

Research Article

Social Exclusion of the Lois of Manipur: A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT

The Lois belongs to the largest group of Scheduled Caste (SC) people in Manipur. Throughout the past, they had been subdued, discriminated and kept excluded from the mainstream to the extent that some of them have even managed to preserve their own culture and language till now. The advent of Hinduism in Manipur in the 18th century further exacerbated the exclusion faced by them in the then Meitei society. They were considered as second class citizens and there were restrictions on intermarriage and even inter-dining with them. The paper attempts to highlight the marginalisation and discriminations faced by the Lois of Manipur in a historical perspective.

Key words: Lois, Manipur, Meeteis, Social exclusion, degraded, Tributary, dependent.

INTRODUCTION

The paper attempts to highlight the discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion faced by the 'Lois' in due course of the history of Manipur. Subdued, degraded and ostracised, the Lois were kept on the periphery of the Meitei society in as much that many of the Loi villages had even different languages customs and traditions. They were looked down upon and were considered to be at the bottom of the Meitei social strata along with the Yaithibis who were the palace sweepers and scavengers and were treated as untouchables. The Lois faced all forms of discriminations and exclusions in the past Meitei society.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND ITS CONCEPT

Ever since the coining of the term 'social exclusion' by Rene De Loir in the 1970s,

it has become the centre-stage of social policy discourses across the globe. So much attention is being paid to the concept, and it has become so versatile and adaptable. As a result, we may even have been tempted to dress up every deprivation as cases of social exclusion (Sen, 2000). However, it is generally argued that the concept is a contentious as well as an evolving one. Nonetheless, certain accepted definitions of it have come out which serves as the cornerstone of the whole policy discourses on the concept. Silver (1994) analysed social exclusion as a concept diverging with the concept of new poverty and inequality, discrimination and the underclass. She defined the term as a dynamic process of progressive multi-dimensional rupturing of the 'social bond' at the individual and collective level (Silver, 2007). She also formulated three paradigms of social exclusion namely the solidarity paradigm, the specialisation paradigm and the monopoly paradigm.

Haan (1998) considered social exclusion as the opposite of social integration, which reflects the perceived importance of being part of the society and being integrated. It can also be referred to as a state or situation but more often refers to the process, to the mechanism by which people are excluded. He emphasises two defining characteristics of the concept in terms of its multidimensionality and the relations and process that causes deprivation (Haan, 1999).

Sen (2000) conceptualised social exclusion as a part of capability poverty. He considered it as constituting a part of capability deprivation as well as instrumentally a cause of diverse capability failures. In course of his conceptualisation, Sen distinguishes between active and passive exclusion. Active exclusion results from policies directly aimed at the result that is it is deliberate perpetrated while passive exclusion results through social processes which is not deliberate in nature. Further, he also distinguishes between 'unfavourable inclusion' and 'unfavourable exclusion' (Sen, 2000). In case of the former, deprivation and exclusion results from unfavourable terms of inclusion and adverse participation while in case of the later, some sections of the society/people are being kept or left out.

Peace (2001) defined social exclusion in two ways – in a narrow and broad sense. In the narrow sense, social exclusion is synonymous with income poverty, and it encompasses people who are either unemployed or paid low wage. On the other hand, in the boarder sense, social exclusion is defined in a wider sense to much more than poverty, income inequality, deprivation or lack of employment.

The DFID (2005) which is a harbinger as far as the study on social exclusion is concerned defined the term as a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. Thus, it derives from exclusionary relation-based on power.

Thorat (2009) conceptualises social exclusion as the denial of equal opportunities imposed by certain groups of the society upon others which leads to inability of an individual to participate in the basic political, economic and social functionary of the society. Thus, he identified social exclusion as emanating from deliberate action of groups on others pervasively impacting on different aspects of life. He also identified two defining characteristics of exclusion – (i) deprivation caused through exclusion in multiple spheres having multidimensionality and (ii) it is embedded in the societal relations and social institutions.

