

# Understanding Muslim Social Arrangement: The Pangals of Manipur, India

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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes the Muslim Pangal community of Manipur in northeastern India. Although its members have been fairly integrated with other groups, their liberal cultural sense, infused with a deep religious grounding, has allowed them to borrow various cultural traits, including language. Apart from Islam, their cultural whole is based on, among other elements, language, dressing patterns, social arrangements, folk songs, and courtship rituals.

## **Introduction**

India's beautiful northeast, which now consists of eight "sisters" (including Sikkim), often comes to the nation's mainstream conscience as a region that is a bit removed, if not entirely remote, region marked by a jumble of strange problems. This may partly be due to its peculiar historical trajectory, given that it is connected to mainland India only by a narrow strip of land known as the "chicken's neck." But taking the northeast as an area entirely independent of the issues faced by India's other regions/states is also a bit removed from what is actually the case. This double-edged "removed" syndrome often prevents its issues from catching, much less dominating, the nation's attention – except perhaps when an event both suits and reinforces existing stereotypical images.

This paper analyzes the Muslim Pangals (also known as Meitei Pangals or Pangan) living in Manipur, which is located in India's extreme eastern flank that borders on largely Buddhist Myanmar/Burma. India's Muslims are not a monolithic community, for they are separated by different existential factors. Reflecting on the country's plurality, Justice Aftab Alam writes: "Indians speaking the same language may belong to different religions. Conversely, Indians belonging to the same religious group may come from different ethnic stocks, may speak the different languages, dress differently, eat different kinds of food in entirely different manners and may have completely different social and economic concerns."<sup>1</sup>

## The Muslims of Manipur

Picturesque Manipur has a proud past. It was an independent kingdom until the British defeated its forces in a historic battle of 1891, during which the local Manipuris (including Muslims) fought bravely to safeguard their sovereignty, freedom, and respect. Muslims had been moving there from elsewhere for many years. In 1606, those who came from the west of Manipur accompanied one of its Meitei princes who wanted to overthrow his brother the king. They were captured and settled in Manipur. Later on, they helped to safeguard the kingdom from Awa (a principality in early preunified Burma): they "defeated the Awa troops and took sixty seven prisoners" in 1722.<sup>2</sup> Many Muslims also left Manipur to escape Burmese brutality, especially during 1819-26, known to the Manipuris as the "seven-year devastation." Pangals now living in Assam, Tripura, and Bangladesh are the descendants of those Pangals. The first chief minister after Manipur achieved statehood in 1972 was Muhammad Alimuddin – a Pangal. The Pangals helped develop Manipur and acquired many things from the Meiteis, the state's major community.

The Muslims involved in the events of 1606 were from Taraf, which is now in the Sylhet division of Bangladesh; earlier, it was part of an undivided Assam. Taraf is situated about fifty-five kilometers northwest of Serail Paragan and about sixteen kilometers southwest of Habiganz.<sup>3</sup> The *Nong-samei*, a text that deals at great length with the Muslims' arrival in Manipur, mentions that they were involved in 1606 events under the leadership of one "Mahamat," who is referred to as "Raja of Tarap"<sup>4</sup> ("King of Tarap" [Taraf]) or "Prasena Napap Mahmad"<sup>5</sup> and was accompanied by seventeen officers.

The political context of their arrival was the intense power struggle going on between the Afghans and the Mughals in Taraf. Muazzam Hussain Khan writes in *Banglapedia, the National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, that Afghans

chief Usman Khan Afghan was the Mughals' most formidable opponent in Bengal. He observes: "Usman created a new centre of authority in the hilly tract in the southern part of Sylhet, with Uhar as the fortified capital. He stationed his son Khwaja Mumriz and brother Khwaja Malhi in the neighboring tract of Taraf. A strong and well-equipped imperialist army was sent against Usman under the chief command of Shujat Khan. Usman opposed the advancing army at Daulambapur, a village about five miles south of Maulvi Bazar."<sup>6</sup>

This shows that Uhar, Usman's capital in southern Sylhet, was adjacent to Taraf, where Khwaja Mumraiz and Khwaja Malhi were stationed. The period witnessed the turning of Mughal attention, under Islam Khan, the viceroy of Bengal, "towards the Eastern division of North-East India through its Sylhet gateway."<sup>7</sup> This was after 1609, and Sylhet was the Afghans' stronghold. By April 1612, Islam Khan had annexed Usman's domain.<sup>8</sup> Generally speaking, the Afghan-Mughal conflict may have played a part in the coming of those Muslims who fought in the 1606 battle.

