

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WEAVING TRADITIONS, SUSTAINING HERITAGE: EVALUATING THE SOIO-CULTURAL STATUS AND ROLE OF BISHNUPRIYA MANIPURI WOMEN

Tapasi Sinha¹¹Department of Political Science, Rabindrasadan Girls' college, Sribhumi, Assam, India.

Abstract: The primary objective of the present paper is to analyze the status and role of women in the culture and traditions of Bishnupriya Manipuri society. Every society has its own culture and traditions that distinctly identifies it from all other ethnic societies or communities. Culture is a collective term used to identify certain ideas, customs, traditions, attitudes, beliefs, social behavior and shared characteristics of a society that has been amassed and passed from one generation to another. It represents spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that distinctly identify a society or a group of people combining their knowledge, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs, morals and laws, art and literature etc. Women are integral part of each and every society but their status and position greatly differ from society to society based on its own culture and traditional practices. Hence it is very important to understand the socio-cultural status and role of women so as to determine the true nature and development of a society on the one hand and position as well as empowerment of women on the other.

Keywords: Women, Culture and traditions, Bishnupriya Manipuri Society, North East India.

Article Received: 14 July 2026

Revised: 22 July 2026

Accepted: 26 July 2026

INTRODUCTION

North-east India is a hub of divergent ethnic communities living together from centuries. The Bishnupriya Manipuri community is one such microscopic linguistic minority community having its own language, ethnic culture and traditions that distinctly identify it from all other communities. In North East India these groups of people are primarily settled in Manipur, Assam and Tripura while a large section is also settled in Sylhet District of our neighbouring country Bangladesh.

Regarding their origin, the Bishnupriya Manipuris assert themselves to be the kshatriyas of the Aryan origin. Originally the Bishnupriya Manipuris are the inhabitants of Manipur Valley surrounding the Loktak Lake such as Bishnupur (locally known as Lamangdong), Bishenpur, Ningthoukong, Khangabok, Heirok etc. having Bishnupur as their headquarter. However, during the 18th century due to the repeated Burmese invasion on the one hand and the ongoing internal conflicts among the Manipuri Princes on the other, a major portion of the Bishnupriya Manipuris were compelled to

fled away from their motherland i.e. Manipur. In course of their migration a large section settled down in Sylhet District of British India while the rest moved to Assam and Tripura. Thus, the small section who somehow managed to stay in Loktak region of Manipur are now completely overshadowed and forgot their mother tongue under the political domination of the Meitei Manipuris. Nevertheless, in Leisabital and Jiribam of Manipur still quite large numbers of Bishnupriya Manipuris are living with their own culture and language. The Bishnupriya Manipuris primarily composed of two sections viz. - Kshatriyas and Brahmins.

The Kshatriyas are further subdivided into two sections viz- plain Kshatriyas and Descendants of kings i.e. Rajkumars. The Bishnupriya Manipuris are Hindus and follow Gaudiya Vaishnavism. However, unlike other Hindu society, the Bishnupriya Manipuri society is free from cast prejudices. Their social pattern reveals that casteism is not so rigid as there is non-existence of Vaishya and Sudra categories of caste.

However, the Bishnupriya Manipuri society consists of two larger social groups viz- Ningthounai (Rajar Gang i.e. king's village) and Leimanai (Madoi Gang i.e. Queen's village) having their own dialect and geographical distribution in western and eastern side of Loktak lake respectively. Based on the system of clan and gotra, the society is subdivided into five clans viz. - (1) *Khamul* (2) *Moirang* (3) *Angom* (4) *Luwang*, and (5) *Mangang* collectively identified as Pancha-Bishnupriya Manipuris.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of the paper is to analyze and explore the status and role of women in the culture and traditions of Bishnupriya Manipuri society in North-east India.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study is mainly socio-cultural and empirical in nature. The data for the present paper has been collected from the primary and secondary sources. The interview method has been used to collect the primary data while secondary data has been collected from different text books, journals and internet sources etc.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Patriarchy is the main feature of the Bishnupriya Manipuri society. Therefore, major decision -making power is always rest on the menfolk of the community. Nevertheless, in Bishnupriya Manipuri society, women enjoy higher social status, greater measure of equality and freedom as well as privileges. In-fact in their social customs and traditions, women were never been neglected. Unlike other patriarchal society where women were confined to the four walls of the house and expected to play the domestic role as mothers and wives with utmost care and self-sacrificing, the role of Bishnupriya Manipuri womenfolk was not limited to domestic sphere only.

