Languages, Office of the Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta,1903, p.419.
44. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language: Additions and Corrections, Prentice - Hall of India (Private) Limited, New Delhi, 1960, p.140. 1960, p.140.
45. Bishnupur is also known as Mandir Nagari, and Gupta Vrindaban.
46. B.C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteer, Vol. 1, The Government of Assam, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Pan Bazar, Guwahati, 2013 (2nd Edition), pp.53-54.
47. Miss Laishram Basanti Devi, A Study of Political History of Manipur From Pakhangba to Khagemba (33 A.D. to 1652 A.D.), A Thesis submitted to the Manipur University, Department of History, 1988, p.4.
48. J. Roy, History of Manipur, East Light Book House, Calcutta, 1958, p.4.
49. K.P.Sinha, The Bishnupriya Manipuri Language, Firma KLM Private Limited, Calcutta, 1981, p.7.
50. K.P.Sinha, op.cit., p.11.
51. U. C. Guha, Cachar Itibritta, Assam Prakashan Parishad, Guwahati, 1971.
52. Naorem Sanajaoba, Manipur: Past and Present, Vol. 4, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2005, p. xix.
53. Naorem Sanajaoba, Bishnupuriya Menace To The Manipuri Meitei Language and Cultural History, Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Assam, Guwahati, 1989, pp.2-3

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