Right after these events, the Pangal (or Pangan) Loishang<sup>9</sup> was established to deal with the community's internal issues. This body was headed by a *kazi*. After marrying Meitei women, they adopted Meiteilon (the Manipuri language) as their mother tongue. Muslims continued to arrive while the Meitei kings ruled and eventually became part of the Pangal community. Their social format was based on a pale version of the Meitei social organizational pattern. Individual or group Pangals were given *sagei* (a kinship term denoting blood relationship) names according to different yardsticks, not merely on the basis of individual occupation. Even one-time acts, such as offering something to the king, were also adopted as a criterion. The descendants of these individuals or groups were later identified with these *sagei* names. We should note, however, that different *sageis* always have different blood categories, for sometimes brothers would form different *sageis* and existing *sageis* would split.

Traditional dressing patterns among Manipur's Muslim women are similar to those of Meitei women: a *fanek* (a cloth that, fastened around the waist, comes down to about the ankle) and a *khudei* (a cloth used to cover the head and other areas of the body). They now also wear the hijab, niqab, and burka. In 1908 T. C. Hodson noted the *fanek*'s color.<sup>10</sup> Pangal folk songs also reflect their love of the land. Kirti Singh observes:

The songs sung by the young female folk in their daily contacts and conversations and on the occasion of marriage and social gatherings containing sentiment did not substantially differ from the songs of the Meiteis.

The girls sing songs in praise of the patriotism of Paona Brajavasi and the warriors of Khongjom (1890) (sic) and who perished in the war with the British and this is clearly reflected in the songs exhorting them to the Kheba hill where the hero died.<sup>11</sup>

With the social format based on *sageis* and *sagei* serving as an exogamous unit, Islam has been a crucial component of their identity. *Sagei*-based arrangements have not been elaborate, for they serve only as an identification benchmark (although entrenched) at the most basic level. In fact, forging of the Muslim community with this distinct pattern of social arrangement, which differs from Muslim communities elsewhere, took place within the Kingdom of Manipur. The Pangals' Loishang also met, among other things, the religious needs of the kingdom's nascent Muslim community. Thus its members speak Meiteilon, have arranged their social format in terms of *sagei*, and follow the Hanafi legal school. In the words of Gangmumei Kamei, founder/president of the Federal Party of Manipur, they are an "indigenized community."<sup>12</sup>

It may be important to mention that this social stratification pattern, based on their social arrangement, differs from those found in other Muslim communities in India. We find in the sources of Manipur such Muslim names as Munankha (Munan Khan),<sup>13</sup> Miliasekh (Milia Sheikh), Santulasekh (Santullah Sheikh), Akunsek (Akun Sheikh), Yismankha (Yisman Khan), Wurakkha (Wurak Khan),<sup>14</sup> Seid Ampiya (Syed Ambiya), and Seid Aptullah (Syed Abdullah).<sup>15</sup> This suggests that there were Syed, Sheikh, and Khan elements among them during the seventeenth century. But as the Pangal community was shaped with Islam as its religion and a social arrangement informed partly by that of the Meiteis, these categories were not taken into consideration. Instead, Muslims were arranged on the basis of *sagei*, in which marriage does not take place and which are arranged on a horizontal formation with no notion of "high" or "low" status.

Since these Muslims are arranged in terms of *sageis*, categories such as Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, and Pathan have never carried any meaning in the matter of marriage. In fact, given that each *sagei* is an exogamous group, the entire community, due to inter-*sagei* marriage, is very closely knit. Moreover, it is neither a caste-like group nor is it associated with any occupation. Such marriages also prevent *sageis* from maintaining any exclusive posture, which results their being separated from each other only by very weak boundaries.

Eleven years after Britain defeated Manipur (1891), a Muslim Panchayat for all Muslims (Pangals) was established.<sup>16</sup> This organization, which

sat at Lilong, was a “special panchayat,” as B. C. Allen put it, for trying “cases between Muhammadan Manipuris.”<sup>17</sup> In 1932, it prepared a report that for the first time categorized the Pangals as Syeds, Sheikhs, and Pathans. This was also an attempt to Ashrafisize them. During the 1930s in Manipur Valley, there was a strong undercurrent for identity-based articulations.

As per the information provided by Allen in 1905,<sup>18</sup> the 1901 census that classified India’s Muslims terms of elaborate caste-like groups neither classified the Pangals in terms of caste-like groups nor grouped them as Syeds, Sheikhs, Mughals, Pathans or by such terms as Ashraf, Ajlaf, or Arzal. They were classed as a single category: Muhammadans.<sup>19</sup> Throughout this community’s history, no tradition or practice of venerating *mazaars* or *dargah*, as found mainly in northern India, has ever appeared.

