



Forging Identity: The Historical Journey and Cultural Evolution of Manipuri Muslims

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The history of Manipuri Muslims or 'Pangals' is a compelling narrative of identity formation shaped by centuries of integration, adaptation and resilience. Their journey reflects a nuanced interplay between historical events, socio-cultural practices, and religious influences, resulting in a unique blend of Islamic and local Meitei customs. This paper explores the origins, integration, challenges, and identity assertion of the Pangal community, highlighting the factors that influenced their cultural and religious evolution in Manipur.

The origins of Manipuri Muslims trace back to the early 17th century during the reign of King Khagemba (1597–1652). Following a significant military encounter between the joint Cachari-Muslim forces and the Manipuri kingdom, approximately 1,000 Muslim soldiers were captured and settled in Manipur as prisoners of war. To ensure their assimilation and prevent potential future threats, King Khagemba integrated these prisoners into the local society by providing them with Meitei wives and land. This deliberate strategy laid the foundation for the unique identity of the Pangals, who maintained their Islamic faith while adopting local traditions and practices. Over time, they became indispensable members of Manipuri society, contributing as artisans, blacksmiths, and soldiers.

The socio-cultural life of the Pangals evolved in close association with the Meiteis, the dominant community of Manipur. This interaction led to the emergence of a syncretic identity that combined Islamic religious practices with Meitei social norms. The Pangals adopted elements such as the clan system, similar to the Meitei "sagei" system, which became an essential part of their social structure. Each clan, or "sagei," maintained lineage-based customs, strengthening intra-community bonds and regulating marriages to ensure exogamy. This adaptation showcased how the Pangals balanced integration with the need to preserve their distinct cultural identity. Marriage practices among the Pangals illustrate this syncretic blend. Although Islamic law framed marriage as a civil contract, Pangals incorporated Meitei customs such as engagement rituals, known as *kwa-khaiba*, and ceremonies like *heinaba/thijaba*. Elopement, a practice known as *chenba*, was also common, reflecting the influence of Meitei traditions. The role of Meitei women married to early Muslims was significant in fostering this cultural exchange, particularly in the spheres of dance and music. Rituals such as *Thabal Chongba*—a traditional Meitei dance—became integral to Pangal marriage celebrations, highlighting the interconnectedness between the two communities.

The advent of Hinduism in Manipur, particularly during the reign of King Garib Niwaz (1709–1748), marked a period of significant religious and social transformation. His campaign to Hinduise the Meitei community created a divide between the Meiteis and the Pangals, who retained their Islamic faith. The Hinduisation process imposed stricter social hierarchies and notions of purity and pollution, marginalizing the Pangals as "impure" alongside the hill tribes. This division reinforced the Pangals' distinct religious identity and limited their interactions with the increasingly orthodox Meitei society. The Burmese occupation of Manipur (1819–1826), known as the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* or the "Seven Years of Devastation," further disrupted the social and economic landscape. The occupation led to mass migration, displacement, and population loss. The Pangals, like other Manipuris, suffered from the devastation and faced significant challenges in re-establishing their community post-occupation. This period served as a catalyst for change, instigating new religious and cultural dynamics as survivors returned with influences from neighboring regions such as Cachar and Tripura.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Islamic reformist movements began to influence the Pangal community. These movements, part of a broader trend seen throughout the Muslim world, aimed to purify Islamic practices and eliminate non-Islamic accretions. Reformist



leaders, including maulvis educated in mainland India, returned to Manipur with renewed religious zeal. They introduced teachings from the Quran and *Hadith*, emphasizing fundamental Islamic principles and practices such as the *Kalima* (faith), *Namaz* (prayer), *Roza* (fasting), and *Zakat* (charity). The establishment of madrassas played a crucial role in disseminating religious knowledge and fostering a unified Muslim identity rooted in orthodox Islamic teachings. The influence of reformist movements brought significant changes to the social and cultural practices of the Pangals. For example, traditional practices adopted from the Meiteis, such as dance and music in marriage ceremonies, were scrutinized and discouraged. New dress codes were promoted, with Muslim men adopting *kurta-pajamas* and women gradually adopting the *burqa*. The reformist maulvis also stressed gender segregation and stricter adherence to religious rituals, marking a shift from the syncretic practices of earlier generations to a more conservative expression of Islamic identity.

The rise of Islamic reformist movements coincided with broader socio-political changes in Manipur. The 20th century saw the emergence of various ethnic identity movements among the Meiteis, the Nagas, and the Kukis. These movements were driven by a mix of political aspirations, cultural revivalism, and responses to perceived threats from other groups. For the Pangals, these movements underscored their minority status and intensified their focus on religious and cultural preservation. The formation of organizations like the Jamiat-ul-Ulama and the Tablighi Jamaat in the 1960s exemplified the efforts to promote religious education, community solidarity, and a deeper commitment to Islamic principles.

Economic factors also played a role in shaping Pangal identity. Despite their integration into the broader Manipuri society, Pangals often found themselves economically marginalized. Limited access to high-profile jobs and a reliance on small-scale trades, craftsmanship, and self-employment fostered a sense of socio-economic exclusion. This economic competition among ethnic groups contributed to the Pangals' growing consciousness of their distinct identity, as they sought community support and solidarity in response to perceived economic disparities.

The interplay between political, religious, and social factors culminated in a complex identity for Manipuri Muslims. The influence of Hinduisation, the impact of the Burmese occupation, and the arrival of Islamic reformist movements each played a part in shaping the Pangal identity over time. The rise of identity politics in Manipur during the late 20th century further complicated this process, as the community navigated pressures from the dominant Meitei group and other ethnic minorities. The Sanamahi revival among the Meiteis, which sought to reassert pre-Hindu religious and cultural practices, also contributed to the heightened identity awareness among Pangals. This movement was perceived as both a cultural renaissance for the Meiteis and a potential challenge to the broader Manipuri identity that included minority groups like the Pangals.

In conclusion, the historical journey of Manipuri Muslims is one of adaptation, resilience, and assertion. From their initial settlement as prisoners of war to their eventual integration into Manipuri society, Pangals have maintained a delicate balance between embracing local customs and preserving their Islamic heritage. The introduction of Hindu orthodoxy, the trauma of the Burmese occupation, and the influence of Islamic reformist movements each played crucial roles in shaping their communal consciousness. The modern identity of the Pangals is marked by both integration within the larger Manipuri framework and differentiation driven by religious, cultural and socio-economic factors. This duality reflects the broader dynamics of identity formation in multi-ethnic societies, where minority groups navigate complex relationships with dominant communities while striving to protect their unique heritage. The Pangal experience offers a poignant example of how identity is continuously forged and redefined through the intersection of history, culture and religion.

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