



Cover Page



EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS OF SCHEDULED TRIBE STATUS FOR THE MEITEI PANGAL COMMUNITY: SOCIOECONOMIC, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

PH. Firoj
Jamia Millia Islamia

Abstract:

The Meitei Pangal community has been actively mobilising for inclusion in India's Scheduled Tribe list, driven by the pursuit of formal recognition and the socioeconomic and political advantages that accompany this status. This movement reflects a broader effort to secure access to affirmative action policies, such as reservations in educational institutions and public sector employment, while also striving for greater political representation and the preservation of their distinct cultural identity. This advocacy underscores the community's strategic engagement with the state apparatus to negotiate their position within the socio-political hierarchy and to safeguard their collective identity in an increasingly competitive and diverse social landscape. Since 2014, the Meitei Pangal Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee has spearheaded the movement advocating for the community's inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe category. Their efforts have encompassed organised protests and strategic engagements with government officials, reflecting a concerted attempt to influence policy and achieve their socio-political objectives. Ethics and community identity constitute the core of the movement, with various groups advocating for protection and recognition under the affirmative action provisions outlined in Article 342 of the Indian Constitution. These efforts highlight the intersection of moral imperatives and the pursuit of social justice, as marginalised communities strive to secure their rights and safeguard their collective identities within the framework of constitutional safeguards.

Keywords: Pangan, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Assimilation, Selectivism, Primitive Traits, Shyness, Vulnerable, Yelhoumee, Lokur Committee.

Introduction:

The Meitei Pangal, an indigenous ethnic group, has been entrenched in Manipur since 1606 AD. The Cheitharol Kumbaba, the esteemed royal chronicle of Manipur, documents a crucial episode from 1606 AD involving a military confrontation that included Muslim combatants, thereby highlighting the early presence of the community within the region. This early documentation not only underscores their historical presence but also suggests a complex pattern of socio-political interactions. In the wake of this significant event, the establishment of the Loishang (an administrative body) was instituted to address and manage affairs pertinent to the Pangal community. This administrative innovation reflects the initial stages of the community's formal integration into the state's socio-political framework, marking a transition from peripheral to more central roles in regional governance. Furthermore, the term "Pangan," as recorded in the Cheitharol Kumbaba, was used to describe Muslims who migrated to Manipur, including the Meitei Pangals (Singh, 1989). This term illustrates the evolving social and cultural dynamics of the period, emphasising the nuanced processes of migration, settlement, and assimilation. It captures the early stages of Muslim integration into Manipur's social fabric, reflecting the broader historical and cultural exchanges that have shaped the region's demographic and socio-cultural landscape.

Historically, the term "Pangal" was utilised by the Meitei people to denote all Muslims, encompassing a broad and inclusive reference to the Muslim population within their sociocultural context. The term not only served as an identifier but also connoted strength, reflecting the perceived resilience and robust character of the community. In regions such as Assam and Cachar, the community was commonly labelled "Mei Moglai," a term that translates to "Mughal Meitheis," indicating their historical connections with the Mughal Empire. Beyond the borders of India, the community has established a presence in the Moulvibazar District of Bangladesh, particularly in the southern part of Kamalganj, where they are locally known as "Khai Bangal." This nomenclature highlights their geographical and cultural dispersion, illustrating the community's adaptation and integration into different regional contexts while retaining their distinctive identity. The use of varied terminologies across regions reflects the nuanced ways in which the identity has been shaped by historical, social, and cultural interactions within South Asia.



Cover Page



The emergence of the Meitei Pangals is intricately linked to two significant Muslim migration waves, occurring in 1606 and 1724. During these periods, Manipur provided refuge to Shah Shuja, a Mughal prince who fled from the retribution of his brother, Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. As elucidated by Henry Rule Kathe, they epitomise a demographic and cultural synthesis, a sociocultural "melting pot" resulting from the confluence of Muslim migrants arriving from diverse regions such as Bengal, Arakan, Cachar, and within Manipur itself—across different historical epochs. This amalgamation not only reflects a complex pattern of migration and settlement but also illustrates the dynamic process of cultural and social integration. The presence of them in Manipur thus represents a historical layering of multiple cultural influences and interactions, resulting in a unique sociocultural identity that emerged from these diverse migratory currents. This demographic evolution underscores the significant impact of historical migrations on the sociopolitical and cultural fabric of the region, highlighting the intricate interplay between displacement, settlement, and identity formation within their community.

The Meitei Pangal community exhibits a marked spatial distribution predominantly in rural locales situated at a significant distance from Imphal, the administrative nucleus of Manipur. The 2011 Census delineates the Meitei Pangal population as 239,886 individuals, representing 8.40% of Manipur's total populace. This community is chiefly concentrated in the peripheral zones of the state, specifically along riverbanks, lake vicinities, and foothill regions, where their settlement patterns reflect both environmental adaptation and traditional land use. Additionally, a notable segment of population resides in Cachar and Hojai in Assam, Komolpur in Tripura, and various areas in Bangladesh. It is widely postulated that the progenitors of the Meitei Pangals migrated from Manipur to these regions during the "Seven Years Devastation," a period historically known as Chahi-Taret Khuntakpa. This epoch, marked by intense turmoil and displacement due to Burmese invasions, resulted in the territorial conquest of Manipur around 1815 AD. This migration not only underscores the profound impact of geopolitical upheavals on community dispersal but also highlights the enduring cultural and demographic shifts that have shaped their community's current distribution. Despite this outward adaptation to modernity and their intermingling with other ethnic and social groups in the region, they have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to preserve their cultural distinctiveness. This is evidenced not only in their traditional dress but also in their retention of linguistic, religious, and ritual practices that differentiate them from surrounding communities. Their ability to maintain this distinct identity while navigating processes of assimilation speaks to their resilience and adaptability within the changing socio-political landscape of Manipur. This complex negotiation between integration and cultural preservation underscores the dynamic interplay between identity, modernity, and tradition within the community.

The community is distinguished by a rich diversity of family names, reflecting the intricate social structures and kinship systems within the group. They are widely acknowledged as an indigenous and peace-oriented community, historically embedded in the sociocultural fabric of Manipur. The sartorial practices of the community exemplify a blend of tradition and modernity: men traditionally don lungis and pyjamas, while women are adorned in kurtis, shalwar, and the indigenous phanek, a garment integral to their cultural expression. Over time, however, the adoption of Western attire has become increasingly prevalent among both genders, symbolising a broader engagement with global cultural influences. Despite this outward adaptation to modernity and their intermingling with other ethnic and social groups in the region, they have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to preserve their cultural distinctiveness. This is evidenced not only in their traditional dress but also in their retention of linguistic, religious, and ritual practices that differentiate them from surrounding communities. Their ability to maintain this distinct identity while navigating processes of assimilation speaks to their resilience and adaptability within the changing socio-political landscape of Manipur. This complex negotiation between integration and cultural preservation underscores the dynamic interplay between identity, modernity, and tradition within the community.

