

Origin, Migration and Settlement of The Bishnupuriya Community

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Abstract

The Bishnupuriyas also known as Mayangs, Kalisha Manipuris, and Bishnupriyas inhabit parts of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura in India, and also outside India in Bangladesh and Myanmar. The word Bishnupriya 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. There are various theories put forward by scholars regarding the origin and history of migration of the Bishnupuriyas. The various schools of thought regarding the origin of the Bishnupuriyas have come up with two main perspectives. The first view regards them as indigenous community of Manipur who migrated to other places outside at different periods of history on account of the political turmoil that prevailed due to wars with Burma. The alternative theory suggests that they are immigrants from outside Manipur and perhaps has its origins in Bengal. Based on the language which the people speak, an Indo-Aryan group of language akin to Bengali and Assamese categorized as Magadhi Aprabhamsa, the origin of the ethnic group is said to be in Bengal. The reason for their migration in successive waves to the nearby areas perhaps starting from the 15th century C.E. could be attributed to factors such as Maratha raids, warfare with the neighbouring kingdoms, religious conversion and famine of Bengal in 1770.

Keywords: Bishnupuriya Community, Origin, Migration and Settlement.

Introduction

The Bishnupuriyas also known as Mayangs, Kalisha Manipuris, and Bishnupriyas inhabit parts of Assam, Manipur,¹ Meghalaya and Tripura in India, and also outside India in Bangladesh and Myanmar. R.K. Jhalajit Singh refers to the Bishnupriyas as 'one of the main groups of people who inhabit Manipur, and that only a few of them now live in Manipur'²The 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.³

The word Bishnupriya⁴ is referred to as a mother tongue in the Census of India, 1951.⁵ 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. Grierson⁶ in the Linguistic Survey of India, recorded that there were one thousand speakers of the Bishnupriya language in two or three villages near Bishnupur in Manipur. They are now included in the list of Other Backward Classes (OBC) in Tripura.⁷ In Assam⁸ this community of speakers of the Bishnupriya language have been demanding inclusion as OBC in the State list.

The total population of Bishnupuriya as recorded in the Census of India, 2001,⁹ is 77, 545, and there was an increase of the population by 30.92% during the decade 1991 - 2001. This report also has information on the distribution of the Bishnupuriyas in different places of India, with the maximum number residing in Assam. The state and corresponding number of the community residing is as thus: Jammu and Kashmir (09), Madhya Pradesh (01), Maharashtra (16), Karnataka (03), Kerala (02), West Bengal (41), Assam (53,812), and Tripura (21,716), Manipur (1,457) etc. There are other informations collected by non-government organisations which give a much larger picture of the population figures.

The Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha, an organisation of the community which is supposed to be represent the interests of their people, reported that there were a total of 2.95 lakh Bishnupuriya population in Assam and that 4.16 lakh Bishnupuriya live in North East India.¹⁰ 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 Bishnupriya language as a subject but not as a medium in 52 schools out of 149 schools enlisted.

There are various theories put forward by scholars regarding the origin and history of migration of the Bishnupuriyas. The two main views differ on whether the community are indigenous to Manipur or whether they are immigrants to the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur. There is a popular theory which suggests that Loktak lake and its adjoining villages in Moirang district of Manipur is the place of origin of the community. The principal localities where the Bishnupuriya language is spoken in Manipur include Khangabok, Heirok, Mayang Imphal, Bishnupur, Ningthoukhong, Ngakhong and Thamnepokpi. The other viewpoint which locates the origin of the community outside Manipur is that of B.C. Allen¹¹ which states that they are not indigenous to the state but are immigrants from outside Manipur. J. Roy¹² asserts that at different periods of Manipur history, many ethnic groups such as the Shans, Nagas and Kukis including people with 'Aryan and Dravidian' features came which led to cross-cultural interaction with the local community. R.M. Nath¹³ in his work on 'Assamese culture', opines that the Manipuris are divided into two main tribes, viz; the Kha-la-chais, who call themselves Bishnupurias, and who are supposed to have been the first ruling race; and the Meithis or Meitheis who call themselves real Manipuris and are supposed to have been the next immigrants. For E.T. Dalton:¹⁴ "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 Meiuung who speak a language of Sanskrit derivation." In this context, the 'Aryans' referred to by Dalton are presumed to be the Bishnupriya Manipuris.

Review of Literature

Primary Source: In Vernacular

The ancient texts called Puyas¹⁵ 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 claimed to be of particular relevance for Bishnupriya Manipuri history and culture is the Khumal Puran¹⁶ edited by Navakhendra which has reference to the nomenclature of the community. Cheitharol Kumbaba,¹⁷ 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'¹⁸ today is used in Manipur to refer to 'outsiders' or the people coming from the western direction which may include Hindus, Muslims etc. It be mentioned that Muslims who came and settled in Manipur came to be known as 'Pangans' and after assimilation process were classified as Meitei Pangans or Manipuri Muslims. Another Puya relevant to the study is the Bamon Khunthoklon or account of the brahmana migration which mainly deals with the coming and settlement of brahmanas to Manipur. The migration of these brahmanas from around the 15th century C.E. brought about a significant change in the religious history of Manipur and the spread of Brahmanical ideology transformed various aspects of the culture and society.¹⁹ The brahmanas are believed to have come from different parts of India such as Orissa, Mathura (U.P), Tripura, Kanauj etc., although majority of them have come from Bengal. The role of the brahmanas in Sanskritization of the people has been attested by scholars such as Saroj Nalini Parratt²⁰ and Longjam Nobinchandra.²¹ While Parratt opines that the brahmanas came to Manipur by the time of King Charairongba, the latter emphasizes on the religion and the philosophy of Gaudiya Vaisnavism which has been adopted by the people.

