

## In Defence of Multiculturalism: A Case of Manipuri Muslims

Md. Abdul Gaffar<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

*The fundamental concepts of multiculturalism and group rights highlight the relationship between the minority and the majority. They have emerged as the essence of societal existence in plural society in modern world. The state and governmental practices, particularly in modern democracies are the embodiment of such ideals. But what is happening in Manipur is against the ideals and values of Multiculturalism. The policies related to social security in Manipur benefit particular group of people, based on their location in arbitrary listings and categories. Ironically, people who constitute the majority in Manipur are economically prosperous and enjoy most of the benefits of expanding identities discourse in the region. The minority groups in this region are discriminated in education, representation in public services or the socio-economic progress. In the present system of governance in the state, minorities are just over-looked and their needs are hardly addressed. The already advanced majority groups take away all the benefits of identity and integrity, leaving the weakest minority high and dry.*

*This paper will explore the difficulties and challenges before multiculturalism and plural existence in Manipur through a brief survey of the socio-economic conditions of Muslims in Manipur and by exploring the causes, which explains the present situation of Muslims in Manipur.*

### Keywords:

Multiculturalism, Manipuri Muslims, *concepts of multiculturalism, identity and integrity*

---

<sup>1</sup> Doctoral Candidate, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Email: ab4ghaffar@gmail.com

## Introduction

The fundamental concepts of multiculturalism and group rights highlight the relationship between the minority and the majority. They have emerged as the bedrock of societal existence in plural society in modern world. The concern of multiculturalism is issue of accommodating minorities within the state. The recognition of diversity and respect for it is aptly writ large in 'contemporary' multi-ethnic society. Further, the presence of mutual respect, tolerance and recognition of rights of various communities are synonymous with the existence of a harmonious life in a plural society. The state and governmental practices, particularly in modern democracies are the embodiment of such ideals. This paper will explore the difficulties and challenges before multiculturalism and plural existence in Manipur through a brief survey of the socio-economic conditions of Muslims in Manipur and by exploring the causes, which explains the present situation of Muslims in Manipur.

Multiculturalism actually is a kind of movement that envisages a society in which all the diverse communities live together with equal dignity and concern.

Gurpreet Mahajan mentions that Multiculturalism is a kind of universalism (Mahajan 1999:12). She further states:

It is not just a statement of facts, it is also a value. It cherishes cultural diversity and envisions a society in which different communities forge a common identity while retaining their cultural provenance. When modern democratic societies embrace multiculturalism, they demonstrate a deeper and more profound egalitarian impulse within them than the mere presence of plural culture. Multiculturalism acknowledges the existence of diverse communities, but what is more important is that it accords positive value to the collective identities of all ethnic communities. It pictures a society, which is characterised not by multiple cultural solitudes or endemic cultural strife, but by communities living together and participating as equal partners in national political life (Mahajan 1999:12-13).

But what is happening in Manipur is against the ideals and values of Multiculturalism. The policies related to social security in Manipur benefit particular group of people, based on their location in arbitrary listings and categories. Ironically, people who constitute the majority in Manipur are economically prosperous and enjoy most of the benefits of expanding identities discourse in the region. Empowerment in Manipur is restricted to these majorities and persons belonging to the minority largely continue to remain backward, steeped in ignorance and poverty. The minority groups in this region are discriminated in education, representation in public services or the socio-economic progress. In the present system of governance in the state, minorities are just over-looked and their needs are hardly addressed. The already advanced majority groups take away all the benefits of identity and integrity, leaving the weakest minority high and dry.

The people of the majority especially elites and their vested interests towards socially, economically and politically leads to the exploitation and oppressiveness of the socially disadvantaged class and degree of political consciousness in the deprived groups are some important factors leading

to social tensions not only in Manipur but also in India.

In case of Manipur, Muslims constitute one such community, which is marginalized and has been continuously neglected by the successive governments. The present conditions of Muslims in the state can be attributed to the sum-total of policies pursued by successive governments towards the community. It is important here to note the precise nature of marginalisation and exclusion of Muslims in Manipur. To say that Muslims are a marginalised community is not to claim that every single Muslim is deprived, or that there is perverse and unmitigated discrimination of all Muslims. What has been happening in Manipur is a serious threat to the future of democracy in the state and India. In order to understand Manipur's current situation, we need to turn to a set of events that show more clearly that how far the ideals of respectful multiculturalism and the rule of law have been threatened by majorities. These events are a terrible instance of targeted killings; but they are more than that. The deeper problem they reveal is that of killing aided and abetted by the highest levels of government and law enforcement, a virtual announcement to minority

citizens that they are unequal before law and that their lives are not worth legal and police protection. More than this, the affliction of general discrimination to Muslims in day-to-day life has plagued the society.