Objectives of the Study:

- To analyse the discourse surrounding the community's nomenclature and its sociopolitical implications.
- To assess the evidentiary basis for the inclusion of the Meitei Pangal community under Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in accordance with Article 342.
- To identify the underlying factors contributing to the socio-economic and developmental backwardness of the community in Manipur.



Cover Page



Methodology:

This study seeks to investigate the compelling evidence supporting the inclusion of the Meitei Pangal community under Scheduled Tribe status as outlined in Article 342 of the Indian Constitution, while also examining the underlying factors contributing to their socio-economic and developmental marginalisation. Employing a multi-methodological approach, the research integrates ethnographic data with supplementary information drawn from a diverse array of sources, including official documents, press releases, reports, and mainstream and vernacular social media narratives. The research methodology encompasses an in-depth ethnographic exploration of rural life within the community. Data collection involved personal interviews, case studies, and group discussions with a broad spectrum of respondents, including activists, educators, students, vendors, traders, and government employees. This comprehensive approach aims to capture a holistic understanding of the community's socio-economic dynamics and the barriers to their advancement.

The Discourse on the Nomenclature of the Pangal Community:

The absence of critical discourse within the community has perpetuated a state of false consciousness, effectively obfuscating the sociocultural lexicon and engendering semantic disarray in the framework of nomenclature. This misalignment in terminological clarity reflects deeper ideological contradictions. The application of dialectical synthesis, as a methodological intervention, possesses the capacity to reconcile these inconsistencies by resolving the inherent tensions between competing terminologies. Through this synthesis, a more coherent and unified nomenclatural schema can emerge, aligning subjective understanding with objective reality, and thus dissolving the epistemological ambiguities that have plagued collective consciousness.

A plurality of individuals have articulated their perspectives, asserting that it is preferable to designate the community as 'Pangal' due to a constellation of socio-historical, cultural, and perhaps linguistic rationales. This nomenclature, they argue, carries with it a distinct cultural identity and historical significance, which may serve to strengthen the community's cohesion and external recognition. The preference for this designation reflects not merely a nominal choice but an ideological alignment with the community's collective memory and self-conceptualization. Such a consensus, if widely accepted, could function as a unifying symbolic referent, fostering both intra-group solidarity and inter-group clarity in socio-political discourse. First and foremost, the term 'Pangal' is embedded within the historical narrative of the Cheitharol Kumbaba, the esteemed Royal Chronicle of Manipur, which accords it a position of legitimacy within the region's official historiography. This reference provides not only recognition but also a foundational narrative that elucidates the origins of the community in question. Second, a deeper historical and scientific inquiry into the lineage of the community reveals a consistent pattern in matrimonial alliances. These alliances demonstrate that the community's kinship system is matrilineally oriented, wherein matrimonial descent is traced through relationships forged with Muslim migrants. This matrifocal kinship structure, underscored by historical evidence, reinforces the distinctive socio-cultural identity of the 'Pangal' community. The integration of these dimensions the recognition within the royal chronicle and the unique matrilineal lineage suggests that the term 'Pangal' carries both historical gravitas and sociological specificity, making it an appropriate and meaningful designation for the community. Third, from a cultural standpoint, the 'Pangal' community exhibits a wide divergence from broader Islamic cultural practices, a distinction that has historically set them apart. The recent trend towards cultural assimilation with Muslim practices can be attributed largely to the forces of globalisation, which facilitate the diffusion of dominant cultural norms across borders. However, the community retains a distinct cultural identity that remains fundamentally alien to the broader Muslim world. This divergence is particularly significant when acknowledging the inherent heterogeneity within the global Muslim population itself, which spans various cultural, linguistic, and geographic contexts. The Community, as a distinct socio-cultural entity, contributes to this global heterogeneity, yet it simultaneously maintains its own unique cultural framework. From material culture including language, cuisine, and clothing to non-material elements such as kinship systems, rituals, and marriage practices, the Pangal culture is geographically and sociologically differentiated from other Muslim communities. These differences in cultural expressions, body structures, and everyday practices highlight the specificity of the Pangal identity, which cannot be subsumed under a monolithic Muslim identity. This cultural distinctiveness underscores the importance of recognizing the Pangal as an autonomous group within the broader landscape of heterogeneity, challenging any simplistic narratives of cultural homogenization under globalisation.



Cover Page



Fourth, in examining the complex dynamics of discrimination, marginalisation, and Islamophobia, it becomes essential to critically analyse the role of nomenclature as a tool for contesting entrenched narratives of exclusion. The term "Muslims" has been co-opted into a historical framework that juxtaposes Mediaeval Muslim experiences with contemporary Meitei Pangal identities, fostering a false consciousness that perpetuates misrepresentation. This distortion, shaped by invisible forces motivated by self-interest, has permeated the social fabric of Manipur, sowing division and exacerbating communal tensions. False consciousness, deliberately constructed by malevolent social elements, has spread, exacerbating misunderstanding and hostility toward the Pangal community. This false narrative, which casts the Pangal as "Bangladeshi Muslims" or a group with "high fertility rates," is not only factually incorrect but also serves to dehumanise and delegitimise the community. In reality, according to the 2011 census, the Pangal community has one of the lowest fertility rates, directly contradicting these stereotypes. Thus, it becomes imperative to dismantle these distorted perceptions by engaging in critical deconstruction of the sociopolitical forces that maintain such falsehoods. Only through a nuanced understanding of these mechanisms can society begin to challenge the prejudices that label and marginalise the community, and by extension, other vulnerable groups, and move toward a more just and equitable narrative. Fifth, the proliferation of multiple nomenclatures within the community has engendered confusion and exacerbated internal societal fragmentation. This semantic multiplicity not only disrupts the formation of a unified communal identity but also perpetuates divisions that hinder collective consciousness. The segmentation of identities through various labels creates an intellectual dissonance that prevents the community from achieving a cohesive self-awareness, which is vital for transcending its current state of fragmentation. To address this, there is an urgent necessity for a critical deconstruction of these overlapping nomenclatures, reducing them to a singular, unified term that can act as a conduit for consciousness for itself, rather than remaining trapped in a consciousness in itself. Such a linguistic consolidation would serve as a vital mechanism for fostering a collective identity that transcends internal divisions. By aligning the community under a single nomenclature, the potential for achieving a deeper sense of solidarity and unity is significantly enhanced. This process is not merely semantic but sociologically transformative, as it would allow for the emergence of a more robust and self-aware communal identity. The absence of this unifying consciousness is the root cause of the current lack of collective cohesion, and thus, the synthesis of a singular nomenclature is both a necessary and urgent step toward fostering a more integrated communal existence.