Secondary Sources: In English

The subject of identity 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's²² book titled Ethnology of Bengal, S.K. Chatterjee's²³ book titled in Kirata-Jana-Kirti, and Ch. Manihar Singh's²⁴ book titled A Clarification on the Bishnupriya in Relation to the Manipuris. Bhim Sen Singha's²⁵ 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. Sinha²⁶ discusses the issue of nomenclature of the community and opines that the use of the term 'Mayang' for the people is incorrect. S. S. Tunga²⁷ explains in the book titled Bengali and the other Related Dialects of South Assam, that Bishnupriya Manipuri language is a hybrid of three languages viz; Bengali-Assamese-Manipuri. Pauthang Haokip²⁸ also explains that Bishnupriya had close links with both Bengali and Assamese, in his book titled Socio-Linguistic Situation in North-East India."The works dealing with aspects of ethnicity include Bidhan Sinha's²⁹ book titled Ethnic Culture of Manipur which differentiates social and linguistic groups of Manipur into Bishnupriya Manipuri and Meitei. The work is in line with the 'Aryan' theory which traces the ancestry

of the people with the Arjuna's episode of the Mahabharata. N. Joykumar Singh³⁰ book titled *Ethnic Relations among the People of North-East India* is useful in understanding ethnic communities in North-East India with particular reference to 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. Kim Amy and Seung Amy's³¹ work titled *Bishnupriya (Manipuri) Speakers in Bangladesh: a Sociolinguistic Survey* deals with the community who are settled in Bangladesh and is also useful for the present research.

Laishram Basanti Devi³² 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. Kh. Bidyapati Sinha's,³³ 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's³⁴ 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,³⁵ 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.

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 Singha³⁶ and K.P. Sinha's³⁷ 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's³⁹ 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's⁴⁰ 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 Khurajam Gyanabati's⁴¹ 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.

Objective of the Study

To trace the origin, history of migration and settlement of the Bishnupriyas.

Rationale Of Study

The reconstruction of the history and culture of the Bishnupriyas 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) This has had major ramifications for the Bishnupriya Manipuris 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 Bishnupriyas 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 Bishnupriyas; the selection being based on purposive-random sampling.⁴² The field work in Assam was done in Cachar District since the maximum numbers of the Bishnupriyas 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.⁴³ 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 Bishnupriyas are Bengali speaking.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ Another ethnic group who migrated to Cachar and settled there in the 16th century C.E. is the Koches (locally known as Dehans).

There are also the Dimasas and about fifty families moved to the plains with the Dimasa Raja when the capital was shifted from Maibong to Khaspur in 1750 C.E., following the merger of the Khaspur state with the Heramba (Dimasa) state. They were joined by a few more families during the political turmoil in North Cachar Hills around the 1820's,⁴⁶ by the Kacharis, Manipuris, Muslims and low caste Hindu from Sylhet, Bengalis and Assamese mainly Hindus.⁴⁷ Another ethnic group who migrated to Cachar and settled there in the 16th century C.E. is the Koches (locally known as Dehans). There are also the Dimasas and about fifty families moved to the plains with the Dimasa Raja when the capital was shifted from Maibong to Khaspur in 1750 C.E., following the merger of the Khaspur state with the Heramba (Dimasa) state. They were joined by a few more families during the political turmoil in North Cachar Hills around the 1820's.⁴⁸ The Manipuris came to Cachar during the Burmese occupation of Manipur in the 'Seven Years Devastation' and also from the neighbouring districts of Sylhet, Tripura and Mymensing and settled down permanently in Cachar. According to Census of India: 1971, the Manipuris are second to Bengalis in the district in terms of numbers. In the Census Report India: 1991 the Bishnupurias are mentioned as the fourth largest group who are settled mainly in Cachar District. The population also comprise other communities such as Nagas (Kwaphis), Kukis (Lushais), Mundas, Santhals, Oraons etc. Cachar district is administratively divided into two Sub – divisions. Silchar sub – division and Lakhipur sub – division. The Barak valley of Assam consists of three districts, viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. The headquarter of the district is at Silchar. The sub – divisions are further divided into revenue circles, under the revenue circles there are Mouzas comprising revenue villages. The district comprises of five revenue Circles: Katigora, Silchar, Udarbong, Lakhipur and Sonai with 1040 villages under it. There are 15 Community Development Blocks (CDS), 163 Gaon Panchayats, 17 Census Towns, 2 Statutory Towns, 15 Anchalik Panchayats and 1 Zila Parishad. As per Census of India: 2011 data, Cachar district had total population of 1,736,617, out of which males were 886,284 and females were 850,333 respectively. The population growth is 20.19% compared to 18.89 % of Census of India: 2001. The density of the district is 459 per sq km. A total of 315, 464 people live in urban areas and 1,421,153 people live in rural areas.

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), Meitei (75,116), Bishnupriya (15,055), Dimasa Kachari (10, 959), Assamese (4,542), out of a total population of (1,378, 576).²⁰ There are a few others 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 Manipuri 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 .

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 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.⁴⁹ 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 formigration 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 Bishnupuriyas. In the Cachar district of Assam where the Bishnupuriyas 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 and around Moirang in Bishenpur district.

Theoretical Framework

Critical examination of sources is an essential part of reconstructing history. It is important to note that identity has emotional basis and hence its politicization can have great emotional impact. Further, ethnicities are 'in an endless process of transformation' where ethnic groups 'contest, revive, create, negotiate and renegotiate their ethnic identity.' For the Bishnupuriyas the issue of ethnic identity will be determined by the extent to which they differ culturally from other groups with whom they interact;

and the intensity of their past and ongoing conflicts with other communities in different periods of history.

Origin, Migration and Settlement

Cross-cultural encounters between Manipur and Southeast Asia⁵⁰ have deep historical roots; the cultural cartography creating an 'imagined map'⁵¹ which members of ethnic groups use, to navigate through time and space.

Indeed, political boundaries of nation-states, have often led to emergence of fractured communities⁵² in Asian frontiers⁵³, which brings to centre-stage questions of how cultural and national identities are conceived in the redefined physical territories. Situated as it is, Manipur⁵⁴ in the extreme north east India has been the route of migration of various ethnic communities; its history reflecting the contemporary concerns of conflict and tension inherent in Asia. Situated as it is, Manipur⁵⁵ in the extreme north east India has been the route of migration of various ethnic communities; its history reflecting the contemporary concerns of conflict and tension inherent in Asia.

The Bishnupuriya⁵⁶ speakers with a population estimated over four lakhs, reside not only in Manipur, but also in the states of Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya as also outside India in Bangladesh (former East Bengal)⁵⁷ and northern Myanmar (former Burma). The exodus took place as a result of the Chahi Taret Khuntakpa or Seven Years Devastation (1816-25 C.E.). E.T. Dalton⁵⁸ refers to the Bishnupuriya Manipuris as the people of Aryan blood who were the original inhabitants of Manipur'.