It seems the contemporary society of Manipur is not so liberal like the monarchies of early Manipur. In the past, Muslims actively participated in administration and contributed many innovative concepts for the cause of development of the state. Today, the world is different for Manipuri Muslims as they are the most marginalised group in the society. Unlike the other communities Manipuri Muslims are not or never demand for separation but certain affirmative action which ensure them proportional seats in legislative Assembly, educational institutions, jobs, etc. The values and ideals of multiculturalism and inclusive society were felt more to the early monarchs than the democratic governments of today. In the conflict between the Meiteis and other communities, Muslims are totally left out.

## **Historical Background of Manipuri Muslims:**

Manipuri Muslims came and settled in Manipur during the reign of Maharaj Khagemba (1597-1652). They came from a place called Taraf, which is south-west portion of the district of Sylhet (Bengal). The joint Cachari-Muslim invasion of 1606 A.D. was the outcome of a trifle that took place between the brothers of Maharaj Khagemba. The two brothers of Maharaj Khagemba, Chingsomba and Sanongba had a fight over a boat, which Chingsomba borrowed from Sanongba. The boat was broken due to collision during the boat race. Sanongba wanted the original boat only and did not agree to the settlement, which Maharaj Khagemba was trying to seek between the two brothers. Sanongba along with his mother-queen Luwang Chanpombi and some followers fled to Cachar when Maharaj Khagemba tried to punish him because of his uncompromising attitude. In order to take revenge against his brother, Sanongba requested Dimasha Prataphil, the ruler of Cachar to help in attacking his brother, Maharaj Khagemba. Dimasha Prataphil sent a force to Manipur but was defeated by the Manipuri forces.

Dimasha Prataphil prepared for another invasion in Manipur. This time he took the help of Nawab of Taraf, Muhammad Najir.

Taraf is situated in the South-West portion of the district of Sylhet. Nawab Muhammad Najir provided Dimasha Prataphil with 1000 soldiers under the generalship of his younger brother Muhammad Shani with some other distinguished leaders (Irene 2010:28). The Muslim soldiers courageously faced the Meitei soldiers at the battlefield of Toubul, but none could win the battle. In the midst of the battle, the Cachari forces fled without informing to Muhammad Shani. Meanwhile, one officer of Maharaj Khagemba by the name Lairikyengbam Jagat Singh persuaded the Muslims soldiers to sign a treaty with the Meitei soldiers or face death. The Muslims agreed upon the offer and surrendered themselves before Maharaj Khagemba. Thus, the Muslims began to settle down and became a part of Manipuri society.

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century Manipuris pronounced 'b' as 'p', the word 'Bengal' was corrupted soon into 'Pangal' (Irene 2010:22). Here, the most important about the Muslims in Manipur are the debates of their identity. Some writers claim that they are immigrants and are not the original inhabitants of the state. However, historical records reveal that they are original, yet distinct community of

Manipur. They are not immigrants because they arrived here not on their own footings but brought by Meitei princes as warriors and skill labourers. Their case is very similar to that Indians who were brought by British colonial masters as labourers in different parts of the world. More than that, the Muslims started their settled lives by marrying Meitei girls. Nevertheless, they should be treated as a separate community. Even though they speak Manipuri as their mother tongue, their religion and other cultural practices are altogether different from the Meiteis and other communities in Manipur.

### **Socio-Economic Conditions of Manipuri Muslims:**

The socio-economic conditions of Muslims were good following their initial settlement. Many Muslims participated in state's administration as ambassadors as well as warriors. Today, the Manipuri Muslims are the third largest religious community (8.7% Census 2011) with having a history of more than 400 years. Yet, with the progress of time and the advent of modernity saw Muslims moving backwards in terms of socio-economic development. Gradually the gap between Muslims and other communities further widened. This is evident in every sector of

social life with microscopic presence of Muslims in the upper echelon of societal institutions.