Finally the adoption of a singular nomenclature emerges as a critical countermeasure against the pervasive labelling and stigmatisation of the community. The indiscriminate assignment of pejorative labels such as huramba (thief), drug traffickers, and other morally degrading stereotypes without substantiated evidence or rational inquiry, exemplifies the deep-rooted epistemic violence inflicted upon this marginalised group. Such labeling practices not only distort public perception but also legitimize social and physical violence, manifesting most brutally in the form of mob lynching a phenomenon that has become disturbingly commonplace against this community. The reduction of identity to singular, stigmatised markers reflects broader processes of social control, where the absence of a cohesive, singular nomenclature facilitates the ease with which the community are misrepresented and dehumanised. A singular, unified nomenclature would therefore act as a sociolinguistic shield, protecting the community from indiscriminate labelling and the consequential forms of violence that arise from such misrepresentations. Moreover, by anchoring the community's identity within a singular, respected nomenclature, it becomes possible to foster a collective narrative that resists external categorization and victimisation. This act of linguistic consolidation, in turn, would demand a reconfiguration of societal understandings and diminish the legitimacy of mob violence against the community. In essence, the establishment of a unified nomenclature is not merely a symbolic gesture but a vital sociopolitical strategy for countering both the everyday and institutionalised violence that they face.

The Case for Including the Meitei Pangal Community under Scheduled Tribe Status According to Article 342 of the Indian Constitution:

The distinctiveness of the community within the socio-cultural fabric of Manipur is evident through its unique language, traditions, and practices, setting it apart from other dominant communities such as the Kuki, Meitei, and Naga, as well as from geographically adjacent regions. The community, in its various manifestations of material and non-material culture, stands as a testament to a deeply rooted cultural identity that has maintained its integrity despite centuries of socio-political and historical upheavals. From everyday cultural practices to their historical engagements, they remain a group marked by uniqueness in both their internal cultural dynamism and their external social interactions. While certain ancient customs continue to be upheld



Cover Page



within the community, others have tragically been lost to time. One such example is the pre-marriage custom of holding hands and singing songs, an important cultural rite that once reinforced social bonds within the community. Its extinction is indicative of broader cultural erosion, one that reflects the relentless pressures of modernity, wherein indigenous practices increasingly become obsolete in the face of hegemonic global cultural forces. This pattern of cultural loss is not unique to the community but is emblematic of many minority groups whose intangible heritage is threatened by the homogenising tendencies of globalization. Historically, the Pangal have made significant contributions to the socio-political development of Manipur. Their involvement in key events such as the First and Second Nupi Lal, women-led uprisings against colonial policies demonstrates the active and influential role of Meitei Pangal women in shaping the region's resistance movements. Furthermore, they played an essential role in the military campaigns of Maharaja Gambir Singh, contributing to the defence of Manipur against Burmese incursions. These historical episodes not only underscore the community's significance but also challenge contemporary narratives that marginalise their contributions. Despite their undeniable influence in shaping the region's socio-political and cultural identity, they face an alarming decline in cultural preservation. The forces of globalisation have accelerated this decline, while the absence of proactive measures by the state to preserve and promote heritage has left the community in a vulnerable position. Cultural practices, languages, and historical narratives that were once central to the identity of them are now under threat of extinction, erasing centuries of communal knowledge and tradition.

The lack of official recognition of their traditions, history, and cultural contributions compounds this vulnerability. Without formal acknowledgment by the state, they remain marginalised within the broader political and social frameworks of Manipur, their history unrecognised and their identity under siege. It is in this context that the demand for Schedule Tribe status for the Meitei Pangal assumes profound significance. This demand transcends the realm of mere political recognition to them is essential to safeguard their unique cultural identity, ensuring that their rich traditions and historical contributions are not consigned to oblivion in the face of modernity and globalisation. It would provide the legal and institutional support required for the community to assert their rights, protect their heritage, and promote the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. Moreover, this recognition would serve to correct historical omissions and validate the Pangal's role in the socio-political history of Manipur. The demand for Schedule Tribe status is not just a political imperative, but a sociocultural necessity that seeks to preserve the distinctiveness and resilience of the Pangal community within the evolving landscape of contemporary Manipur.

Second, they face a multifaceted array of socio-economic challenges, deeply rooted in poverty, low literacy, and restricted access to economic opportunities. These barriers, compounded by systemic marginalisation, manifest in the community's predominant reliance on the primary sector for livelihood, with manual labour as the central economic activity. A significant proportion of them engages in low-wage occupations such as driving, rickshaw pulling, and vegetable vending, underscoring the community's economic vulnerability. According to the 2011 census, only 37.66 percent of the total population is engaged in the labour force, with female workers constituting the same percentage of their population, indicating a limited role for women in the workforce. Further analysis reveals that within this workforce, 40.34 percent are main workers, while 59.66 percent are marginal workers, highlighting the instability and precarity of employment within the community. This precarious labour dynamic is also reflected in the socio-economic survey of the Meitei Pangal (2004), which reveals that only 28.83 percent of the population participates in the labour force, of which 24.14 percent are employed and 4.69 percent remain unemployed. The educational dimension of these challenges is particularly concerning, as evidenced by the stark literacy disparities. Male literacy stands at 80.33 percent, while female literacy lags behind at 55.22 percent, as per the 2011 census. These figures are significantly lower when compared to other communities, further exacerbating the Pangal community's socio-economic marginalisation. Beyond the basic literacy rate, the community suffers from a profound lack of vocational skills, which are necessary to bridge the gap between education and economic opportunity. The disconnect between literacy and skill acquisition is stark, as the community perceives the need for a parallel rise in both, but the absence of such synergy has stunted socio-economic mobility. In addition to educational shortcomings, the infrastructural deficits within the community exacerbate the situation. The educational infrastructure, in particular, is woefully inadequate, lagging far behind that of other communities. Furthermore, systemic selectivism in development initiatives compounds the issue. Development projects often favour certain communities, leaving the population sidelined and restricted from accessing crucial resources. This selective development process entrenches socio-economic inequalities and perpetuates the marginalisation of the community. Thus, the structural



Cover Page



exclusion and limited socio-economic mobility faced by the community necessitate recognition as Scheduled Tribes. Their demand for Scheduled Tribe status is not only a response to historical marginalisation but a necessary step toward rectifying systemic inequities and ensuring equitable access to resources, education, and economic opportunities.

Third, The Meitei Pangal community is increasingly driven by a pressing need to safeguard its ethnic and cultural identity, particularly as it constitutes a minority within the state. This identity, historically unique and deeply rooted in the local socio-cultural landscape, is being eroded due to multiple intersecting factors, notably the pervasive influence of Westernization and Sanskritization. Such external cultural forces are gradually displacing traditional practices, thereby posing a profound threat to the community's cultural continuity and existential stability. One of the key contributors to this cultural displacement can be traced back to the early 20th-century influx of Muslim migrants who adhered to Islamic practices reflective of the Arab world. While the community shares the fundamental tenets of Islam with these migrants, the local cultural expression of Islam has historically been distinct and intricately woven into the broader Manipuri cultural framework. This distinction is now increasingly under threat as external cultural forces, both from within and beyond Manipur, challenge the unique identity of them. The internal threat to their cultural identity is also evident in the gradual abandonment of traditional dress, such as the Manipuri Phanek and Khudei, which are integral to the cultural expression of them. These traditional garments are being replaced by more homogenised clothing styles, such as the Salwar and Kurti, mirroring broader cultural shifts seen across other minority groups. Such changes reflect not merely a superficial alteration in attire but signify deeper cultural assimilation that threatens the unique practices and identity markers of the Meitei Pangal. In light of these cultural shifts, the urgency to protect and preserve their identity is paramount. The forces of external cultural homogenization, both through Westernization and the assimilation of broader Islamic practices, have exacerbated an existential crisis for the community. Moreover, these cultural pressures are compounded by the geographical and political marginalisation of the community, both within Manipur and in the broader Indian context. The demand for Scheduled Tribe status thus emerges not merely as an appeal for socio-economic benefits but as a crucial means of preserving and protecting their cultural identity from further erosion. The recognition as a Scheduled Tribe would provide the legal and institutional framework necessary to shield the community from the forces of cultural assimilation and to ensure the continuation of its unique cultural practices. Without such recognition, the existential threat to the Meitei Pangal's identity will only intensify, as external cultural forces continue to undermine the integrity of this historically rich and distinct community. Therefore, the preservation of cultural identity, in the face of both internal and external pressures, forms a compelling justification for their inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe category.