There is a small minority of Bishnupuriyas settled in Manipur and they are not recognized by the Meiteis⁵⁹ as part of their community. In contrast, Bishnupuriyas in Assam maintain their identity despite becoming bilingual (Bishnupuriya and Bengali), and this was facilitated by the British having patronised Bengali during the colonial period. Any attempt by the Bishnupuriyas to add Manipuri to identify themselves is strongly resisted by the Meiteis of Manipur, although some of the Bishnupuriyas see themselves as Manipuris both culturally and historically.

The structure of Bishnupuriya language has both properties of 'Indo-Aryan' and TibetoBurman group of languages.⁶⁰ It is important to note that the Bishnupuriyas are associated with three languages viz; Bishnupuriya, Meitei and Bengali, which has implications for cultural identity. The Bishnupuriya community living in India as also in Myanmar and Bangladesh (former East Bengal) have been in the process of reconstructing their sense of nationhood and identity due to shifting political borders. Linguistics, Ethnology and Archaeology are three important tools for cultural studies.⁶¹ The assumption that each ethnic group or community have maintained its culture through social and geographical isolation to the ignorance of its neighbours is not plausible and thus cultural exchange and acculturation becomes central to understanding the various communities. Places, constructed spatially, have multiple meanings for their inhabitants and it is well recognised that space has got multiple implications in the context of

place, property and heritage, and which in turn creates identity.

Contesting the conventional opposition between myth⁶² and history. Mali⁶³ advocates instead a mythistorical approach that reconciles the two and recognizes the crucial role that myth plays in the construction of personal and communal identities. This 'recognition of myth' defines the task of mythistory.

Thus according to Mali, memory is spatial, and is created from places and images. A place (locus) is easily memorised – a construction, a characteristic location. Images are 'forms of what we wish to remember'. Loss of territory erases history, jeopardizes historical and cultural self-consciousness and renders identities invisible.

Those who claim as Bishnupriya Manipuris trace their descent to Babrubahana, the son of Pandava prince Arjuna of the Mahabharata, who is believed to have visited Manipur during his self-imposed exile.⁶⁴ The sacred tradition has it that Arjuna during this period came down from the Himalayas and travelled to holy places, temples and hermitages in the eastern region viz; Anga, Vanga and Kalinga. He then passed by the Mahendra mountains and reached Manipur by the sea coast.

The sacred tradition has it that Arjuna during this period came down from the Himalayas and travelled to holy places, temples and hermitages in the eastern region viz; Anga, Vanga and Kalinga. He then passed by the Mahendra mountains and reached Manipur by the sea coast. After visiting the holy places he is supposed to have met Chitrabahana, the ruler of Manipur and married his daughter Chitrangada. He is believed to have stayed in Manipur for three years and a son named Babrubahana was born to them, and who eventually became the king of Manipur. Arjuna is also believed to have come to Manipur in the course of his military campaigns in connection with the Asvamedha sacrifice performed by king Yudhisthira. While protecting the sacrificial horse, Arjuna had to fight hard for three days before he could defeat the son of Bhagadatta, ruler of Pragiyotisha. In fact Bhagadatta is frequently mentioned in the Mahabharata as a powerful potentate ruling in the East. There is a reference in the Sabha Parvan that Arjuna attacked his kingdom.⁶⁵ The horse followed by the Pandava prince after the end of the Kurukshetra war is said to have entered Manipur with a strong force.⁶⁶

Arjuna it is said, refused to recognize Babrubahana as his son and belonging to the Pandava lineage. In the course of the confrontation and fight that lasted seven days, Arjuna was defeated and killed by his own son. But life was restored to Arjuna by Ulipi, the daughter of the Naga king whom Arjuna had married on his pilgrimage to the place.

Arjuna invited his son to be present in the Asvamedha at Hastinapur. Accordingly, Babrubahana attended the ceremony and returned to Manipur with the 'Vishnumurti' offered by Yudhisthira. Babrubahana then placed Visnu image in Manipur and constructed a temple over it. The place was named Vishnupur which became the capital of Manipur. In this way,

Babrubahana is said to have begun to rule Manipur with the regular worship of the 'Vishnumurti', and the descendants coming from the royal family of the Kshatriya king Babrubahana have been known as Bishnupriya Manipuris as they have been worshipping the Vishnu image as keen devotees since that time.

In the context of understanding mythological narratives in history, Romila Thapar⁶⁷ explains as thus: 'The Mahabharata includes elements of the historical tradition which arose largely from attempts to provide antecedents in order to connect the origins of tribes and geographical sections, to indicate relationships at various levels between the gods and the heroes'. It may be noted that the purpose of narrating religious myths and symbols for the glorification of contemporary rulers was aimed at legitimating the king and kingdom.

Although most scholars are inclined to believe that the 'Manipura' mentioned in the epic is situated in modern Orissa, it may be worthwhile to mention that the tradition of Arjuna's visit is not found in Orissa although it is inextricably linked with the literature and culture of Manipur. The advocates of this 'Babrubahana Legend' include scholars such as Mahendra Kumar Sinha,⁶⁸ Namdev Sinha,⁶⁹ Jagat Mohan Sinha⁴⁵ and Birendra Sinha.⁴⁶ Jagat Mohan Sinha⁷⁰ and Birendra Sinha.⁷¹

N.D.R.Chandra and Nigamananda Das⁷² writes, "According to the tradition, Chitrangada's forefather, the Hindu sage Marichi Muni was born of the limbs of Brahma – the creator of the Universe, who himself arose from the naval lotus of Lord Narayana, the Protector of the Universe". It will be worthwhile to discuss the various schools of thought put forward regarding the origin of the Bishnupriya Manipuris. One of the popular theories⁷³ among the Bishnupriyas relate to the view that they were brought into the valley of Manipur by some people from Dwarka and Hastinapur during the Mahabharata period, after the Kurukshetra war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Further, it is believed that the Bishnupriyas were accompanied by Babrubahana, the son of Arjuna and Chitrangada (Manipuri princess), and they brought along an image of lord Visnu which was later installed in a place called Bishnupur in Manipur.⁷⁴ The Bishnupriyas trace their roots to Thailand and according to this theory the image of Visnu installed in Bishnupur was brought from Thailand.⁷⁵

