

Name of the Element: Manipuri Priesthood of Bangladesh

Name of Inventory: Test Inventory (T1)

Serial No: D4-00002

Brief Description

Manipuri society, in Bangladesh, is primarily divided into Bishnupriya Manipuri and Meitei Manipuri communities.

Within the Meitei community there is a division between those who believe in the 'Apokpa', and those who follow Vaishnavism. 'Apokpa' is the main cult of Sanamahism also known as Manipuri religion or Kanglei religion, an animistic, ancestor-worshipping, shaman-led religious tradition found among. On the other hand, Manipuri Vaishnavism was adopted amongst Meiteis when a king of the Shan Kingdom gifted an effigy of the Vishnu chakra (the symbolic disc of Vishnu or Krishna) to Kyamaba, king of Manipur. So, since the 1470s the kings of Manipur started worshipping Vishnu. Many Brahmin priests from the West, the main areas of India, came to Manipur and settled there. On the other hand, since the reign of King Bhagya Chandra, towards the 18th century, Vaishnavism became very popular amongst the Bishnupriya community of Manipuri.

For all three communities: Meitei Apokpa, Meitei Vaishnavites, and Bishnupriya Vaishnavites the Priests are an integral part of Manipuri life, wherein each 'rite of passage' i.e birth, naming of child, marriage etc., is consecrated by religious rituals conducted by Priests. Manipuri Brahmin priests occupy a hugely revered position in Manipuri Society. One can become a priest only after acquiring knowledge of 'panchathatya'. Though there is a history of social conflict between the Meitei and Bishnupriya communities, surprisingly Brahmin Priests bridge this divide and not only have access, but also conduct rites and rituals for both Meitei and Bishnupriya Vaishnavites. From birth to death, these rituals are:

- Sashtipuja or 'birth-rites'
- Shuddikaran or 'purification rites'
- Namkaran or 'naming rites';
- Annaprashan – first feeding of rice to child;
- Upanayan/Dhiksha – initiation into religious teachings,
- Churakaran – shaving of head
- Marriage
- And, Shraddha Ceremony or 'funeral rites'.

Besides the above there are the rites of Gods and Goddesses - Saraswati Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Satyanarayana Broto (Katha) et al.

In Harisankirtan, the priests perform the task of setting up the pots, such as: 'Kalpataru's Ghat', 'Lakshmi Narayan's Ghat', 'Shiva Durga's Ghat' at the entrance of the worship. 'Har Gauri's Ghat' where Radha Kundu and Shyam Kundu are consecrated. Nahit Kundu, Vayu Kundu, Ishan Kundu, Agni Kundu are to be placed on all four sides of Kalpataru Ghat. On the left side of the kalpataru ghat is to be placed the nitai puja ghat for NatoSankirtan. In this way, the priests perform their duties. At Ras Leela, the priests place the 'kalpotoru' pot and start the ceremony with the sound of joy. So, Manipuri society is incomplete without the priest.

Region: Komolgang Upazila, Moulibazar District, Sylhet Division

Photographs: Video: Consent:

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