Roughly speaking, around 71% of the Muslim population resides in the rural areas although their earlier settlements were in Patsoi, Moirankhom, Bamon Leikai, Singjamei, etc (Ahmed 1998:19). According to 2001 population census, the percentage share of Muslim workers to the total state workers was found to be 7.42% only. Further, the number of Manipuri Muslims workers found in the state's total workers is only 36.75% while the total workers of state are at 43.62% (Irene 2010:131-132). This overall economic backwardness of the Muslims hinders their educational development. At the same time, poor education further contributes to their backwardness. Moreover, since agriculture is the main source of livelihood, the community hardly encourages education, as it does not bring immediate economic benefits. Thereby, the overall state's literacy rate of the state is 70.5%, but the literacy rate of the Muslims is 58.6%. The representation of Muslims in the white-collar jobs in the state is quite low. Their highest representation is in the state police force.

In the professional fields of medical and engineering, the representation of Muslims is way below as compared with other communities. The scarcity of medical and engineering professionals within the community is evident from several instances in which the quota provided to the community in these fields were left unfulfilled due to the absence of eligible candidates. The recent examination conducted by MPSC for Medical officers and Dental Surgeons best exemplify the scarcity problem in community, whereby only 17 eligible candidates could apply for the 18 quota seats (Meitei-Pangal quota) (MHS 2010). The Ibobi Singh cabinet sympathetically selected all the applied 17 Muslim candidates.

In terms of standard of living, the performance of Muslims is below par as compared with other communities. Agriculture is the main occupation in the state. However, Muslims again are lacking in this sphere of the economy. This can be attributed to both scarcity of land and the quality of land in the possession of Muslims. Among the Muslim landholdings, 62% of the cultivated land is without irrigation facilities and other 16% land is uncultivable (Special Economic Survey Manipur 2004:45).

Drinking water is another indicator of the poor living conditions of Muslims. The main source of drinking water in Manipur is underground water, which is usually pumped out by using hand pump. However, for other day-to-day purpose, water from rivers and ponds are generally used. Tap water is rear in the Muslim localities. Only 9% of the households of Muslims used tap water as the source of drinking water as against 24.8% of Manipur (SES-MP, 2004:48).

The backwardness of the Muslim community can be explained through several contributing factors. First and the most important factor is the neglect of government of issues concerning the community. Successive governments have been ignorant and negligent of the important and urgent demands stemming from the community. The long demand of converting all the Manipuri Muslims to Most Backward Community (MBC) to solve the problem of education and economy is still a distant dream. The Manipuri Muslims Political forum urged the government to initiate the policy of free education for Muslim students' up to twelve standards likewise the state of UP (Imphal Free Press 2012). The demand for

introduction of Urdu language in the primary and upper primary levels, recalling the initiative taken by the Government of Manipur in 1978 is also not in progress. Again, the claim for extending the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme from the already implemented hill districts of Manipur to promote girls' education remains ineffective (Ahmed 2011).

Second, important block in the way of development of the community is the absence of dedicated and efficient political leadership. The successive elected legislative members of the community seldom made any initiative to mobilise any kind of resources or pushed for policies to foster an all-round development of the community. What is again funny is that some so-called 'bureaucrats' whose ignorance and irresponsibilities have resulted in turning things against the community. It seems that the mere representations of Muslims in the administration of the state are also busy for the incurring the amount they paid in various price tags government jobs. Third factor, which explains the weak socio-economic state of Muslims in Manipur, is the poor access of the community to quality modern education. Modern

educational institutions especially private institutes in Muslim dominated areas are poor in terms of their standard and profile. These institutes fall way below the standard in terms of the educational qualification of the teachers, and other infrastructural facilities: library, laboratory and sport facilities. It is time for those in the power to realise the present condition and situation and put the community on the right track.

On the other hand, Meiteis by virtue of being a majority community do not have much a problem. They form the most educated and economically sound community. Moreover, the affirmative action enjoyed by the Scheduled Caste communities—the Lois or the Meitei Aribas constitute in the majority section. Again, the thirty-three officially recognised tribal groups have 19-seats exclusively reserved for them in the 60-member of Manipur state assembly and upto 31 percent reservation in all government jobs. By contrast, Muslims have been forced to linger with no help from any quarter. It is of utmost concern to the Muslims that given their deplorable condition the government ought to do some steps to improve one of the important sections of society. It is not

surprising that Sekmai town—population of about 4325 has more representation than of all the Muslims in Manipur.