Fourth, The persistent social distrust observed among communities is a direct consequence of relative deprivation, a concept that emphasises the disparity in access to resources, opportunities, and social recognition. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced within the community, which has historically been marginalised and excluded from equitable participation in socio economic development. The stratification of living standards across communities exacerbates these feelings of alienation and mistrust. Therefore, the pursuit of equity emerges as a critical imperative. In this context, the recognition of Schedule Tribe (ST) Status is not merely a legal classification but a strategic intervention designed to redress historical inequalities. It offers a means to dismantle structural barriers and create avenues for social mobility. Furthermore, the politicisation of relative deprivation by various interest groups has led to the manipulation of communal identities, fueling polarisation and reinforcing societal divisions. The instrumentalization of these grievances for individual or political gain perpetuates irrational discourses that deepen the fissures between communities. Such polarisation can only be effectively countered by fostering a sense of social cohesion rooted in genuine equality. Schedule Tribe Status serves as a mechanism to institutionalise this equity, thereby restoring harmony and reinforcing a shared sense of identity within the broader geographical and social fabric. Without addressing these entrenched inequalities, societal harmony will remain elusive, and the aspirations for collective unity will continue to be undermined.

Fifth, The community has long endured systemic exclusion from mainstream society, both socially and institutionally, a condition that has only deepened their marginalisation within the state of Manipur. Despite being an indigenous group with deep historical and cultural roots in the region, they have not been afforded any form of reservation or affirmative action to address their disadvantaged position. This exclusion is evident in their lack of representation across various spheres of public life there are no symbols, emblems, or flags that recognize the their identity, further reinforcing their invisibility within the broader social fabric of the state. This prolonged marginalisation has fostered a profound sense of mistrust between the Meitei



Cover Page



Pangal and other communities, contributing to their social alienation. The state's selective and artificial policies have only intensified this exclusion. A glaring example is the severe underrepresentation of the community in higher education, with only one college available to serve a population of over 200,000. Such disparities exemplify the structural inequities that have left the community educationally and socially deprived, effectively stunting their access to opportunities for upward mobility. Moreover, the historical narratives of Manipur have been dominated by hegemonic discourses that primarily reflect the interests and perspectives of the majority community, leaving little to no room for the voices or experiences of marginalised groups like the Meitei Pangal. Their history, struggles, and contributions are rendered invisible within the broader historical canon, further entrenching their marginalization. The call for Scheduled Tribe (ST) Status is thus a necessary corrective measure to address this multifaceted exclusion. By granting ST Status, they would be afforded the legal and institutional recognition required to rectify these deep-seated inequities. This status would enable the community to access educational, political, and economic resources that have been systematically denied to them, fostering a sense of inclusion and promoting social cohesion. In doing so, it would also challenge the dominant historical narratives and pave the way for a more pluralistic representation of Manipur's diverse communities. Without such intervention, they will continue to face structural barriers that prevent them from fully participating in the social, economic, and political life of the state.

Sixth, the sustained exclusion of the Meitei Pangal community from the mainstream socio-political and economic frameworks in Manipur can be understood as an outcome of systematic and deliberate marginalisation. This marginalisation is both structural and selective, manifesting through various mechanisms that disadvantage the community in multiple domains, including education and culture. The community has been positioned in a socio-economic environment where they consistently lag behind the state's average, thus entrenching a cycle of deprivation and inequality. A critical component of this exclusion is the reservation policy. While various communities within the state of Manipur are beneficiaries of a structured system of reservations designed to mitigate historical and structural inequities the community remains conspicuously absent from such protections. This absence is exacerbated at the national level, where the competition for limited opportunities further pits the Pangal community against relatively advanced and resource-rich groups. The combination of structural disadvantages and the lack of specific state-level affirmative action measures creates an environment where the community's progress is stunted. The current policy landscape inadvertently perpetuates social inequalities, compelling the community to demand the status of a Scheduled Tribe. Such recognition would not only serve to rectify historic wrongs but also provide a structural avenue to bridge socio-economic gaps and promote equitable development within the state's diverse ethnic landscape. This demand, therefore, is not merely a call for inclusion but a necessity to correct enduring systemic biases that inhibit the full participation of the Meitei Pangal in the state's socio-political fabric.

Seventh, The recurrent targeting of the Meitei Pangal community by other groups, through violence and systemic marginalisation, has created an enduring existential crisis for this minority. A critical point of reference is the tragic event of May 1993, where over 130 Meitei Pangals were killed in what is widely perceived as a state-sanctioned pogrom. The government of Manipur at the time failed to intervene, raising serious questions about the complicity of state institutions in perpetuating such violence. This event marked a watershed moment in the collective memory of them, highlighting their vulnerability to orchestrated acts of violence. Beyond the tragic loss of life, the community has faced persistent threats to their land, identity, and culture, which remain under siege from prejudiced social elements. These threats are often invisible to the broader public but operate with impunity, aided by the tacit approval of law enforcement and state mechanisms. For instance, the communal riot of April 11, 2016, in Konchak, Mayang Imphal, left 33 people gravely injured, while nine shops were burned, and millions of rupees in property were looted. Disturbingly, this violence was carried out with government-issued licensed guns, in full view of law enforcement officials who failed to protect the community. This failure to uphold justice reveals a broader structural bias within state institutions, which consistently side with other dominant groups, leaving the Meitei Pangal exposed to further marginalisation. These repeated episodes of targeted violence, combined with systemic marginalisation in cultural, economic, and political spheres, have left the community in a state of perpetual insecurity. The lack of accountability for perpetrators, coupled with the free reign of social elements hostile to the community, has exacerbated feelings of alienation and frustration toward the state apparatus. The state's inability or unwillingness to safeguard the rights and lives of the community has fueled the demand for Scheduled Tribe status. This designation would provide a legal framework for the protection of the community under the holistic safeguards afforded by India's constitutional framework for



Cover Page



Scheduled Tribes. Thus, the call for Scheduled Tribe status is not merely a demand for recognition but an urgent plea for survival and protection. It seeks to rectify historical wrongs, ensure the safety of the community, and grant them the legal tools necessary to resist the structural violence that continues to plague their existence. Without such protections, they remain vulnerable to both physical violence and systemic marginalisation, making their inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe category a crucial step toward achieving social justice and equality in Manipur.