The Bishnupriyas are also linked to the Sanskrit speakers like the Bengalis and Assamese who are said to have migrated to Manipur and Cachar.⁷⁶ The Meiteis of Manipur on the other hand say that the Bishnupriya language according has no roots in Manipur and that the Bishnupriyas are the Meiteis who have migrated outside Manipur after the Chahi Taret Khuntakpa i.e., in the 19th century C.E and migrated to several places in Assam mainly Cachar, Tripura and Bangladesh.⁷⁷

There is yet another theory which holds that the Bishnupriyas were descendants of sixty-five Bengali families who had migrated to Manipur during the reign of Garibniwaz in the second part of 18th century C.E. This leader of this group was a prince

named Dhanapati Rajkumar, also known as Koireng Khullakpa; and they were absorbed into the Meitei society speaking a 'broken Meitei dialect'.

Further, the Meiteis opine that the Bishnupriyas speaking Bishnupuriya language are descendants of low caste Bengali Hindus who were brought as war captives by some Manipuri kings.⁷⁸ Henry Frowde⁷⁹ in *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* observes: "The family of the Rajas of Bishnupur, which was founded in the 8th century C.E., was at one time one of the most important dynasties in Bengal; they were nominally tributary to the Muhammadan Nawabs, but frequently exercised independent powers.

In the 18th century C.E. the family rapidly declined and they were impoverished by the ravages of the Marathas, and the famine of 1770 C.E. depopulated their territory and completed their ruin. The estate was ultimately sold in detached portions, for arrears of land revenue." B. C. Allen in his work titled *Gazetteer of Naga Hills and Manipur* mentions a view that the Bishnupriyas are believed to be the illegitimate descendants of a Manipuri king who stayed for some time at a place called Ningthoukong in Manipur.

Allen states as thus:⁸⁰ "The Bishnupriya Manipuris almost form a separate caste, and are said to be descendants of 120 Hindu families of different castes, who are brought into the valley by Gharib Nawaz in the later half of the eighteenth century to teach the indigenous inhabitants of the valley the customs of the Hindus. They intermarried with the people of the country, but after a time the Meithei, or original Manipuri race, came to the conclusion that the new-comers were of inferior stock, and they are now regarded with a certain measure of contempt. Both parties style themselves Kshatriyas, and in Manipur intermarry with one another. In the Surma Valley the distinction is more rigidly observed, and intermarriage is not generally allowed".

Another school of thought regarding the origin of the Bishnupriyas is that they came from Lakhimpur in Cachar to Manipur with a shaligram⁸¹ called Bishnu. King Marjit of Manipur had taken the sacred stone with him when he went to Cachar and later when it was brought back to Manipur, it took the route of Bishenpur on way to the Manipur valley. The Bishnupriyas were made to settle in Ningthoukhong, and were entrusted the duty of providing fodder for the royal stable in the capital.

According to Raj Mohan Nath:⁸² ".....the Kha-la-chais, who called themselves Bishnupriyas, and are supposed to have been the first ruling race, and the Mei-this or Meitheis who called themselves as real Manipuris are supposed to have been the next immigrants.... Kha-la-chais evidently means the children (Cha, Chai) of the wide lake, and probably refers to the race of people who lived in the plain portion of the Manipur Valley. Meitheis is clearly-people of this land, meaning the people coming from central China. It is quite reasonable to surmise that the Austric Kha-chais (Khasis) who had submitted to the influence of the Bodo and the Asura culture and stayed in the plains of Kamarupa when that country

was over-run by those races, gradually turned into a mixed race with a mixed culture and language. At a later time, due to afresh political turmoil in Kamarupa, instead of migrating to the Khasi and Jaintia hills where they were socially banned by the orthodox batch of their race, they migrated further eastwards and settled in the valley of the wide Loktak lake or Kha-la, and were known as the Khalachais."

Nath further states that King Khongtekcha, the successor of the Manipuri King Nao-Thing-Thong made an alliance with the king of Kamarupa, and this interaction between the Bishnupriyas and the people of Kamarupa developed into a mixed dialect separate from that which was prevalent in Manipur and were designated by a separate name - "Vishnu-purias to distinguish them from the Mei-theis".⁸³ An important source for Bishnupriya history is the *Khumal Puran*⁸⁴ which is considered a short history of the Khumal clan of Manipur. It mentions the incident of Nongkhrang Lappa which took place during the reign of Garibniwaz. The king invited one Santidas Gosai to initiate the people of Manipur into Vaisnavism. The guru advised that the people should take a holy dip in the Nongkhrang water-tank in order to initiate them to the new faith. However, the Khumal clans refused to undergo the ritual of initiation. When the Khumal king was asked the reason for refusal to take the holy dip, he replied that people of Manipur are not impure and that the Khumals, the Luwangs and others had been initiated into their religious fold from the time of their ancestors. After confirming the statement of the Khumal king from King Garibniwaz, Shantidas Gosai advised the Khumals to worship Ram. But the Khumal king expressed the desire that his clan continue to be devotees of Visnu.

Thus, Santidas Gosai is said to have initiated the Khumals into Visnu cult, and from then on they came to be known as Bishnupriyas. The ancient texts of Manipur called *Puyas*⁸⁵ record the history of migration⁸⁶ of the Mayangs who are believed to be the same name given to the Bishnupriya Manipuris. The state chronicle *Cheitharol Kumbaba*⁸⁷ records that the first early contact of Mayangs with Manipur took place during the reign of King Kongyamba (1324-1335 C.E.). They are said to have been defeated by the king and driven out of Kangleipak (ancient name of Manipur). The chronicle records as thus, "...Another fight took place at the Koubu Ching in which the invading forces of the Mayangs were given a stiff resistance and ultimately routed". Wangkhemcha Chingtamien⁸⁸ explains that in the 14th century C.E. with better surface communication, the Mayangs attacked Kangleipak with the aim of occupying the land of the Meiteis.