Mathieson *et al.* (2008) considered social exclusion as a continuum across society, or as affecting a segment of the population outside mainstream social systems and relationships. They are considered to be multidimensional, dynamic and relational in nature. Negi (2011) conceptualises social exclusion on one hand as a condition or outcome and on the other hand as a dynamic process. Social exclusion according to him results from social identity, social location, social and political relations and access to organisational and institutional sites of power.

WHO ARE THE LOIS?

There are different viewpoints as to who are the Lois as well as their origins. Even the literal meaning of the term has been interpreted in varying ways although all of them indicate their social position. Parratt¹ (1998) interpreted the term ‘Lois’ as a ‘tributary’ while Singh (1978) understood the meaning of the term as subdued and dependent persons who paid tributes to others. Damant (1880) went a step further and considered the term to mean ‘slaves or dependent’. Devi (2002) understood the term Lois as having double meanings – (i) one who pays tribute and (ii) one who are put into exile. Kriti (2005) considered the term as denoting two main groups of people who speak different dialect (different from the Meities) and showing considerable Mongoloid characteristics. Singh (2007) considered the term ‘Lois’ as applicable to certain groups of people of Manipur who were subdued and became dependent and outcaste. Added to them are there who were captured during wars and those who committed serious offences and thereby excommunicated to Loi villages to henceforth become Lois. Birachandra (2013) also considered the Lois as those people who were conquered and subdued by the Meities and were made to pay tributes of various kinds to the Meitei king. In addition to it, those people were also banished to Loi villages as punishment for breaking social norms, differences with the kings and as a way of religious persecution.

¹Compiled and edited by John Parratt from the original manuscripts (Notes from various sources of Manipuri scholars) of Mr. J.C. Higgins, political agent of Manipur from 1919 to 1993.

The Lois were understood by Mangang (2012) as those people who were expelled by the king for political dissent and for disregarding of prevailing social norms and customs. They were consequently forced to settle in segregated villages. Further, those war captives and those who refused to embrace Hinduism when it came to Manipur were also excommunicated to join the ranks of Lois in Loi villages. Singh *et al.* (1998) mentioned the Lois as those distinct groups of people in Manipur who speak Chakpa and worship gods like Koubru, Panam Ningthou and Kounu. Their traditional occupation includes distillations of liquor, rearing of pigs, silkworm, farming and pottery making.

The Aier Report as mentioned by the Chief Commissioner of Manipur, P.C. Matthews² in 1955 identified the Lois as a distinct community, different in many respects from the Manipuri Meities and to a great extent similar to the hill tribes. The report considered them as a backward and untouchable community in Manipur.

TYPES OF LOIS

The Lois may be classified into various kinds. Parratt (1998) divided the Lois into two types namely (i) those tributary tribe conquered by the Meities and (ii) those who were out casted from Meitei society and vanished to Loi villages. To the above-mentioned two types, Devi (2002) and Singh (2007) added a third one that is those who were captured during wars and converted to Lois. Singh (1995) also emphasised three types of Lois – (i) Lois by birth, (ii) Lois by punishment and (iii) by captivity in war. Singh (1963) added yet another type of Lois to the above-mentioned ones that is Loi by purchase which may not be Loi in its true sense of term.

Khangembam³ (1998) on a different note classified the Lois in to two groups according to their religion. Accordingly, she identified them into two groups – those who converted to Hinduism and those who preserve their own religion, customs and traditions. Birachandra (2013) added yet another dimension to their classification by identifying them according to the tributes paid by them. Accordingly, the Lois may be classified into various types like Langloi (those who pay silkworm as tribute), Yotloi (paying iron), Selo (paying coins), Thumloi (paying salt), Ngaroi (paying fish), Uroi (paying wood) and so on according to the kind of tributes paid by them. Further, it is worthwhile to note that those who become Lois by banishment were sent mostly to certain penal villages lying in the periphery of the Manipur valley. The penal villages which were used for banishment are Sugnu, Pallel, Thanga, Sagolmang, Haojampan, Samupan and others according

²Letter (No. G.Hill.23/54 dated 18 June 1955) sent by P.C. Matthew, the then Chief Commissioner of Manipur to the D/S to the G/I,M/H.A., New Delhi.