In spite of majority omission and commission driving the Muslims into joblessness and poverty, the horrendous May 1993 communal scars the history of Muslims in the state. Besides this, innocent and law-abiding civilians are sandwiched between the army, police commandos engaged in counter-insurgency operations on the one hand militants and insurgents on the other are exposing the plight of Muslims as well as its leaders. The murder of Mr. Abdul Hanif—President of All Manipur Muslims Students' Organization (AMMSO) in 2007 leaves the space of Muslim leaders in the state. It is his great movement for reservation of Muslims that the Ibobi government acknowledged and giving 4% reservation for the Muslims in the state. Again, the murder of Professor Islamuddin, who was the only Muslim Professor and Proctor of Manipur University, further added to the plight of Muslims, who hardly had any representation in the state educational apparatus.



It is true that Manipur is a historically unified and independent territory in which the Meiteis ruled with considerable local autonomy. Also, the Muslims stand and ever stand with the Meiteis in any issue since the initial settlement. Which Muslim will forget that they are the children of courageous Meitei women and ignore that they speak the same language-Manipuri. It is in the interest of Muslims to have a united Manipur in territory and in polity and that; Meiteis need to mend their way. One can say that it was also the part of the participation of Muslims that Meiteis could rule a unified territory of Manipur. They have the same respect and undying love for the land with the Meiteis and bound to a common destiny of the state down the ages. Rethinking its Manipuriness, the government should bring social justice to Muslims of Manipur. Also, the Meiteis should understand that Manipur is a land of multi-culture and multi-ethnic. Many other people are as indigenous as the Meiteis. Therefore, they cannot claim that Manipuri is the land of the Meiteis only.

In fact, what multiculturalism wants in a society in which all the diverse communities live together with equal dignity and concern. It envisages a society,

which offers equal opportunities, an environment of peaceful co-existence of various groups within same territory. For this purpose we need recognise every single community of all size distinctly thereby giving due considerations to each group. The development of such environment of peaceful co-existence is not possible in an 'unequal' society. We need to understand that the importance of democracy links to non-discrimination of minorities. That is how spokesmen of representative democracy such as Locke and Paine questioned the privileged status accorded to noble birth in the political arena (Mahajan 2002:199). At the same time, the multicultural agenda of inter-group equality must be coincidence along with the concern for intra-group equality.

Hence, the state should respect the diverse cultures. And respect of diversity implies equal space and opportunity for all cultural communities to sustain themselves. Therefore, remedying minority discrimination entails policies that ensure full and equal membership to all communities within the state. This may at times require special consideration or even collective rights for vulnerable minorities who have been the victims of force

assimilation or exclusion. This will create a more integrated society.

## References:

1. Ahmed, Syed (August 2011), 'Muslim College Teachers of Manipur Demanded Introduction of Urdu in Schools,'
2. [http://twocircles.net/2011aug24/muslim\\_college\\_teachers\\_manipur\\_demanded\\_introduction\\_urdu\\_schools.html](http://twocircles.net/2011aug24/muslim_college_teachers_manipur_demanded_introduction_urdu_schools.html)
3. \_\_\_\_\_ (1998), *Manipur in Transition: Role of Muslims From the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, M.Phil. Dissertation (Unpublished), New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University
4. *Census Volumes of India, Manipur 2001*, Series 14, Paper 2, Manipur: Directorate of Census Operation
5. Forum urges govt to convert state Muslims to MBC, 10 June 2012 <http://ifp.co.in/imphal-free-press-full-story.php?newsid=6820&catid=1>
6. Irene, Salam (2010), *The Muslims of Manipur*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications
7. Mahajan, Gurpreet (2002), *The Multicultural Path: Issues of Diversity and Discrimination in a Democracy*, New Delhi: Sage
8. \_\_\_\_\_ (December 1999), 'The Problem', *Seminar*, pp.12-13.
9. Manipur Health Services (2010), <http://manipurhealthservices.blogspot.in/2010/11/mpsc-results-for-medical-officers-and.html>
10. *Socio-Economic Survey of Meitei Pangals 2004*, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Imphal: Government of Manipur