Eight, The infrastructural and socio-economic conditions of the Meitei Pangal community reveal an entrenched pattern of structural neglect and deliberate marginalisation. When we examine the physical infrastructure within Meitei Pangal areas—water pipelines, electric posts, roads, schools, and government buildings—the disparities become glaring in comparison to other communities. Roads in their localities, for instance, are often built with lower quality materials, leading to shorter lifespans, while basic amenities like water and electricity are limited. Educational infrastructure is equally dismal. Despite the high enrollment rates, they suffer from a dire lack of adequate facilities. The sole college in the community still functions under a metal roofing sheet, a stark symbol of educational deprivation. Laboratories are nonexistent, and there is a severe shortage of qualified teachers, exacerbating the student-teacher ratio and hindering the intellectual development of students.

The negligence towards them extends into government-run education programs such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Schools under this scheme in the Meitei Pangal regions consistently fail to function properly, leaving students in a state of academic limbo. With a significant proportion of students reliant on government schools, given their community's limited economic resources, the impact of these structural failures is profound. The inability of families to afford private schooling highlights the financial constraints faced by the community, which directly correlates with the poor quality of public education. This negligence, paired with inadequate government oversight, results in high dropout rates. Parents frequently cite the collapse of the midday meal scheme—a vital lifeline for impoverished families—as a reason for pulling their children out of school. Initially, the midday meals work to an extent, but corruption and poor management quickly render the program ineffective, depriving students of both nutrition and motivation to attend school. This breakdown in services reflects a broader structural inequality, where the government's lack of accountability contributes to the community's continued marginalisation.

Health and sanitation issues further compound the Meitei Pangal's plight. According to a report by SEMSP, only 5.4 percent of households have access to tap water, while 48.35 percent still depend on rivers for drinking water. The absence of proper drainage systems, with 69.23 percent of households lacking any form of sewage management, presents significant public health risks. The community's life expectancy is markedly lower than the state average, with many of them barely reaching 60 years. Health services are practically nonexistent in Meitei Pangal areas, forcing residents to travel long distances to access even the most basic medical care. This geographic and economic divide, where 80 percent of the community resides in rural areas but only 20 percent of healthcare facilities are available, contributes to a deeply unequal healthcare landscape. The systemic neglect in areas of education, health, infrastructure, and sanitation not only marginalises the community but also deepens the socio-economic inequities that they face. The lack of investment in their development and the visible discrepancies in public services between the Meitei Pangal and other communities reflect a historical pattern of exclusion that is both intentional and structural. The continued deprivation experienced by this community underscores the urgent need for affirmative action in the form of Scheduled Tribe status. Such a designation would provide the necessary legal and structural protections to ensure equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, which are currently denied to them. The demand for Scheduled Tribe status for them is thus rooted in the recognition of these systemic injustices. It is not merely a call for recognition, but a critical step towards rectifying historical wrongs and enabling the community to access the basic rights and services that are essential for their survival and development. Without such protections, they will continue to suffer from chronic underdevelopment, limited access to education and healthcare, and widespread poverty. The state's failure to address these issues in a meaningful way highlights the urgency of this demand, as Scheduled Tribe status would provide a framework for targeted interventions aimed at redressing past errors and ensuring future sustainability for them.

Ninth, The persistent lack of adequate political representation for the Meitei Pangal community in the Manipur State Assembly underscores a long-standing issue of exclusion and marginalisation. Despite the 1947 Manipur Constitution Act explicitly allocating 5.9% of reserved seats for the "Mohamadas," this provision remains unfulfilled, leaving the 2 lakh indigenous Meitei Pangal population without guaranteed representation. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that only one



Cover Page



constituency, Lilong, has consistently produced a representative. However, this is not a permanent safeguard, and the community's political representation is precarious, as the seat could be lost at any time due to changing electoral dynamics. The looming threat of delimitation—an administrative redrawing of constituency boundaries—further complicates political future. If the delimitation process is conducted purely through objective, population-based criteria, without a nuanced understanding of the socio-political realities of them. The Meitei Pangal community could erase even the limited political voice they currently possess. Given that the community has rarely had a presence in the Council of Ministers, their exclusion from decision-making spaces in state governance further deepens their marginalisation. The ongoing trend of political underrepresentation fuels concerns about their ability to protect their interests within the broader political system of Manipur. Without affirmative action, such as reserved seats or special provisions in the Assembly, the community risks further marginalisation and political invisibility. The absence of positive steps toward inclusion only intensifies their alienation from the mainstream society and governance structures. The demand for Scheduled Tribe status for them is not simply about political power but about ensuring the survival of the community in the face of increasing socio-political marginalisation. Such recognition would guarantee structural safeguards, providing the community with affirmative action mechanisms to secure political representation and protect against the erosion of their voice in state governance. Scheduled Tribe status would also help in fostering an environment where they can participate fully in the democratic process, ensuring that their concerns and aspirations are reflected in legislative and policy-making decisions.

Tenth, The socio-economic and educational marginalisation of the Meitei Pangal community is deeply rooted in a history of long-term isolation, exacerbated by pervasive stereotypes and prejudices. These forces have systematically contributed to the community's continued backwardness. Furthermore, the selective development of infrastructure and income-generating activities, skewed in favour of other groups, has intensified this marginalisation. The educational backwardness of them, encompassing both males and females, is a critical concern. As reflected in the 2011 Census, the Pangal population comprises 8.32% of the total population, with illiteracy rates standing at 19.77% for males and a staggering 44.88% for females. While these figures may suggest a relatively high literacy rate within the community, it is essential to interrogate the narrow definition of literacy employed here. Literacy, understood merely as the ability to read, write, and speak, does not encompass the acquisition of practical skills necessary for socio-economic mobility. This limited conceptualization creates a "skills crisis" that hinders the community's progress. In fact, the manner in which the community engages with education has entrenched, rather than alleviated, their socio-economic difficulties. Instead of empowering the community, the existing education system reinforces their marginalisation, as it fails to equip individuals with the tools needed to break the cycle of poverty and backwardness. The community is not merely being educated but is, in a figurative sense, "digging its own grave" by participating in an education system that does not serve its developmental needs.