### **Marifat Songs and Islam**

Muslims in Manipur sing a typical song, known as *marifat*, which leads us to wonder whether or not there once were Sufis among them. Their tradition makes certain vague and nonexplicit references to one Niyamattullah, a long-dead individual who supposedly possessed some unique “ability” and meditated for the pleasure of Allah (swt) under a guide (a *pir*) in some isolated places. One fateful day, as part of a test to determine his firmness and conviction, he was asked to drink hot milk from a boiling pan. He did so without the slightest hesitation with a cup-like object made from a coconut shell. Later, he is said to have possessed some unique characteristics, such as reaching places faster than others. Thus he began to be known as Ipu Keidongba (the grandfather who rides on a tiger). His grave is still there, but neither he nor it are venerated because the concept of *pir* is not popular. As this is an isolated oral tradition, we cannot say for certain whether it could fit in with the aspects of a Sufi or Sufi-type person.

The community does possess, however, Arabic/Urdu-based *marifat* (knowledge) songs that emphasize Allah’s (swt) glory, stories associated with Islam and Prophet Muhammad (saw), the temporal nature of human existence, and the inevitability of the Hereafter. The underlining concern of such songs is to remind people of the necessity to turn to Islam. We are not sure whether this type of song was, at an early period, associated with the Sufis who might have lived in the area. At present, they can be written and sung by anyone. One thing is clear, however: no traces of Sufi orders (*turuq*) or their dances have ever been found in Manipur. A *marifat* song is given on the following page.

*Leita nattedo leiman chanba  
Taibang meeshu leiman challi  
Leiman challaba hakchangdubu  
Mabu kouee ahal haina*

Flowers are not the only ones that wither  
Also do humans wither  
The body that which withers  
Is called an old

*Hakchangee marupti thawainido  
Dunya nanga kari thoknei  
Bandada khuda  
juda natte  
Khudada banda parda leitedo*

Soul is the friend of body  
What relations it has with *dunya*  
*Banda* (human beings) has no separation  
with *khuda* (God)  
*Banda* has no veil from *khuda*

*Taibangee thourang insangi poloi  
Punsinadi konba thungde  
Puba yaroi leihougani  
Khalhousi insan meeoi-basa*

Worldly affairs, end of man  
Hard to embrace all in a lifetime  
Cannot be carried, it will be left behind  
Oh mankind! lets think over it

*Punsigi ipakta taoriba hakchang  
Thamoida asha puraduna  
Dunya koina chellamlaga  
Leiman shingda chankhiniko*

The body that floats on the sea of life  
Carrying hope in the heart  
After running after the world (*dunya*)  
Will become one that withers

*Mapugi khudoldi mamal yaode  
Shariatki lambelda tingkhang leite  
Tattana shonsi Kaothokloishi  
Punshigi mari tatkhiniko*

Priceless is the gift of God  
No thorns in the way of Shariat  
(Lets) say constantly, not forget  
For the string of life may be broken  
(any time)

*Ningsha hondraba kabarduda  
Leiruba tare takkabbur hakchang  
Nungshiba dunya thadoklaga  
Pattuna leibak onkhiniko.<sup>20</sup>*

In the grave where there is no breathing  
Certain to live this proud/arrogant body  
Leaving behind this cherished world  
Will get decayed/decomposed and  
become earth.

## Socioeconomic Profile

According to the 2001 census, Muslims form 8.8% of Manipur's total population. Their sex ratio is 973 per 1000, their literacy level is 58.6% (the figure for Manipur's total population is 70.5%), and their female literacy rate is 41.6 percent. Their work participation figure is 43.7% (the lowest of the state's religious categories), as against 48.1% of all religions in the state. The Muslim female work participation rate is even lower: 29.6%. Among Muslims, 28.6% are said to be cultivators as against 40.2% for all religious categories; 22.3% are agricultural laborers as against 12.0% for all religious groups; 7.6% belong to the "household industries"; and 41.5% belong them to "other workers" category.<sup>21</sup> This census also reveals that 70.96% dwell in rural areas, whereas 29.03% live in urban areas.<sup>22</sup>

## Manipuri Muslims outside Manipur

Manipuri Muslims also live in other Indian states (e.g., Assam and Tripura), Bangladesh, and Myanmar/Burma. Regarding those living in Bangladesh, Md. Abdul Khaliq writes:

In fact, the Manipuri Muslims now living in Bangladesh are the descendants of those Manipuri Muslims of Manipur, who left their homeland during the time of war between the state of Manipur and Burma. ... Since the state of Manipur had always been threatened by the neighbouring Burmese, a large group of the Manipuris – both Hindu and Muslim came out of Manipur and some of them stationed at Cachar. ... After a few years, a large group of the Manipuri Muslims, who resided in Cachar advanced towards Bangladesh, reached at Longla under the Kulaura Inaba and stationed there for a few years. Longla was then under the Prithimpsa estate, owned by Ali Amjad, the then famous landlord of Sylhet. Later on, the Manipuri Muslims living in Longla left for Bhanugach *pargana* under Kamalgonj *thana* in quest of better livelihood and coexistence with the Manipuris who settled there a few years ago.<sup>23</sup>

They are very active in cultivation and mainly depend upon agriculture; few of them work in government services, vocational professions, or trade and commerce. Their living conditions are neither below the normal level nor are they economically affluent.<sup>24</sup>

The data on Manipuri Muslims in Myanmar/Burma is very limited. It is known, however, that the Burmese took many of them back home after they attacked Manipur in the eighteenth century. Even today, elders among the Manipuri community fondly talk of those who were carried away. Bryce Beemer states that Manipuris in Myanmar/Burma can be broadly divided into Ponna (Brahmans) and Kathe (Burmanized non-Brahmans),<sup>25</sup> and that the latter be subdivided into Kathe Budhhists, Kathe Hindus, and Kathe Muslims<sup>26</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Justice Aftab Alam, “The Idea of Secularism and the Supreme Court of India” [The Pluralism Working Paper Series 5], in *International Summer School on Human Development and Human Rights Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme: Reader 2* (Utrecht: University of Humanistics; Yogyakarta: Centre for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies; and Bangalore: Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, 2010), 12.
2. Thangjam Subhas Singh and Oinam Ranjit Singh, “Status of Pangals in Pre-Colonial Period: A Study of Manipuri Muslims,” in *The Orient Vision* 5, nos. 3 and 4 (July-August and September-December 2008): 86.

3. B. Kullachandra Sharma, and Badaruddin, *Meitei Pangal Hourakpaham* (Imphal: Lainingthou Bapu Research Centre, 1991), 2.
4. Oinam Bhogeshwar Singh and M. A. Janab Khan Ipham, *Nongsamei* (Imphal: 1973), 8.
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. Muazzam Hussain Khan, "Usman Khan Afghan," [http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/U\\_0042.htm](http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/U_0042.htm). Accessed on 23 March 2009.
7. S. C. Dutta, *The North-East and The Mughals (1661-1714)* (New Delhi: D. K. Publications, 1984), 19.
8. *Ibid.*
9. L. Ibungohal Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh, eds., *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (Imphal: Manipur Sahitya Parishad, 1989), 33.
10. T. C. Hodson, *The Meitei* (New Delhi: Neeraj, 1984), 18.
11. Kirti Singh, *Folk Culture of Manipur* (New Delhi: Manas Publications, 1993), 62-63.
12. Gangmumei Kamei, *Ethnicity and Social Change: An Anthology of Essays* (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2008), 146.
13. See Singh and Ipham, *Nongsamei*, 11.
14. Raj Kumar Sanahal Singh, *op.cit.*, p. V.
15. See Singh and Ipham, *Nongsamei*, 79.
16. Sharma and Badaruddin, *Meitei Pangal*, 12.
17. B. C. Allen, *Gazetter of Naga Hills and Manipur* (New Delhi: Mittal, 2002), 124.
18. *Ibid.*, 135-36.
19. *Ibid.*, 135.
20. I would like to thank Tej Khan for kindly providing me the text of this *marifat* song.
21. For details, see Government of India, *Annexure to the Report of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (India: Ministry of Minority Affairs, n.d.), 2:154-56.
22. See Government of Manipur, *Statistical Abstract Manipur 2005* (Imphal: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2006).
23. Md. Abdul Khaliq, "Manipuri Muslim (Meitei Pangal) in Bangladesh," in *Manipur: Past and Present*, ed. by Naorem Sanajaoba (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2005), 4:162.
24. For details, see *ibid.*, 166.
25. As reported at [http://kanglaonline.com/2010/09/many-myanmarese-manipuris-not-sure-if-they-are-manipuris/?sms\\_ss=email](http://kanglaonline.com/2010/09/many-myanmarese-manipuris-not-sure-if-they-are-manipuris/?sms_ss=email). Accessed on 5 September 2010. Bryce Beemer, a Fulbright scholar from Hawaii University, delivered an interactive lecture on "Manipuris in Myanmar" at Manipur University.
26. *Ibid.*