³Cited by Devi (2013).

to Birachandra (2013) and Thanga, Sugnu Ithai, Chairal, Irengpal, Kumbi, Fougokchao and Arong as mentioned by Devi (2002).

ORIGIN OF THE LOIS

The history of the origin of the Lois is still shrouded in mystery, and there are diverse views put forward by historians as to how they originated. Due to the want of proper verifiable accounts, oral testimonies, popular folklores and narratives play a significant role in our understanding of their origin. According to a traditional story as mentioned by Kriti⁴ (2005), the Lois are believed to be the descendants of the eldest son of the immortal *Guru*⁵ and *Leimarel Sidabi*⁶ and were condemned to live in desolate places on account of their foolish nature. Devi (2002) also quoting oral traditions mentioned that the Lois were some of the earlier settlers of Manipur. It is believed that the Lois of Phayeng, Andro and Sekmai are believed to have been living since the creation of universe, and they are the descendants of '*Soraren*'⁷ and descended directly from his abode. Again, Khangembam (2010) mentioning oral traditions mentioned the Lois belonging to one of the seven clans of Manipur, and their conflict with the Ningthouja clan drove them towards the foothills, and there they have emerged as a separate group embracing the name 'Lois' later on.

As to the question of whether the Lois are the descendants of the Meities and hence part of the larger Meitei community or not, there appear to be two divergent viewpoints. Hodson (1908) considered them as either earlier settlers or direct descendants of the Meities who were later banished to Loi villages as punishments. Constantine (1981) also considered them as once part and parcel of the Meitei groups. They were created out of the Meities for their social offences and as such not been originally as Lois. On the contrary, Brown (1874) mentioned that the Lois are not recognised as pure Manipuries. According to him, they appear to be descendent of the former inhabitant of Moirang, an ancient principality which occupied the south of the Manipur valley. They were formerly independent but due course subdued by the Meities. Dun (1886) also reiterated the Loi as belonging to tribe distinct from the Meities. Birachandra (2013) also considered them as not pure Meities; some of them have their own religion, custom, traditions and even language of their own which is still used in their religious ceremonies.

⁴ The information was taken by Kriti from Pandit Ng. Kullachandra who is considered as an authority on the subject.

⁵ Almighty God who created the world.

⁶ Supreme Goddess.

⁷ God of the sky.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND THE LOIS

Caste system in its rigid form as found elsewhere in India was not found in the Meitei society. Nonetheless, throughout her course of history, certain sections of the society like the Lois and Yaithibis were considered as degraded, inferior and outcaste and hence left excluded. The Lois were considered as impure and unclean, and certain restrictions were imposed on them in terms of their interaction and intermingling with the rest of the society. Brown (1874) was of the view that all descendants of people of low caste, other than the Muslamans, seem to be consigned to the Lois. In fact, they were considered so inferior that even the name 'Meities' are not given to them. They have been looked down so much and kept isolated that many of the Loi villages have preserved languages of their own (Cullock, 1859). They also faced severe restrictions from asserting their rights, freedom, self-respect and responsibilities in the Meities society during the yesteryears (Kriti, 2005).

The Lois unlike the Meities had to take seat separately and share everything in a different manner. There were restrictions on them in competing with the Meities in games and sports and a separate completion is held for them (Birachandra, 2013). They could not run in *lamjen* (race) or row in *hiyang* (boat race) (Parratt, 1998). Further, the Lois, the Keis⁸ and Nais⁹ were also prohibited to serve in royal offices. Among the Lois, the 'Kei Lois' were not even allowed to air grievances to the king directly. They were also restricted to serve in the royal offices. So much were kept aside and looked down upon them that they could not even wear the traditional clothes of the Meities (Birachandra, 2013). Even their choices of occupations were restricted like the Sudras. They cannot change their occupations without the consent and order of the King (Singh, 2007). Those kinds of work which could not be done by the Meities were performed by the Keis, Phunganais¹⁰ and Lois (Singh, 2007). As a result, they were mostly engaged in occupations like rearing of pigs and distillation of liquor among others which were considered as unclean.