Eleventh, the *primitive traits* of the Meitei Pangal community represent a significant anthropological profile, encapsulating early cultural beliefs, practices, and physical characteristics that remain largely untouched by the waves of modernization. These traits serve as living relics of a distinct cultural identity, preserved through centuries and passed down through generations. One prominent element of their cultural heritage is their **traditional attire**. Their clothing, such as the "Pheijom" for men and "Phanek" for women, serves not merely as functional wear but as an outward symbol of their collective identity and cultural distinction. These garments signify a deep-rooted connection to their past and distinguish them from other communities in the region. Similarly, their **language**, a dialect of Manipuri infused with Persian, Arabic, and Bengali influences, represents a unique cultural synthesis, emphasising their distinct identity within the Manipuri socio-linguistic landscape. This blend of linguistic influences reflects their historical connections to Islamic traditions while retaining ties to the local culture. Their **cuisine**, centred on rice, fish, and vegetables, mirrors the traditional diet of the region, but the integration of Halal practices introduces a layer of religious significance that sets them apart from neighbouring communities. Unique dishes like "Eronba," a spicy vegetable preparation, highlight their ability to innovate within traditional culinary boundaries, further reflecting their cultural distinctiveness. The demand for scheduled tribe status for the Meitei Pangal community stems from the necessity to protect and preserve these unique primitive traits. Recognition as a scheduled tribe would offer them the legal, social, and economic protection needed to maintain their cultural heritage in the face of modernization and external pressures. Without this recognition, there is a risk of their distinct identity being subsumed by dominant cultures, leading to the erosion of



Cover Page



their traditional practices, language, and customs. Therefore, scheduled tribe status would not only affirm their unique identity but also provide essential safeguards to ensure that these cultural traits continue to thrive and flourish in the future.

Twelfth, the *distinct culture* of the Meitei Pangal community encompasses a rich tapestry of religious practices, language, cuisine, music, dance, and family traditions, all of which collectively differentiate them from other communities in the region. This distinctiveness reflects both their historical roots and their ability to adapt Islamic influences into their local cultural context. One significant aspect is their **celebration of Islamic festivals**. While rooted in Islamic tradition, they have incorporated local customs into their religious celebrations, blending typical Islamic foods with traditional Manipuri dishes. This fusion not only highlights their adaptability but also underscores the uniqueness of their religious and cultural identity within the broader Manipuri society. Their festivals represent a harmonious balance between faith and regional heritage, marking them as a distinct group within both Islamic and Manipuri cultures. Their **music and dance** traditions further illustrate this cultural hybridity. While Islamic forms of music such as Naat and Qawwali play an important role, the Meitei Pangal have adapted these art forms to their local context, creating a unique expression of their cultural identity. The blending of Islamic musical traditions with regional influences is a testament to their rich cultural evolution, reinforcing their distinct status. Similarly, their **traditional folk songs** carry deep cultural significance. These songs, which are passed down through generations, reflect the values, stories, and experiences of them. They are performed during religious and cultural events, serving as both a form of entertainment and a vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. The preservation of these folk songs is crucial to maintaining the community's historical and cultural identity. The demand for scheduled tribe status is thus rooted in the need to protect and preserve these distinct cultural practices. Recognizing them as a scheduled tribe would not only safeguard their unique cultural traditions but also provide them with the resources and protections needed to continue practising and evolving their culture in the face of modernity and external pressures. Without such recognition, there is a significant risk that their distinct religious, cultural, and artistic expressions could be marginalised or lost. By granting scheduled tribe status, the state would affirm their right to cultural preservation and ensure that their distinct identity is recognized and supported in an increasingly homogenised world.

Thirteenth, the *geographical isolation* of the Meitei Pangal community has played a pivotal role in shaping their unique cultural and social identity within Manipuri society. Originating in the early 17th century, the community was granted land by the Meitei kings and settled in specific areas, often separate from mainstream Manipuri society. This isolation allowed them to cultivate and preserve distinct cultural practices, traditions, and social structures. Over time, villages such as Lilong, Thoubal, and Mayang Imphal became cultural hubs for the community, reinforcing their sense of identity and solidarity. This geographical separation, which was further entrenched during British rule, allowed them to maintain a degree of autonomy from the cultural influences of the broader Manipuri society. However, while this isolation helped preserve their cultural uniqueness, it also led to social and economic marginalisation. They were often excluded from mainstream social, political, and economic structures, reinforcing their need for communal cohesion and self-reliance. The demand for scheduled tribe status is directly linked to this history of geographical isolation. Recognition as a scheduled tribe would provide them with the legal and institutional support necessary to overcome the socio-economic disadvantages they have faced due to this isolation. Scheduled tribe status would offer them protections and resources to preserve their unique cultural identity while addressing the historical inequalities that have arisen from their physical and social separation from the rest of Manipuri society. By granting this status, the state would not only acknowledge the historical circumstances that shaped them but also provide them with the tools to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world without losing their distinct cultural identity.

Fourteenth, The shyness of contact exhibited by the Meitei Pangal community historically can be attributed to a complex interplay of social, historical, and cultural factors. This phenomenon, characterised by a certain reluctance or hesitation in engaging with the broader society, stems from the community's unique settlement patterns and the deliberate preservation of their cultural and religious identity. When they were first settled by the Meitei kings, land was granted to them with the explicit intention of maintaining their distinct identity. This early separation fostered the development of a cohesive community that sought to preserve its traditions, but it also contributed to a form of social isolation from other groups in the region. This early physical and social separation laid the foundation for what can be described as an inward-looking approach, wherein they prioritised interaction within their own group over engagement with others. Their desire to safeguard their cultural and religious practices led them to form tightly-knit social networks, often avoiding extensive contact with the wider society to



Cover Page



prevent cultural dilution. This insularity was further reinforced by stereotypes and prejudices from other communities, which likely fostered a sense of reservation. Faced with external misconceptions, they found safety in retreating to their own community, where mutual understanding and shared values provided comfort. This hesitancy was not only a form of cultural protection but also a response to societal pressures, further entrenching their isolated social stance.

Moreover, economic isolation also played a significant role in limiting the community's interactions with mainstream society. Marginalised from broader economic opportunities, they were often confined to localised economic activities, which further reduced their engagement with other communities. The hurdles they faced in gaining access to resources, coupled with their geographical isolation, intensified their reluctance to interact with the outside world. This economic marginalisation became a crucial barrier to their integration into mainstream society.

Education further contributed to this shyness of contact. The Meitei Pangal community historically placed greater emphasis on religious education through traditional madrasas over secular education. This prioritisation of religious schooling, while vital for maintaining cultural and religious continuity, limited their interaction with other communities in secular educational institutions, where social mixing could have fostered greater cultural exchange. Their limited participation in secular education also contributed to their isolation from broader social, political, and economic institutions, creating a gap between the Meitei Pangal and other groups in Manipuri society.

The demand for scheduled tribe status is, therefore, rooted in addressing the historical and structural factors that contributed to the community's isolation. Recognition as a scheduled tribe would provide them with legal and economic protections that could help break down the barriers of social and economic marginalisation. Scheduled tribe status would offer access to affirmative action policies, improving opportunities for education, employment, and political representation. These measures would not only uplift the community economically but also encourage greater interaction with the broader society, reducing the historical shyness of contact. By recognizing the unique circumstances that shaped their reserved social stance, scheduled tribe status would ensure that the community is given the tools to preserve its identity while engaging more fully with the modern world, allowing them to overcome the barriers of isolation and marginalisation.