Rather they equally participated in the socio-economic and cultural activities of the society. In-fact, women (*Beyapa*) played a significant role and thus hold a special position in the economy, culture and traditions of the Bishnupriya Manipuri society. In fact it is the culture and tradition of the Bishnupriya Manipuri society to pay due respect and special care to the

womenfolk (*Beyapa*) not only of their own community but also other communities too. Particularly after the propagation of Sri Chaitanya's Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the position and status of women became higher which is evident by the honor showed to women in various socio-cultural and religious activities.

In any socio-cultural and religious observations of the society be it Raas Leela, Kirtana, Vaasaka, Marriage ceremony, Birth and Death rituals and many others, women always hold respectable position. In other words, womenfolk enjoy equal status and it is quite impossible to observe any social and religious functions without the participation of women of all categories - married, unmarried and widow.

Besides, the important portfolios of the social functions (e.g. *Bhandari*, *Sebari* etc.) are equally shared by both men and women. In any socio-cultural and religious ceremonies, it is the culture of Bishnupriya Manipuri society to make separate sitting arrangement for men (*Munir Falu*) and women (*Beyapar Falu*). The underlying meaning of such separate arrangement is that both men and women are equal and hence both deserve equal honor and respect. The social pattern of the community reveals that there are no such existence and practice of social evils like- *Sati-dah* (widow burning), dowry culture, *Devdasi* system, untouchability etc. which show the higher position of the Bishnupriya Manipuri women in their society.

The Bishnupriya Manipuri Society is culturally rich as they have their own Dance forms i.e. Manipuri Classical and Folk Dance, folk culture and rituals where women hold higher position and play vital role for the preservation of their rich culture. The *Rasleela* is the greatest religious cultural festival of the Bishnupriya Manipuris where one can see the dominant role played by women as Radharani and Gopis. A unique folk culture of Bishnupriya Manipuri society is called "*Boron Dahanir ela and nasa*" rain invoking song and dance which is very significant so far as environmental conservation is concerned.

Earlier, at the time of draught often this cultural ritual was practiced to invoke rain in the paddy field through singing and dancing by both men and women with utmost faith. It

is believed that after this ritual rain will surely take place as the deity of rain will be pleased and happy by their performance. Another form of folk dance which enhanced the rich cultural heritage of Bishnupriya Manipuris is “*Khupak Ishei*” also known as-*karatali nritya* mainly performed by the women-folk. This form of folk dance is very attractive and popular because of its nature of dance that demands competition among the participants themselves to show their talents. In this dance form also the dominant position and role of women is clearly visible.

Apart from dance, Music particularly devotional folk songs constitute another important feature of Bishnupriya Manipuri society. The Bishnupriya Manipuris are Vaishnavites and they follow Gauriya/Chaitnya Vaishnavism. In every Bishnupriya Manipuri village whether large or small, there is a community hall/temple called “*Malthep*” where they installed idols of Radha-Krishna, Prabhu Jagannath, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu along with Lord Shiva.

It is their religious culture to offer puja and Arati (Devotional folk songs) regularly and here also the role and position of women is equally important with man. Particularly, the month of Kartik is very holy for the Bishnupriya Manipuris which they called as “*Niyam Mah*”. Every day throughout the month, both men and women assemble in their village Malthep and offer prayer i.e. Mangal Arati in the morning during the Brahma Muhurta. While in the evening every house on a rotation basis organizes Gita path “*Lerik Deni*” and offer khoi prasad and different fruits to Gobindaji installed in the temple/Maltheep which they call as “*Kartikar Pali*”. Both men and women, young boys and girls and even children assemble in the *Maltheep* every day during *kartikar paali* and listen Gita Path with utmost devotion to purify their inner soul.