The adoption of Hinduism in Manipur valley further exacerbated the social exclusion of the Lois. Whatever little respect that was left for them were also lost with the embracing of Hinduism by the Meities in the 18th century. Kriti (2005) was of the opinion that with the adoption of Hinduism, the Meities which were hitherto considered as numero uno in the social hierarchy were degraded to second-class position, and the immigrant Brahmins took the top hierarchy of the society and the Lois were degraded to the lowest social position. In the words of Singh (2007)

⁸ Villages of slaves which supplied rice and paddy for the king.

⁹ Means slaves.

¹⁰Slaves who live with their masters' place with their own hearths.

The position of the Lois was so degraded especially after the conversion of Hinduism by the Meities that they had been ex-communicated, restricted in coordinating and intermingling with the Meities.

Like the Sudras, the Lois were not allowed to enter inside the Hindu temples and self-respecting Vaishanava during those times would not enter their houses, eat or drink with them (Kriti, 2005). There were also strict restrictions on inter-dining with the Lois and anybody found doing so risked losing his or her caste (Birachandra, 2013). Thus, the advent of Hinduism in Manipur severely restricted the social intercourse or intermingling among the Lois and Yaithibis and the Hindu Meities and Meitei Brahmins (Kriti, 2005). The Lois were not allowed to wear *chandals* or sacred thread (*nagun*) or else they would be punished. Even if they desired so, they could not be converted to Hindus unless the king agrees them to do so.

Further, there were also severe restrictions on intermarriages among the Lois on one hand and the Meities and Meitei Hindus on the other hand (Parratt, 1998). If a Brahmin man marries a Loi woman, then the resulting son would be still considered as a Brahmin, but he would not be received as such in Brahmin or Meitei society nor could he be a *purohit* thereby degrading him. If a Meitei man marries a Loi woman, then the Meitei man is degraded to the status of Lois. On the other hand, if a Loi man marries a Meitei woman, the woman becomes a Loi. Thus, marriages with the Lois resulted the others in being degraded to the status of Lois.

However, unlike the Sudras of the Hindu Caste system, the degraded Loi people could be upgraded to the status of the Meitei Hindus by way of purification if allowed by the king (Singh, 2007). Thus, the downgraded statuses of the Lois were reversible in the past Meitei society. There had been many instances where the kings allowed many Loi villages to be upgraded to the status of the Meitei Hindus. One of the earliest token of programmes of Loi towards Hinduism is the abandonment of their food habits and occupations (Hodson, 1908).

Even after independence, the social status of the Lois were not found to be encouraging, and for that reason, P.C. Matthew (1955), the then Chief Commissioner of Manipur, quoting the Aier Report stated that the Lois were more backward than that of the Manipuri Meities and the hill tribes. The report suggested that they have been treated as untouchables for the following reasons:

- i) The Lois are not allowed to enter the house of the Meitei Hindus.
- ii) The main occupations of Lois are cultivation and distillation of country liquor.
- iii) Inter-marriage and co-dining between the Lois and Manipuri Meities are prohibited.

- iv) They worship goddess of nature; and
- v) They cremate their deaths; in this respect, they are akin to the Hindus.

Thus even after independence, the stigma and discrimination associated with being a Loi continue to exist evidently inheriting from the past. Devi (2002) who did an extensive study on Loi villages of Andro, Khurkhul, Phayeng and Sekmai concluded that till now the Loi in spite of giving Schedule Caste status are a backward community both in social and economic aspects. Due to their traditional customs, their isolation still persists to a certain extent. Presently, they are beginning to merge with the rest of the society, and the stigma which has been hitherto associated with the Lois has been gradually fading away, but the past tradition is not totally lost, and the scars of the past has not been altogether healed.

CONCLUSION

For centuries, the Lois had been degraded, out casted and considered inferior in the Meitei society. They had been discriminated, marginalised and kept isolated by the general population for various reasons. Centuries of negligible interaction and intermingling with the rest of the society have resulted the Lois in being able to preserve their own customs, food habits, occupations and even their own languages to a certain extent. After independence, the Lois were included in the list of Scheduled Caste and affirmative policies on the part of the government, as well as the changing perception of the society enabled the Lois to gradually shed the stigma of being Lois but the scars of the past still remains.

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