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SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF THE PEOPLE OF THANGA: CONTINUITY AND CHANGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving social dynamics of Thanga, a lake-dwelling community in Manipur, through the lens of continuity and change. By analysing historical records, oral narratives and sociological frameworks, it explores how broader processes of social transformation, such as Sanskritization, Westernization, secularization and modernization have shaped the social fabric of the region. The study situates Thanga within the wider historical trajectory of Manipuri society, particularly highlighting the impact of the introduction of Hinduism and Vaishnavism on indigenous Meitei traditions.

While these external influences brought significant shifts in religious practices, social organization, cultural expressions and economic life, the people of Thanga did not simply abandon their earlier ways of life. Instead, they negotiated change in a manner that allowed traditional beliefs, rituals and livelihoods to persist alongside new structures. The paper also traces developments in education, occupational patterns and migration, showing how increasing access to modern institutions and opportunities has gradually altered the aspirations and lifestyles of the community.

Nevertheless, the continued dependence on fishing and locally available natural resources highlights the enduring relevance of traditional ecological knowledge and livelihood systems. The study thus presents Thanga as an example of how communities negotiate change without losing cultural continuity. It argues that social transformation in such contexts is best understood as a layered and on-going process rather than a complete rupture from the past.

KEYWORDS: *Thanga, Social Change, Sanskritization, Westernization, Modernization*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of social change has long occupied a central place in sociological inquiry, attracting diverse interpretations and analytical approaches. Scholars have attempted to define and contextualize social change from multiple perspectives, often linking it to broader processes of cultural transformation. Kingsley Davis, for instance, understood social change as alterations occurring within social organization, particularly in its structure and functions. In his view, such change represents only one dimension of a wider category of cultural change, which encompasses transformations across various domains including art, science, technology and philosophy, alongside shifts in social norms and institutional arrangements (Kingsley Davis, 1949, p.622).

Similarly, Ram Ahuja conceptualized social change as modifications in established patterns of social relationships, values and institutional structures. He emphasized that change may be either partial or comprehensive, though in most instances it tends to be incremental. Illustrative examples include reforms in educational systems or legislative measures addressing social practices, which reflect partial but significant transformations within society (Ram Ahuja, 1994, p. 394). Yogendra Singh approached the subject from a dynamic and historical standpoint, arguing that the analysis of social change must incorporate dialectical levels that capture both its historical specificity and cumulative tendencies (Yogendra Singh, 2014, p.164).

K.L. Sharma further noted that social change may unfold as either progression or regression, thereby indicating shifts in both structural and cultural dimensions of society (K.L. Sharma, 1996, p.180). In contrast, R.M. Maciver and Charles H. Page highlighted the inherent unpredictability of social change, suggesting that it does not necessarily follow a fixed law, direction, or continuity (R.M. Maciver & Charles H. Page, 1959, p. 521). Expanding on these perspectives, B. Kuppuswamy described social change as a process marked by discernible alterations in the functioning and structure of a social system. He underscored the neutrality of the term “change,” which simply denotes variation over time in social behavior and institutional arrangements (B. Kuppuswamy, 1972, p. 9).

In examining social change within the Indian context, particularly with reference to Manipur, certain conceptual tools become especially significant. These include Sanskritization, Westernization, secularization and modernization, each of which provides a distinct lens for understanding transformations in social life (Mangoljao Maibam, 2011, pp. 111-114). Sanskritization, as defined by M.N. Srinivas, refers to the process through which lower castes or social groups adopt the customs, rituals and lifestyles of higher, often “twice-born,” castes in pursuit of upward mobility (M.N. Srinivas, 1966, p. 6). Yogendra Singh interpreted this process as an endogenous mechanism of social mobility operating within relatively closed social systems (Yogendra Singh, 1973, p.6).

Westernization, another key concept introduced by Srinivas, denotes the wide-ranging changes in Indian society resulting from prolonged contact with Western institutions, ideas and values, particularly during colonial rule (M.N. Srinivas, p. 47). These changes extend across technological, institutional and ideological domains. Importantly, Westernization does not necessarily hinder Sanskritization; rather, the two processes may operate simultaneously and even reinforce one another (Yogendra Singh, p.48). Ram Ahuja similarly described Westernization as a transformative process arising from sustained cultural interaction with Western societies, characterized by an emphasis on rationality and technological advancement (Ram Ahuja, 1994, p. 356-357).