But they suffered defeat at the hands of the Meiteis. After the defeat, they surrendered to the king of Manipur who allowed them to settle in Kangleipak but not as 'leipak-macha' or natives. They were given menial jobs in the palace and from then on the first settlement of the Mayangs now called Bishnupriya took place in Manipur. The second contact with the Mayangs or outsiders took place during the reign of King Kiyamba (1467-1508 C.E). By this time they showed their allegiance to the king and rendered

service to the people. The Cheitharol Kumbaba records as thus: ⁸⁹"In the year of Lamlei Chanouwa, Saka 1426, the Mayangs advanced to the Valley. The Angom Chief led a force to meet them, but Mayangs advanced to the Valley. The Angom Chief led a force to meet them, but suffered defeat at the hands of the invaders. The Nongthonba, son of the king and other officers namely Apujam Haoba, Wangkheirakpam Kongyamba, Kambam Sekmu, Hijam Haoba along with the foot-soldiers of the Yaikul Subdivision fell in battle."

The contact which took place during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652 C.E) was the result of a war at Thoubal, in which the Meitei army routed their opponents viz; Muslim and Mayang. About 1000 men which included blacksmiths, utensil makers and washer-men were taken as war captives along with 30 elephants and 1000 guns. These captives settled in Manipur and was to form the Bishnupriya population.⁹⁰

The history of migration of different groups of people to Manipur are recorded in two Puyas, namely, Nongpok Haram (migration from East) and Nongchup Haram (migration from the West). The people who came to Manipur from the 13th century to the 17th century C.E. were absorbed in the Meitei community and allotted yumnaks (surnames) as well as Meitei yek-salai (clan names).⁹¹ From the East came the Chinese, Tai (Shans), Tibeto-Burmans etc. while those from the West came the Muslims, Brahmanas, Bengalis, Bishnupriyas etc. The Bishnupriyas claim that they are the descendants of Kala Raja, the Khuman King of the clan of the same name in Manipur.

However, Nongchup Haram narrates that Phirchandra of Takhel (Tripura) who accompanied Kala Raja emigrated from Rangamati, during the period of Khagemba (1597-1652 C.E.) and married the latter's younger sister Patsali whose lineal descent are the Rangacha family. Tangja Abhiram, Pura Mayum and Churamani.⁹² In fact Rangamati represents the name of two places, one in Goalpara district and the other in Bengal. There was a mass exodus of people from Bengal from Rangamati which coincided with the reign of King Khagemba.

The ancestor cult of the Meiteis must have necessitated the recording of lineage and descent of each clan.⁹³ The genealogy of the Bishnupriyas has been written down in the Kalisharon, a part of the Sanggai Phammang.⁹⁴ This work which was prepared during the period 1872-1878 C.E. was necessitated on account of the Seven Years' Devastation (1819-1825 C.E.) which led to chaos and instability of the kingdom.⁹⁵ This text mentions that early name of the Bishnupriyas was Mayang Kaalisha, but after installation of the Vishnu image at Lamangthong, they earned the second name i.e. Bishnupuri or Bishnupriyas. Further, after leaving Manipur they came into contact with the Assamese and Bengalis.

The Sanggai Phammang Puya records that: "Praying to Goddess Kalimai of the family of Pukhrabam Kala Raja Aribam (the elder son), an account of the origin of this family hailing from the west is given here During the reign of Gambhir Singh, the Meitei king in

saka 1749, the Mayang Kalishas are christened as 'Bishnupriyas' and invested with the sacred thread".⁹⁶ There are some puyas written in the 19th century C.E. which deal with the genealogy and history of migration of the Bishnupriyas. One such text is Kalisaron,⁹⁷ which is an account of the Kalisa clan of Naotia ethnic community of Tripura state. Another text titled Mayang Leimanai Khangabok ⁹⁸deals with the ethnic people of Khangabok who inhabit mostly the left banks of Arong stream and Ekop lake and belong to Leimanai community. They are said to have rendered service to the queen of the Nais, an ethnic group who are believed to have entered Manipur from the western direction. The Ningthoukhong ⁹⁹text informs that the Ningthounais served the Meitei king as servants or 'slaves' and having migrated to Manipur from the West were permitted to settle in Ningthoukhong village.

A text dealing with similar theme is the Ningthounai Leimanai Lon¹⁰⁰ which is about the migrants from the West. The Ningthounai or the servant of the king and Leimanai or the servant of the queen belong to the larger Nai group of people. The Khuman Ningthourol Lambuba records that, "The migration of the Kacharis into Manipur and the Manipuris into Kachar took place from early times. The Kacharis who migrated into Manipur from Kachari kingdom and settled down there are found in different groups known as Akoksha, Thouchensha, Toung Thongraisha, Akesha, Akisha, Hojaisha, Dimasha, Kalisha etc according to Puyas such as Nongchup Haram, Nongchup Haramlon etc. The Mayang Kalishas were found to have already settled in the areas of Leimatak in 1200 A.D and even before this date. The Khuman king, Thinggon Hanba attacked them, captured some and later, they were settled at Konchak and Konchai."¹⁰¹ W. Mc Culloch ¹⁰² in his work titled An Account of the Valley of Manipur refers to the Meeyang or people from the West, "the grass-cutters" who are under one who is styled Kalaraj. The Meeyangs are believed to be descendants of people from the "Western Plains who were captured in arms against Munnipore, and some of them immigrated of their own accord." Their number seems to have been substantial at one point in time and their place of residence is mentioned as Meeyang-yin-pham. This place was located on a raised land which was the result of the labour of the same group of people indicating their numerical strength to perform the task. W. Mc Culloch wrote that: "they always speak their own language among themselves which is a dialect of Hindee, but they all understand and most of them can speak Munnipore." Dun¹⁰³ in his work Gazetteer of Manipur also mentions about the migrants from west to Manipur. The Bishnupriyas were given land for settlement at Mayang Imphal but later gradually dispersed in different areas of the Manipur valley. Their chief was called Kalaraj or Mayang Ningthou who resided in Ningthoukhong in south Bishenpur. According to B.C. Allen,¹⁰⁴ the Bishnupriyas are mentioned as Hindus (a separate caste) and also descendants of 120 families belonging to different castes brought to Manipur by King Gharibniwaz in the later half of the 18th century

C.E. in his efforts to bring about Hinduisation in the Manipur kingdom.