Fifteenth, *backwardness*, the long-term isolation and entrenched stereotypes and prejudices directed at the Pangal minority have contributed significantly to their socio-economic backwardness. In addition to these cultural barriers, selective infrastructure development and limited income-generating opportunities have further exacerbated their marginalised position. These challenges are deeply entrenched, highlighting systemic neglect and reinforcing the cycle of underdevelopment. The educational landscape for them reveals profound disparities. Both males and females within the community are educationally disadvantaged, with the 2011 Census indicating alarming literacy gaps. While literacy rates superficially appear promising, with the overall literacy rate showing significant numbers, this metric fails to account for the qualitative aspects of education, particularly the acquisition of practical skills. Literacy, in this context, is narrowly defined as the ability to read, write, and speak, which does not equate to the possession of marketable or technical skills. This lack of skill-based education has contributed to a skill crisis within them, one that perpetuates their socio-economic stagnation. The overemphasis on literacy as a benchmark for progress needs to be critically reassessed, as it does not adequately address the underlying structural issues inhibiting social mobility. In fact, the manner in which education is delivered within this community tends to entrench their disadvantaged status rather than offer a path to upliftment.

The infrastructure supporting education in the Meitei Pangal areas is grossly inadequate. Lilong College, the only college serving the community, is characterised by substandard facilities, including a deteriorating building with a metal sheet roof and insufficient student resources. The lack of proper rules and regulations, alongside a poor student-to-teacher ratio, reflects the broader institutional neglect experienced by this community. The absence of adequate school buildings and higher education facilities further impedes educational attainment. Only two higher secondary schools exist, both plagued by administrative inefficiencies and political interference. These institutions are largely controlled by political appointees who do not even enrol their own children in the schools, indicating a lack of genuine investment in the quality of education provided. Furthermore, the absence of sufficient lower primary, upper primary, junior high, and higher secondary schools in key Meitei Pangal areas exacerbates the educational crisis. It is telling that in Mayang Imphal, a population exceeding 8,000 can only produce a handful



Cover Page



of research scholars, underscoring the depth of the problem. The situation in other isolated Meitei Pangal areas mirrors this troubling pattern, with few individuals qualifying for higher academic posts and a conspicuously low number of individuals in prominent educational or professional roles. The data from the All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) 2018-19 confirms the low educational enrollment rates and high dropout rates among the Meitei Pangal community. To date, only five individuals from the community have successfully passed the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) Civil Services Examination, further reflecting the educational and professional challenges faced by this minority. The economic activity within the community remains concentrated in primary and secondary sectors, with fishing, basket making, mat making, quarrying, and construction labour serving as the main sources of income. However, these traditional forms of employment are rapidly diminishing due to the capitalist model of labour specialisation, which has alienated the Meitei Pangals from their means of production. The transformation of labour relations has exacerbated their economic marginalisation, pushing them further into the periphery of the modern economy. The labour force participation rate among Meitei Pangal women is alarmingly low, with less than 30% actively engaged in the workforce. Among these, 40.34% are classified as main workers, while 59.66% are marginal workers, indicating the precarious nature of their employment. The 2004 Socio-Economic Survey of Meitei Pangals, conducted by the Directorate of Economic Statistics, reveals that 71.17% of the community is outside the labour force, with only 28.83% participating. Of these, 4.69% are unemployed, and 24.14% are underemployed, indicating a severe lack of economic opportunities. The situation is even more dire for women, with 90.12% of Meitei Pangal females remaining outside the labour force entirely.

The living conditions of the Meitei Pangals further highlight their vulnerability. The 2004 survey indicates that 62% of households rely on uncultivated, rain-fed land, with 16% possessing non-arable land. Housing conditions are similarly dire, with 62% of the population residing in kuccha (temporary) houses, only 6% in pucca (permanent) homes, and 31.2% in semi-pucca houses. More than 94% of the community lacks access to basic potable water, relying instead on rivers and ponds for drinking water. The inadequate provision of water facilities is glaring, with only 5.49% of the population having access to tap water, and even this supply is often insufficient in quantity. Conversations with locals reveal dissatisfaction with the water pipeline infrastructure in Pangal areas, with pipes in regions like Bengoon being smaller compared to non-Meitei Pangal areas. This selective development approach, which prioritises other areas, creates additional barriers for achieving socio-economic parity. Moreover, the unequal distribution of resources extends beyond water supply to other critical infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, and drainage systems. In areas where infrastructure projects are undertaken, they are often poorly maintained or inadequately constructed, further contributing to the community's isolation and marginalisation. These systemic inequities in development not only hinder their progress but also perpetuate a deeply entrenched cycle of underdevelopment and deprivation.

Sixteenth, the community demonstrates a clear alignment with the criteria periodically established by the Government of India for Scheduled Tribe (ST) recognition. A critical examination of the relevant constitutional and legal frameworks reveals a strong basis for their inclusion under the ST category. Given that the 1951 Order and subsequent constitutional provisions explicitly recognize the Scheduled Tribe status for all communities in Manipur based on these traits, their demand for ST recognition is both legally and sociologically substantiated. Their historical marginalisation, compounded by the persistence of educational and economic disadvantages, places them firmly within the framework of Scheduled Tribe eligibility. As such, recognizing them as a Scheduled Tribe is not only a constitutional imperative but a necessary step toward rectifying long standing inequities and fostering inclusive development for this marginalised community. Further, they demonstrate a clear alignment with the criteria periodically established by the Government of India for Scheduled Tribe (ST) recognition. A critical examination of the relevant constitutional and legal frameworks reveals a strong basis for their inclusion under the ST category.

To begin with, the Constitution (Scheduled Tribe) (Part C States) Order, 1951 (Constitution Order 33), issued on 20th September 1951, explicitly included Manipur in the applicable list for Scheduled Tribe status. This order was grounded in the criteria outlined under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution, which sets forth specific guidelines for identifying tribal communities or sections of communities that meet the requisites for ST recognition. These guidelines are articulated based on a combination of socio-cultural and geographical factors that distinguish tribal groups from other communities.



Cover Page



The core criteria for Scheduled Tribe status include: a) **Primitiveness**: This refers to the retention of traditional and often rudimentary ways of life that have persisted over generations. In the case of the Meitei Pangal, their social and cultural practices reflect this continuity with their historical past. b) **Geographical Isolation**: The Meitei Pangal community, residing in regions that are often difficult to access and lack integration into mainstream socio-economic networks, fits the geographic isolation criterion. This seclusion has further exacerbated their socio-economic marginalisation. c) **Shyness of Contact**: Historically, the Meitei Pangal have exhibited a degree of social withdrawal, interacting minimally with external groups, which aligns with this trait of "shyness" as specified in the criteria for ST recognition. d) **Social, Educational, and Economic Backwardness**: The community suffers from profound backwardness, as indicated by low literacy rates, minimal access to higher education, and the predominance of marginal employment. Their economic base is largely rooted in manual labour and informal sectors, reflective of a larger pattern of deprivation and underdevelopment. Article 366(25) of the Indian Constitution underscores that communities suffering from extreme social, educational, and economic backwardness due to primitive agricultural practices, a lack of infrastructural facilities, and geographical isolation are deemed fit for Scheduled Tribe status under Article 342. The Meitei Pangal, with their reliance on rudimentary agricultural practices and economic marginalisation, are a clear embodiment of these conditions. The community's limited access to modern infrastructure and resources further entrenches their disadvantaged position.