So far as economic culture is concerned, the equal participation of women holds very important. The traditional Bishnupriya Manipuri society is agrarian in nature as agriculture is the main source of their income. In such agricultural activities participation of women in in the agricultural activities such as sowing paddy seed, cutting the crops etc. are highly significant. In-fact both men and women join hand in hand together to perform agricultural activities.

Actually, from the very beginning, the activities of Bishnupriya Manipuri women are not strictly confined to the domestic sphere only unlike most of the Indian women. Alongside male, women have the equal responsibility to meet family expenditure which often necessitates them to work outside in the agricultural field at the time of reaping and harvesting of crops.

To make agricultural work more sort of fun and enjoyable, women farmers used to sing folk songs in group at the time of sowing and harvesting the crops which actually make easy for them to complete the task without feeling much pain. There is also a unique culture observed by the Bishnupriya Manipuris during the time of agricultural work which is called “*Bala system*”. Under this system a group of eight to ten women farmers formed two different groups – one is called “*Rua uli*” (who do the task of sowing the paddy crops) and “*Dowa uli*” (who are engaged in harvesting the paddy crops) offer help to the cultivators in a rotation basis.

The main objective of this economic culture is to extend help to the poor farmers who could not effort to bear the cost of manpower require in cultivation mainly in sowing and cutting the crops. Moreover, this system also assumes significant in promoting community service on the one hand and provide the benefits of working together on the other which not only boost energy and enthusiasm among the farmers but also gives opportunity to complete the process of cultivation on time.

This system is directly associated with their culture because the *bala* members before going to work take bath, wear fresh traditional garments and Chandan tilak on their forehead and offer prayer and gratitude to the mother earth. This *Bala* system actually signify the important position of women and their work in agriculture.

Besides, Bishnupriya Manipuri women are expertise in handloom products like weaving, knitting of their traditional indigenous garments. In-fact, the Bishnupriya Manipuri women are very laborious as most of the women not only perform all their domestic works without having any helping hand like maid servant, but also engage in hand loom and handicraft works to meet their economic needs. Earlier, it was very difficult to find a Bishnupriya Manipuri house without handicraft and handloom products.

In-fact it is the culture of their society that every woman must have the knowledge of handloom production. They used to go out in the market for the sale of their traditional handloom products such as – *Angaluri*, *Tolofuti*, *Enafi*, *Khuttei*, *Pachati*, *Mattherkani*, *Kala-Leiroom*, *Nayanamuna*, *Firaal*, etc. which actually represent their culture. Thus, the position of women in the economy of the Bishnupriya Manipuri society assume very significant. However, so far as financial independence and property rights are concerned, women are in least advantageous position owing to the patriarchal nature of the society.

In the marriage ceremony also participation and role of women in every ritual is inevitable. A special ritual which is done in both the bride and groom's house separately is called "*Yupaal*". Basically, it is a ritual where ancestors are invoked and prayed so that the new couple be blessed with children of their required number after their marriage. This ritual is solely done by the females of the society. Another custom followed at the time of marriage is "*Ghathir Dhon*". Under this system it is the culture of the bride's Made (*Nigolpi*) to demand some amount of money otherwise they will not free the knot of the bride and groom.

This ritual is performed immediately after the marriage ceremony is over and both bride and groom are taken inside the house to seek blessings of the parents and other relatives. The groom side is bound to pay the financial reward after which the bride's made free the knot tied between the newly married couple by the Pandit (*Bamoon*) during the time of marriage. This ritual actually places women in a higher position and it is their custom to arrange a feast (*Bandhara*) after few days where the couple is also invited. Besides, the girls buy some utensils for community purpose with that "*Gathir dhon*".

So far as pregnancy and child birth is concerned, the Bishnupriya Manipuri Society follow some social norms and culture which are highly beneficial for the women. In the pre-natal and post-natal period of pregnancy, women in the Bishnupriya Manipuri Society are given special status and care. It is the culture and tradition of the Bishnupriya Manipuri society to feed the pregnant lady with various nutritional foods. To do this, the whole society comes together and every house arrange feasting for the pregnant woman i.e.