Contributing to the debate on the history and culture of the Bishnupriyas, Kh. Bidyapati Sinha,¹⁰⁵ explains that the community identifies themselves as Bangals (Bengalis). The author in his work has tried to refute the claims of the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha that the Bishnupriya Manipuris are the descendants of Arjuna, the great Pandava prince of the Mahabharata.

Yumnam Oken Singh and Khuraijam Gyanabati states, "As time passed, more and more people began to settle in the valley from all the surrounding areas through migration and as captives in war throughout the centuries. These people got merged with the Meitei in different clans and continued to grow in numbers. As such some of the Meiteis might be the descendants of the Burmese, Chinese, Shans, Aryans etc. Manipur valley was a melting pot of many communities and the kingdom of Manipur became more powerful."¹⁰⁶ The Bishnupriyas settled in the Patharkandi areas identify themselves as Bangals and also call themselves as Bishnupriya Manipuris¹⁰⁷ They do not favour recognition of their language as Bishnupriya Manipuri but not as Bishnupuriya. They claim to have migrated to Cachar in the second decade of the 18th century C.E. during the reign of Pamheiba. The place was named Rongokalapur after king Rongokalap, the son of Nimitaka, the king of Kaushambi, a small kingdom consisting of some parts of the district of Mymensing, Manbhum of Bengal and Rongpur of Koch Bihar. The proponents of this theory which connects the Bishnupuriyas with Mallabhum in Bankura district of West Bengal include Kh. Vidyapati Sinha¹⁰⁸ and Chittaranjan Dasgupta.¹⁰⁹ Parimal Sinha,¹¹⁰ coordinator of BLDO says, "the 'Munda Mala is still now present in Bishnupur of Bankura district in West Bengal.

Nowadays, we can see a tank named as "Munda Mala" in Patharkandi, but people of the region are giving a distorted history about it. But actually it has a historical connection with Bishnupur kingdom." The Census of Bangladesh: 1991 included Bishnupriya Manipuri under the category of Manipuri community. It mentions a Madoi group of the Bishnupriyas also called as Kalishas who were supposed to have converted to Vaisnavism along with the Meitei King Pamheiba alias Garibnawaz in the 18th century C.E.

The Census of Bangladesh: 1991 records the Bishnupriyas as being divided into two groups based on dialects viz; Rajar Gang (King's village) and Madoi Gang (Queen's village). The speakers of the language of the Madois and who call themselves Bishnupriya Manipuri / Manipuri Bishnupriya are also brought under the category of Bishnupuriya in the Census Report of India: 2011. The Manipuri Bishnupriyas in Bangladesh do not speak Manipuri/Meiteilon but Bishnupriya language.

The history of the Bishnupriyas of Bishnupur, popularly known as Mallabhum¹¹¹ in the medieval period was under the rule of the Malla rulers over a decade. But at present, Bishnupur is a sub-

division of the Bankura district of West Bengal, one of the important districts of the radh / rarh (rough upland) of the state. The name Mallabhum for Bishnupur is derived from the name of the Malla dynasty which ruled during the period from the 8th century C.E. to the 18th century C.E. The territory of Mallabhum included the Bankura, a part of Burdwan, Birbhum, Santhal Parganas, Midnapur and also a part of Purulia. It was situated in the south-western border of Bengal, the central area of the traditional Rarh region, which along with the adjoining tracts in Bihar and Orissa had a large concentration of autonomous semi-independent principalities. Each of the principalities had the suffix 'bhum' which signifies the extent of political control. It is bounded on the western side by the territories of Samantabhum (Chatna), Ambikanagar and Supur, on the north by Gopbhum and Senbhum and beyond the southern limits lay Bagri. The Malla¹¹² kings ruled over the south-western part of present West Bengal and a part of southeastern Jharkhand in the 20th century C.E., and it also included Medinapur and Bankura districts. The name of Bankura owes its origin to the aboriginal population and almost the whole district belonged to the Bishnupur raja's family. Binod S. Das¹¹³ opines that: "South-West Bengal comprising mainly these two districts is situated in the cross-sections of two cultural streams of Indo Aryan and native-aboriginal elements of the region.

With varied natural phenomena and cultural synthesis this region from the remote past has strategic, political and commercial importance to the successive foreign conquerors, and also to the inhabitants of the soil." It may be mentioned that Mallabhum was the most ancient kingdom of Bengal which at present is included in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum and Burdwan. Mallabhum covered the major portion of the present Bankura district, and spread between the uplands on the eastern end of the Chottanagpur plateau and the western fringe of the riverine alluvial plains of Bengal.¹¹⁴ The region of Mallabhum was called 'rarh' (forest) and its rulers were referred as 'Mallaboninath', the 'king of Mallabhum', 'lords of Mallabhum', 'Mallabani or the forest of the Malla region'. There are several mythical as well as traditional accounts of the legendary rajas of Bishnupur which is mentioned in the Pandit's Chronicle (Annals of Rural Bengal, Vol-1, W.W. Hunter) in the Statistical Account of Bengal (W.W. Hunter) and in the Annals of Rural Bengal by Sir William Hunter. King Adi Malla also popularly known as Bagdi raja, the founder of the Malla dynasty is said to have ruled over Laugram during the period 694-710 C.E. There is an account of the early life of Adi Malla which runs as thus:¹¹⁵

"In the year 102 of the Bengal era, i.e., in 695 A.D., a prince of one of the royal houses of Northern India made a pilgrimage with his wife to the shrine of Jagannath in Puri. While on his way thither, he halted, in the midst of a great forest, at the village of Laugram, 6 miles from Kotulpur, and there left his wife, who was about to give birth to a child, in the house of a Brahman named Panchanan, after arranging that a Kayasth named Bhagirath Guha

should look after her.....The mother and child remained at Laugram in the care of the Kayasth, and when the boy reached the age of 7 years, the Brahman employed him as a cowherd. One day, when overcome with fatigue, he had fallen asleep under a tree, two huge cobras, raising their hoods above the sleeper's face, shaded him from the rays of the sun, till they were startled away by the approach of Panchanan searching for the boy.From this time the boy ceased to be a cowherd." The story goes on to say that he received the education of a warrior, and that his skill in this art endeared him to be an aboriginal ruler called the Raja of Panchargarh, which earned for him the sobriquet of Adi Malla, the original or unique wrestler. Adi Malla's son Jay Malla succeeded his father, and extended the dominions on all sides and made Bishnupur as capital. After him there were forty successive kings who ruled over Bishnupur until the reign of Bir Hambir (1591-1616 C.E).