Secularization introduces another dimension to social change, referring to the gradual differentiation of social spheres and the declining centrality of religious authority in everyday life. Arnold E. Loen interpreted it as a shift in human consciousness, wherein the world is no longer perceived as directly governed by divine intervention (Arnold E Loen, 1967, pp. 1-2). Complementing this view, Srinivas noted that secularization involves both the decline of religious influence and the increasing autonomy of institutions such as the economy, polity and law (M.N. Srinivas, p.119).

Modernization, as discussed by Myron Weiner, is often understood in terms of technological advancement and economic growth, particularly the application of scientific knowledge to enhance productivity (Myron Weiner, 1966). At the same time, sociologists emphasize its role in fostering structural differentiation within society. Richard D. Brown, however, cautioned against viewing modernization as a purely neutral concept, pointing out its implicit Eurocentric assumptions and its tendency to frame societies along a traditional–modern continuum (Richard D. Brown, 1988, p. 7).

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN MANIPUR

In tracing the trajectory of social change in Manipur, it becomes evident that a significant turning point emerged during the reign of King Kyamba. Historical accounts indicate that this period witnessed the permanent settlement of Brahmins in the region, as recorded in *Bamon Khunthoklon* (Samjetsabam Koba, 1952, pp. 1–3). Gangumei Kamei also notes that although Brahmins may have visited Manipur earlier, it was under Kyamba’s rule that their migration became historically documented, accompanied by their institutional roles as temple caretakers and astrologers (Gangmumei Kamei, 2015, p. 235). This movement is further corroborated by R.K. Jhalajit Singh, who situates the migration within the broader historical development of Manipur (R.K. Jhalajit Singh, 2023, pp. 90–91).

The introduction and gradual consolidation of Vaishnavism marked another critical phase in the transformation of Meitei society. Although its initial presence can be traced to the fifteenth century, its

substantive influence became visible during the reigns of King Charairongba and later King Bhagyachandra. Sources such as *Sanamahi Laikan* suggest that Charairongba had encounters with Shakta Brahmins and was influenced towards forms of Hindu worship (O. Bhogeshwar Singh, 1972, p. 47). The process deepened under King Garibniwaz, whose initiation into Vaishnavism in 1717, reportedly guided by Guru Gopla Das, is recorded in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (Iboongohal and Khelchandra, p. 66).

Subsequently, the arrival of Shanta Das from Sylhet played a decisive role in popularizing the Ramanandi sect, which emphasized the worship of Lord Rama. Under royal patronage, this new religious orientation began to reshape the socio-cultural landscape of Manipur. Measures undertaken by the king included patronage of Brahmins, restrictions on certain dietary practices such as meat consumption and the discouragement of pig and poultry rearing in specific areas (Gangumei Kamei, p. 297). The introduction of the Hindu *gotra* system further restructured social identity, aligning the traditional seven clans of the Meiteis with corresponding Hindu lineages (O. Bhogeshwar Singh, pp. 59–60). In this process, the Meiteis were also accorded the status of Kshatriyas within the Hindu social order (Gangumei Kamei, p. 301).

Cultural transformation extended into ritual and festival life, where many indigenous celebrations were reinterpreted within a Hindu framework. Festivals such as Heigru Hitongba, Yoiren Iruppa and others were associated with Hindu religious observances including Jal Yatra, Snan and Ratha Jatra (O. Bhogeshwar Singh, pp. 63–64). Jyotirmoy Roy viewed the policies of King Garibniwaz as instrumental in integrating Manipur more closely with broader Indian cultural currents, thereby facilitating a process of cultural consolidation (Jyotirmoy Roy, 1958, p. 30).

The process of Sanskritization reached a more pronounced stage during the reign of King Bhagyachandra, who formally embraced Gaudiya Vaishnavism under the guidance of Rup Parmananda Thakur (L. Iboongohal Singh & N. Khelchandra Singh, 1989, p. 131). His reign was marked by active efforts to institutionalize the new faith through temple construction and the installation of religious icons, most notably the image of Shri Govindajee (Gangumei Kamei, p. 323). The ceremonial installation of this deity at Langthabal in 1779 is documented in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (Iboongohal and Khelchandra, p. 133).