"*Bat Khouani*" in a rotation basis. It basically starts after five months of pregnancy and continues till the child birth. Why they follow this culture is that financial constraints or poverty should not hinder the nutritional requirements of the pregnant woman so that she become healthy during her pregnancy and also deliver a healthy baby.

In the post-natal period also, one of the unique traditional practices followed by the Bishnupriya Manipuri society is that the new mother has been given a break of minimum three months from cooking and other heavy domestic works so that her body recovers fully and she could give enough time and care to the new born. Not only that, during the menstruation also, women enjoy a break of three to six days from doing cooking and other heavy works. This culture is also observed keeping in mind the health benefits of women.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it is clear from the above analysis that the role and position of women in the culture and society of Bishnupriya Manipuris is very significant. In-fact it is quite impossible to perform any socio-economic, cultural and religious activities without the participation of women. The present decade witnessed the greater contribution of womenfolk of this community in all spheres and no one can deny the important position that women hold in the family as well as societal level.

The Bishnupriya Manipuri women often have proved their courage and heroism in critical and challenging circumstances. Particularly, it is evident in their language movement where almost all the women have shown their involvement with enthusiasm and in the year 1996, Sudeshna Sinha, a great lady gave her life for the sake of her mother tongue and thus became the second women martyr in the history of language movement in Asia. In spite of that, the patriarchal nature of the society takes away the decision-making power of the women.

Generally, the males possess the sole authority of decision-making in the affairs related to society, family as well as property. The women folk though always deserve an honourable position and in some traditional practices they are even treated as equal to male persons, but they are not treated as effective decision makers. Major management functions and decision-making

power are vested to the male members and regarding the possession of property women generally does not get except very few and even claim their share from paternal property. In spite of their knowledge, skills and contribution, womenfolk generally do not enjoy their decision-making power. Besides, the father, husband and other male members of the family often overpower and dominate women.

Moreover, if any social problem arises, it is the menfolk who took the command of decision making and the opinion of women are generally ignored. Besides, in the name of culture and social norms various restrictions are also imposed on women which are however with the advent of globalization gradually undergone many changes resulting greater amount of freedom of women.

Nevertheless, though compared to other patriarchal society, Bishnupriya Manipuri women enjoy higher status and greater amount of freedom but due to the existence of patriarchal values and male chauvinism, women often have to forgo their decision-making power and property rights which are solely considered as male preserve.

REFERENCES

1. Bhattacharya, Dr. P.C. (1977). "The Languages and Dialects of Cachar District in Assam." *Journal of The Assam Research Society*, Vol. XXII, pp.12-15.
2. Chatterjee, Suhas. (2000). *A Socio-Economic History of South Assam*, Printwell Publishers and Distributors, Jaipur.
3. Nath, R.M. (1978). *The Background of Assamese Culture*, Dutta Baruah & Co. Gauhati.
4. Guha, Upendra Chandra. (2012). *Cacharer Itibritta*, Saupon Publishers, Kolkata.
5. Sinha, Harendra. (2019). *Bishnupriya Manipuri Identity and Culture*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi.
6. Sinha, Harendra. (2015). *The Bishnupriya Manipuris in North East India Society Economy and Development*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi.
7. Sinha, K.P. (1960). "Bishnupriya Manipuri." *Journal of The Assam Research Society*, Vol. XIV, pp.04-12.
8. Sinha, N. (2006). *History of Manipur Political and Social Aspects*, Bishnupriya Manipuri Text Book Publication Committee, Silchar.
9. Sinha, Prabhat Kumar. (2020). *Bishnupriya Manipuris on Socio Political Crossroads*, Research and Publication Cell Radhamadhab College, Silchar.
10. Sinha, Tapasi. (2023). "Entrepreneurship, Sustainability and Economic Empowerment: A Study in the Context of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in Assam." *Srotaswini*, Vol. VI, pp.217-225.