The reign of Bir Hambir was significant as the king became involved in the struggle between the Afghans and the Mughals. Bir Hambir was succeeded by Raghunath Singh, the first raja to assume the title of Singh (a Kshatriya title). During this period of Bengal history, the rajas of Bishnupur or Bishenpore were busy constructing temples and forts; the famous temples of Jor Bangla, Shyamrai and Kalachand being built by Raghunath Singh. The next raja was Bir Singh who erected the temple of Lalji in 1658 C.E, excavated seven big lakes or tanks called Gantabandh, Lalbandh, Krishnabandh, Syambandh, Pokabandh, Jamunabandh and Kalindibandh. Thus a number of rulers ascended to the throne of Bishnupur kingdom till the 18th century C.E. They continued to pay tributes to the Muhammadans but were independent within their own kingdom. However, the kingdom of Bishnupur began to disintegrate at the beginning of the 18th century C.E. At first they had to face the aggressions of the King of Burdwan, next the Maratha invasions from 1742 C.E and also the great famine of Bengal in 1770 C.E. The ruler at that time was Gopal Singh, a deeply religious person who was weak to face his enemies and so could not retaliate. The Marathas under king Bhaskar Rao attacked Bengal for the first time in 1742 C.E. Chaitanya Singh succeeded Gopal Singh, a pious king, his religious disposition made him an unfit ruler in facing the strong powers of the Marathas. By 1760 C.E., Bishnupur came under the control of the British. A large portion of the population was swept away ; lands fell out of cultivation ; distress and destitution drove the people to acts of lawlessness and violence, in which disbanded soldiers lent a willing hand.¹¹⁶ In Bangladesh, the Bishnupuriyas are found mainly confined in the Sylhet division and settled in the localities of Tilakpur (Nagar), Bhanubil (Banughas), Baghbat, Sripuri, Mahung, Teteigaon, Ghanshyampur, Baram, Baluchar, Kalarabil, Guramara, Baligaon, Lakhat, Machimpur (Sylhet), Hiramati, Madhavpur, Lamabazar, Guler Haour, Bamangaon, Shukkur, Chaygai, Gobindabari, Ullagaon, Kalibari, Digalbhag, Majergaon, Rajbari, Bendaria, Chunarughat, North Tilakpur or Alipur,

Guler Haour, Shimutala etc. There are also considerable number of the population living scattered in the local headquarters like Kamalganj, Khuwaighat, Rangamati of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and also at Tezgaon, Manipuripara of Dacca, the capital city of Bangladesh.¹¹⁷ The Bishnupriya Manipuris strongly claim themselves as the original inhabitants of Manipur who had migrated to other regions outside the state during the Burmese-Manipur wars. The origin of the Bishnupuriyas are largely based upon historical narratives which indicates that they have arrived in Manipur during the 16th to 18th centuries C.E, migrating from the west i.e.,

From the linguistic point of view, G.A. Grierson¹¹⁸ and Suniti Kumar Chatterjee¹¹⁹ 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,¹²⁰ 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 Bishnupriyas 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 Khagamba (1597-1652 C.E).¹²¹ Braja Gopal Sinha¹²² in the book titled Origin of Clans Among Vishnupriya Manipuris suggests that the Bishnupriya Manipuris were in fact the early inhabitants of the Manipur valley but migration took place from around the 13th century C.E. to various places such as Cachar, Sylhet, and Tripura, and that migration took place mainly during the 18th century C.E.

It must be noted that in the official history of Manipur the Bishnupriyas 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. It is said that the descendants of

Kalaraja refused to leave their 'motherland' and gradually they were completely absorbed in the Manipuri community without any trace of distinct characteristics. The population which left Manipur in the exodus claim themselves as Bishnupriya Manipuris. N. Tombi Singh¹²³ opines that it is possible that some kings may have brought some Bishnupriya Manipuris and allowed them to settle in Manipur. An occasion could be the installation of Visnu image at a temple in Manipur. Tradition has it that King Kyamba (1467–1508 C.E.) was in frantic search of men to help in preparation of kshir (rice cooked in milk and sugar) to be offered to Visnu deity. He was sent some experts as present by the king of Siam and the population increased thereafter. In Manipur, the Bishnupriyas are said to have settled first at Mayang Imphal,¹²⁴ than in Ningthoukhong, Nachou, Ngaikhong Kulen, Ngaikhong Khunou near Loktak lake and in Wangjing, Heirol and Khangabok.¹²⁵ J. Roy¹²⁶ 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 Bishnupriyas. It is claimed that the Bishnupriya Manipuris belonged to the Kshatriya caste and descended from Aryan blood with some admixture of the Mongoloid stock. They associated themselves with the successive waves of 'Aryan invaders' and with Arjuna's exploits that have passed through the valley of Manipur in the pre-Christian era.

This people trace their ethnic origin with the Arjuna-Chitrangada line of the Mahabharata. 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."¹²⁷ The centre of culture of this people being at Bishnupur, so they were named Bishnupriyas (inhabitants of Bishnupur). There are references to the people known by other names such as Bishnupuriya,¹²⁸ Mayangs,¹²⁹ Kalisa Manipuris,¹³⁰ and even as Bengalis. For R. Brown, Bishnupriya Manipuris are described as Mayangs, descendants of Hindus who had migrated from the west and were even the captives of Manipuri kings. Brown states that although the general facial characteristics of the Manipurie (Manipuri) are of Mongolian type, there is a great diversity of feature among them, some of them showing a regularity approaching the Aryan type." K. P. Sinha opposed the use of the term Mayang for the Bishnupriya Manipuris. However, it may be mentioned that the term Mayang has been used by E.T. Dalton in *Ethnology of Bengal*, S.K.Chatterjee in *Kirata-Jana-*