These religious developments were accompanied by regulatory interventions in everyday life. Practices such as the application of Chandan marks, recitation of the Gayatri mantra and adherence to dietary restrictions became increasingly formalized (L. Mani and L. Mangi, 1965, pp. 216–217). Acts such as the consumption of alcohol or the slaughter of cows were treated as serious offences, often resulting in punitive measures (L. Kunjeswori Devi & Rajkumar Jackson, 2018, p. 129). Linguistically, the growing influence of Vaishnavism

contributed to the incorporation of Bengali, Brajabali and Sanskrit elements into Manipuri literary traditions, with these languages frequently serving as mediums of scholarly expression (Ibid, pp. 129–130).

The cumulative effect of these developments was visible across multiple domains, including dress, food habits and artistic practices. The adoption of Bengali styles of clothing, such as dhotis and kurtas, became increasingly common, particularly among elites (M. Kaoba Singh, 1983, p. 28). At the same time, dietary transformations occurred, as earlier practices involving the consumption of meat—once integral to ritual offerings—were discouraged or prohibited following the spread of Hindu norms (Ng. Jayshree Devi, 2018, p. 36). Cultural expressions also evolved, with narrative traditions such as Wari Leela gaining prominence during this period (M. Thoiba Singh, 2018, p. 49).

Historical evidence thus suggests that the eighteenth century represented a formative phase in the social transformation of Manipur. Sanskritization, in particular, emerged as a powerful force shaping changes in social hierarchy, cultural practices and modes of communication, including the increasing use of Bengali in religious contexts (Jyotirmoy Roy, 1999, p. 69). Despite these shifts, elements of continuity remained visible. Traditional attire, especially among women, persisted alongside new forms, symbolizing an on-going negotiation between inherited customs and external influences (Gangumei Kamei, p. 326).

SETTLEMENT AND SOCIAL FORMATION OF THANGA

The historical origins of settlement in Thanga can be traced back to the reign of King Khagemba in 1597 A.D. Historical narratives indicate that during a visit to Loktak Lake, the king identified Thanga Hill as a suitable site for habitation. Acting on this decision, he instructed several individuals, including Soibam Kwakpa, Laishram Kwakpa and Haobijam Kodo, among others, to establish residence in the area (Ningthoujam Chaoba Singh, 2016, pp. 31–32). This account is further supported by oral testimony, including that of Salam Chandramohan Singh (Interviewed with Salam Chandramohan Singh, dated on 18/02/2024).

Following his return to the royal court, King Khagemba reportedly directed additional clans (Yumnaks)—namely Pukhrambam, Phourungbam, Mayengbam and Akhom—to settle in Thanga (Ningthoujam Chaoba Singh, p. 32). However, oral accounts present slight variations, with some suggesting that only Pukhrambam and Akhom clans were initially established in the region (Interviewed with Salam Chandramohan Singh, dated on 18/02/2024). Such differences underline the importance of integrating both written and oral sources in reconstructing local histories.

The inhabitants of Thanga, belonging primarily to the Meitei community, originally adhered to indigenous religious practices and social systems that predated the introduction of Hinduism. These systems were characterized by well-defined cultural traditions and belief structures. With the gradual spread of Hinduism in Manipur, Thanga too experienced religious transformation. However, this transition did not occur immediately. In fact, Brahmin presence in Thanga appears to have been relatively late, becoming more prominent during the reign of King Chandrakriti (1850–1886). It was during this period that the adoption of Hinduism was actively encouraged and in some cases enforced, among the local population (Ibid, p. 50).

To facilitate this process, the king deputed Shri Gurumayum Tonjao Sharma to Thanga, where he is regarded as the first Brahmin resident of the area. Settling in Thanga Oinam Leikai, he played a central role in promoting Hindu practices (Ibid). Despite these developments, the people of Thanga did not entirely abandon their earlier religious traditions. Instead, they continued to maintain their indigenous practices alongside the newly introduced Hindu framework, reflecting a pattern of cultural coexistence rather than replacement.