Furthermore, the Lokur Committee's 1965 report, titled "Revision of the Lists of SC and ST," underscored the need to include certain occupational groups under Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) categories. Among the groups listed for inclusion were the Dhupi (Dhobi), Loi, Muchi, Namsudra, Patni, and Yaithibi. The Meitei Pangal community aligns with several of these groups based on their traditional occupations:

Dhupi (Dhobi): The Meitei Pangal's involvement in occupations akin to the Dhobi, such as washing and related tasks, situates them within this classification.

Muchi: The community includes numerous shoemakers (Muchis), which is a prevalent occupation in their villages.

Namsudra: Historically, the Meitei Pangal have engaged in fishing, boatmen activities, and later, agriculture, reflecting traditional practices similar to the Namsudra group.

Patni: The primary occupations of the Meitei Pangal—basket making, ferrying boats, local trading, and cultivation—are deeply embedded in their culture and have been their main sources of livelihood.

The persistent exclusion of the Meitei Pangal from Scheduled Tribe status, despite their fitting into the occupational categories outlined by the Lokur Committee, is largely attributable to systemic neglect by the state government. This neglect has obstructed their official recognition and the benefits associated with Scheduled Tribe status. In addition to occupational alignment, the Meitei Pangal meet the five criteria established for Scheduled Tribe identification:

1. **Primitive Traits**: Their traditional ways of life and economic practices reflect primitive characteristics.
2. **Distinct Culture**: They maintain a unique cultural identity.
3. **Geographical Isolation**: Their community has historically been geographically isolated.
4. **Shyness of Contact**: There has been limited interaction with the broader society.
5. **Backwardness**: Socio-economic conditions demonstrate backwardness in development.

Given that the Meitei Pangal community satisfies these criteria and has historical and occupational parallels with other recognized groups, the demand for Scheduled Tribe status is both justified and necessary. This status would address long-standing inequalities and support the community's socio-economic development, aligning formal recognition with their established socio-cultural and economic realities.



Cover Page



Conclusion:

The demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for the Meitei Pangal community in Manipur has reached a critical juncture, marking a pivotal moment in their socio-political journey. As a distinct and historically marginalised group within the state, they have long faced systemic neglect and exclusion from formal mechanisms of state protection and recognition. In the current socio-political climate, where questions of identity, representation, and resource allocation have taken centre stage, it is more pressing than ever to extend the constitutional safeguards of Scheduled Tribe status to the Meitei Pangal community.

The granting of ST status is not merely a symbolic act; it serves as a tool of empowerment for communities that have historically been excluded from mainstream political, economic, and cultural participation. For the Meitei Pangals, such recognition would translate into access to crucial benefits, including educational and employment opportunities, political representation, and affirmative action, which are essential for uplifting the community from socio-economic marginalisation. At a time when rapid modernization and globalisation are eroding traditional ways of life, ST status would also provide institutional support for the preservation and promotion of their unique cultural identity, traditions, and languages.

Moreover, they have consistently fulfilled the established criteria for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe category. Their distinct cultural practices, socio-economic backwardness, and historical marginalisation align with the constitutional provisions set out for communities deserving of ST status. Yet, despite meeting these criteria, the community has been continually overlooked by both state and central authorities, further deepening their vulnerability in a region marked by ethnic complexities and competing claims for resources. Now is the time for the state government to correct this historical oversight. By extending ST status to them, the government can address long-standing inequalities and work towards a more inclusive and just society in Manipur. It is not a matter of political favour or convenience but a constitutional and moral obligation to ensure that all communities, regardless of their size or influence, are afforded equal opportunities to thrive. Therefore, the time for Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei Pangal community is not just upon us, it is overdue, and the future of this unique and resilient community depends on it.

Notes:

1. Meitei Pangal inhabit the valley area of Manipur, which comprises 2 lakh of the total population, occupying 8% of the small area in villages.
2. Meitei Pangal self-identifies as Yelhoumee (indigenous people) but does not enjoy any constitutional safeguards.
3. Meitei Pangals, tribals by birth, have been constitutionally and administratively categorised as OBC.
4. After Manipur merged with India in 1949, a societal dividing line emerged between scheduled tribe hill people and non-scheduled tribe valley people.
5. The Meitei Pangal tribe in the valley was left without constitutional safeguards to protect their ancestral land and ethnic identity, while ST in hill areas are safeguarded under Article 16 and the Manipur Land Revenue and Reform Acts 1960.
6. Rapid and continuous demographic changes and globalisation have resulted in the Meitei Pangal community shrinking towards extinction.
7. Including Meitei Pangal in the ST category, in line with other communities (Yelhoumee), will create a composite ST-dominant state and remove the constitutional dividing line between hill tribes and valley tribes.
8. Meitei Pangals are the most backward community in Manipur; without ST status, they will be seen as more backward and mistreated by other communities. They always fulfil the criteria for inclusion in the ST status. State government negligence, lack of cooperation, and mistreatment among communities have hindered inclusion. However, people should not be against constitutional provisions; including one community is not harmful to others if the criteria fit.



Cover Page



References

1. Akoijam, A Bimol (2002): 'Cry for Homeland: A Political Psychology of Identity Politics', MRFD Bulletin, Vol 2, Issue 3, Manipur Research Forum, Delhi.
2. Oinam, Bhagat (2002): 'Manipur: Assembly Election: Manifestation of Growing Crisis EPW, Vol XXXVII, No 27.
3. Singh, L Ibungohal and N Khelchandra Singh (1967, 1989): Cheitharol Kumbaba (Manipuri), Manipur Sahitya Parishad, Imphal.
4. Yambem Laba (March 1994, unpublished) 'Manipur: Ethnic Clash', NEAT Plan Consult Guwahati
5. .Sanajaoba, Naorem (1988). Manipur, Past and Present: The Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization. Mittal Publications.
6. Khullakpam, A. Hakim Shah (2008). The Manipur Governance to the Meitei-Pangal (Manipuri Muslim), 1606-1949. Pearl Education Society.
7. Nazir, Ahamad (2013), The Muslims in Manipur: A study in their History and Culture (PDF), Imphal: Manipur University, p. 27
8. Sarkar, Sonia (22 September 2018). "What it means to be a Muslim in lynch-era Manipur". *The Telegraph India*. Retrieved 30 June 2020.
9. Malik, Amir (14 April 2020). "JNU research scholar accuses Manipur of harassing Pangal Muslims in newspaper article, state government responds with author's arrest". *Firstpost*. Retrieved 30 June 2020.
10. Mander, Harsh (21 July 2019). "A Manipur Muslim family struggles to understand why a lynch mob thought their MBA-son was a thief". *Scroll.in*. Retrieved 30 June 2020.
11. Irene, Salam (2010). The Muslims of Manipur. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications.
12. Names of Mughal ambassadors can be known from P. Gogoi, 1961, *The Tai and Tai Kingdoms* who gave Dur Beg and Rustam; Kheiruddin Khullakpam, 1997, *Turko-Afghan Chada Naoda*, Lilong: Circles, gives the Boggy clan ancestor as Noor Bakhsh that must be noor beg
13. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, 1989.