Kirti, and Ch. Manihar Singh in *A Clarification on the Bishnupriya in Relation to the Manipuris and Padmanath Vidyavinode* in his work titled *Gait's History of Assam among others*. For Padmanath Vidyavinode, "There is, moreover, an Aryan dialect called Mayang still spoken in Manipur, the headquarter of which are two or three plain villages near Vishnupur,the number of people in Manipur speaking this dialect is at present about 1000," S. S. Tunga,¹³¹ studying the dialects of Assam states that 'the most important speech-form in Cachar after Bengali is a Bengali Assamese-Manipuri hybrid commonly known as Bishnupriya Manipuri.' That this 'hybrid' language has common features with both Assamese and Bengali implies the cross-cultural context in the history of the community." The identity crisis faced by the Bishnupriya Manipuris is sought to be understood by tracing the history of the community in a work by Bhim Sen Singha.¹³²

S. Gajrani¹³³ in a voluminous work dealing with the diverse history, culture and religious beliefs of the people living in different parts of India mentioned that Manipuri community comprises both Aryan and Kuki-chin people speaking two distinct languages viz; Meitei language and Bishnupriya Manipuri language. Further, it suggests that the Bishnupriya Manipuri language is highly influenced by Sanskrit and Maharastri as well as Sauraseni Prakrit, though there are some words of the Hindi language of Northern India, Meitei, Assamese and a little influence of Bengali language. In P. K. Mohanty's¹³⁴ work titled *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Tribes In India* the Bishnupriya Manipuri language is mentioned as a language of the Manipuri community in Manipur. A socio-linguistic study of Northeast India by Pauthang Haokip¹³⁵ also infers that Bishnupriya language retains pre-Bengali features and is closer to both Bengali and Assamese. In Tripura, the Bishnupriya Manipuris are included in the list of seven non-tribal minority languages.¹³⁶ They are settled in Kailasahar, Dharmnagar, North Tripura, Unokuti, Dhalai, Sepahijola and West Tripura district. In Assam, the Bishnupriyas have settled in the districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. As per the Census of 1971, they are recorded as the fourth largest group in Cachar district with the nomenclature 'Bishnupriya' and not as Bishnupriya Manipuri. In Cachar district they are settled in Narsingpur, Meherpur, Bikrampur, Jatrampur and also in Silchar city. The areas in Hailakandi district are Khunou, Sunapur, Nandirgang and Andurgang where the people call themselves as "Bangals" at home and as Manipuri outside. Similarly the majority people of Patharkandi area also do the same. In Karimganj district they are also found in majority in such areas like Dullabchera, Amurkhal, West Krishnapur, Chamtilla, Tingari, Kukitilla, Kholapar, Bitorgol etc, they also call themselves as 'Bangals' at home and as Manipuri outside. The negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual representation of cultural difference.

In this connection it may be mentioned that folklore narratives are now accepted as one of the

necessary complementary source for reconstructing the past. Mali¹³⁷ explains that "For historical myths are now commonly perceived as 'foundational narratives', as stories that purport to explain the present in terms of some momentous event that occurred in the past.... historical communities, like religions or nations, consist in the beliefs that their members have about them – more concretely, in the stories they tell about them." "These stories tend to be about events that occurred in what Mircea Eliade¹³⁸ calls illud tempus, the primordial mythical time that precedes historical time. Hence, the central concern of mythistory is that history must recognize the role of myth in the constitution of national identities. The various schools of thought regarding the origin of the Bishnupurias have come up with two main perspectives. The first view regards them as indigenous community of Manipur who migrated to other places outside at different periods of history on account of the political turmoil that prevailed due to wars with Burma. The alternative theory suggests that they are immigrants from outside Manipur and perhaps has its origins in Bengal. Based on the language which the people speak, an Indo-Aryan group of language akin to Bengali and Assamese categorized as Magadhi Aprabhamsa, the origin of the ethnic group is said to be in Bengal. The reason for their migration in successive waves to the nearby areas perhaps starting from the 15th century C.E. could be attributed to factors such as Maratha raids, warfare with the neighbouring kingdoms, religious conversion and famine of Bengal in 1770 C.E. Hiteshranjan Sanyal¹³⁹ states, "Due to the havoc caused by the Marathas a large number of people fled from their homes and migrated towards east. G.A. Grierson spoke of the Mayang speaking people known as Bishnupriya Manipuri and their language is akin to Assamese and Bengali. A common place mentioned to both the perspectives is the association with a place named Bishnupur and the name being derived from being devotees of Visnu.

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- 1 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. The nomenclature Bishnupriya Manipuri and Bishnupriya is used alternatively in this study to refer to the same community speaking the language of the same name.
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 - 42 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: *Bishnupuriya villages in Cachar district, Assam.*
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 - 44 James N. Stanford and Dennis R. Preston (eds.), *Variation in Indigenous Minority Languages*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2009.
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 - 49 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.
- 50 Southeast Asia comprise of eleven countries that stretch from Northeast India to China, and is generally divided into 'mainland' (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) and 'island' (Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei and East Timor) zones.
- 51 Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New Left, Bombay, 1983. The notion of the 'imagined' is taken from Anderson's idea of nation as a myth which is imagined. According to him people from corners of the geographical territory who will never meet or know the rest continue to see the other parts of this territory and their cultures as a component of 'our' nation.
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- 55 The Meiteis inhabit the Manipur valley and also constitute more than 50% of the population; the hills are inhabited by tribal communities belonging largely to the Naga and Kuki group of people. This place was referred to by different names in different periods of history. Early manuscripts mention the place as Meitrabak, Poirei Meiteileipak, Sanaleibak and Kangleipak. Sanamahi Laikan, a historical work states that the present name Manipur was first officially introduced in the early 18th century C.E. during the reign of King Garibaniwaz.
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- 60 Shobha Satyanath and Nasrin B. Lascar. op.cit., p.446.
- 61 Amalendu Guha, 'Introduction', in Gautam Sengupta and J. P Singh (eds.), *Archaeology of North Eastern India*, Vikash Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991, p.2
- 62 Myths are folklore narratives often considered 'unscientific' and in contradistinction to History since the latter is supposed to be based on 'facts' and 'objectivity'. The repository of myths belong to the cultural history of a community or region. David Adams Leeming, *Myth: A Bibliography of Belief*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002, p.8
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