EDUCATION, ECONOMY AND MIGRATION PATTERNS OF THANGA

Educational development in Thanga has its roots in early royal initiatives. Historical accounts suggest that King Khagemba sent learned individuals to the area to impart knowledge, marking the beginnings of organized education. Later, during the reign of King Garibniwaz, when Hinduism had been established as the state religion, a formal educational institution was set up in Thanga to teach Sanskrit and Bengali (Ningthoujam Chaoba Singh, pp. 73–74). This development is corroborated by both documentary sources and oral testimonies (Interviewed with Salam Chandramohan Singh, dated on 18/02/2024).

The colonial period introduced further changes with the establishment of Western-style education. Thanga Loishang saw the opening of a Lower Primary School, one of the earliest in Manipur. As the number of students increased, additional schools were established in Thanga Wangma and other nearby localities, including Salam Modern LP School, Heisnam LP School, Chingkha LP School and several others (Ningthoujam Chaoba Singh, pp. 73–74). Over time, these institutions expanded and by 1958 they were brought under government administration. The emergence of private educational institutions also contributed significantly to the spread of literacy and educational attainment in the region (Ibid).

Further institutional development occurred when Thanga was designated as a centre for the High School Leaving Certificate Examination in 1990, thereby improving access to formal education for local students (Ibid). These educational advancements have played a crucial role in shaping new aspirations and facilitating social mobility within the community.

From a socio-political perspective, an important milestone was the inclusion of twelve clans of Thanga in the Scheduled Caste category under the Government of India. This classification enabled access to reservation benefits in education and public employment from 2005–06 onwards (Tamphasana Rajkumari, 2017, p. 38). As a result, a growing number of students from Thanga have entered professional fields such as engineering, medicine and management, while others have succeeded in competitive examinations conducted by bodies like the Union Public Service Commission and the Manipur Public Service Commission (Ibid, p. 44).

Economically, Thanga remains closely tied to Loktak Lake, with nearly 80 per cent of its population engaged in fishing as their primary occupation (Ningthoujam Chaoba, p. 69). In addition to fishing, residents depend on a variety of natural resources available in the lake ecosystem, including edible plants and aquatic produce such as Pulei, Loklei, Heikak and Thangjing (Tamphasana Rajkumari, 2017, p. 38). Traditional fishing methods—using nets, hooks and manually operated boats—continue to be widely practiced, although the recent introduction of motorized boats reflects gradual technological change (Chongtham Budhi Singh, pp. 66–75).

Alongside these economic activities, diversification has occurred, with some individuals entering agriculture, trade and salaried employment in both public and private sectors. This diversification has contributed to changing socio-economic patterns and rising living standards.

Migration has emerged as another significant feature of contemporary life in Thanga. A considerable number of residents, particularly those with better education and employment opportunities, have relocated to urban centres such as Imphal. Areas like Kwakeithel, Sagolband, Singjamei and Uripok have become common destinations (Interviewed with Salam Chandramohan Singh, dated on 18/02/2024). The reasons for migration are varied, including access to employment, education, healthcare, improved infrastructure and aspirations for a modern lifestyle (Ibid).

CONCLUSION

The case of Thanga offers a compelling illustration of the complex nature of social change in Manipur. Across domains such as religion, social organization, economy and cultural practices, the community has experienced significant transformation over time. Processes such as Sanskritization, Westernization and modernization have contributed to reshaping social structures and everyday life. Yet, these changes have not resulted in the complete erosion of traditional systems.

Instead, what emerges is a pattern of coexistence, where older practices continue alongside newer influences. The persistence of indigenous beliefs, rituals and livelihood systems underscores the resilience of

local culture, even in the face of sustained external pressures. At the same time, developments in education, state policy and economic opportunities have opened new pathways for mobility and integration into wider social frameworks.

Thanga, therefore, may be understood as a microcosm of broader societal transformation in Manipur—one in which continuity and change are not opposing forces, but interrelated processes. The experience of the community suggests that social change is best viewed not as a linear transition from tradition to modernity, but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by historical context, cultural agency and adaptive strategies.

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