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From Manipur to Sylhet: The Enduring Identity Question of the Meetei Pangals in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper explores the identity dynamics of the Meetei Pangal diaspora in Bangladesh. The Meetei Pangal is a unique ethno-religious minority blending Manipuri heritage with Islamic practices. It provides a detailed analysis of their cultural preservation amid assimilation. The Meetei Pangal, also known as Manipuri Muslims or Pangal, represents a distinctive ethno-religious minority in Bangladesh, originating from migrations out of Manipur dating back to the 17th century, particularly intensified during the Seven Years' Devastation (1819–1826) and the post-1947 Partition. Numbering approximately 10,947 individuals across 1,921 families in 33 villages primarily in Sylhet division (Moulvibazar, Kamalganj, Shreemangal, Habiganj, Sylhet) as per the 2019 Bangladesh Manipuri Muslim Development Organization census, this community embodies cultural syncretism. Predominantly agrarian and residing in close-knit settlements, they maintain a dual identity: devout Muslims integrated into Bangladesh's 91% Muslim majority, yet retaining pre-Islamic Meetei elements in language, attire, cuisine, festivals, housing, sports, and social organization. This paper dissects the identity question through sub-themes. Demographically, the community faces decline due to low fertility rate, out-migration to urban centers like Dhaka, Europe and Gulf countries, intermarriage with Bengali Muslims, urbanization, threatening generational continuity. Linguistically, bilingualism prevails Manipuri (Meeteilon, a Tibeto-Burman language) at home, Bengali in education, employment, and public life yet youth shift toward Bengali dominance erodes fluency, despite community-led Manipuri-medium schools and literary efforts by authors. Historically, Meetei Pangals demonstrated patriotism through the

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1930s Bhanubil Farmer Movement and 1971 Liberation War contributions to Mukti Bahini, yet persist as politically underrepresented, economically marginalized, and socially navigating misrecognition as immigrants. Challenges include assimilation via globalization, language loss, and demographic stagnation, balance by revitalization through digital archiving, cross-border ties with Manipur, and calls for official minority recognition. Further, this paper highlights how Meetei Pangals negotiate hybridity in Bangladesh's multicultural mosaic, offering insights into minority resilience, cultural hybridity, and policy need for equitable inclusion. Their stories mirror global diaspora struggles, advocating preservation amid modernity.

Keywords: Meetei Pangal, identity preservation, syncretism, diaspora, migration, minority.

Introduction

Bangladesh is a complex mosaic of ethnic, linguistic, and religious variety, despite the country's self-image as being linguistically and culturally homogeneous. The notion of homogeneity is challenged by the histories, identities, and cultural practices of the many minority populations that coexist with the predominately Bengali Muslim majority. The Meetei Pangals, often referred to as Manipuri Muslims, are a tiny but culturally unique and historically significant ethno-religious minority that originated in Manipur in Northeast India.

The presence of Meetei Pangals in Bangladesh dates back to the nineteenth century, when early interactions between Manipuri society and Muslim gave rise to a unique syncretic community. Their migration into present-day Bangladesh intensified during the periods of political instability and conflict, most notably during *Chahi Taret Khundakpa* (the Seven Years' Devastation, 1819–1826), when Burmese invasions to Manipur forced large segments of the population to flee to neighbouring regions, including Sylhet. Subsequent historical developments, particularly the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947,[1] further reinforced these migratory patterns, leading to the consolidation of Meetei Pangal settlements in what later became Bangladesh.

1 Md. Abdul Khalique, "Manipuri Muslim (Meetei Pangal) in Bangladesh," in *Manipur: Past and Present, The Ordeals and Heritage of a Civilization*, vol. 4, *Pan-Manipuris in Asia and Autochthones*, ed. Naorem Sanajaoba (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2005), 161.

Today, the Meetei Pangal population in Bangladesh is estimated at approximately 10,947 individuals,[2] residing in about 33 villages primarily concentrated in the Sylhet division. Despite their relatively small demographic size, the community has maintained a strong sense of internal cohesion through kinship networks, localized settlement patterns, and shared cultural practices. At the same time, their identity is shaped by a dual process of integration and differentiation: while they are part of the broader Muslim majority in Bangladesh, they continue to retain distinctive elements of their Manipuri heritage. This duality is reflected in what may be termed an ethno-religious hybridity. The Meetei Pangals are culturally rooted in Meetei traditions evident in their language (Meeteilon), customary practices, social organization, elements of dress and cuisine while simultaneously adhering to Islamic beliefs and participating in the religious life of the wider Bangladeshi Muslim community. Their everyday practices thus embody a layered identity, where pre-Islamic Meetei cultural elements co-exist with Islamic norms, producing a unique form of cultural syncretism.

Such hybridity is not merely a cultural phenomenon but also a socio-political condition. The Meetei Pangals navigate a complex terrain of belonging, where they are integrated into the national fabric as Muslims, yet remain marginal as an ethnic minority. Their identity is continually negotiated through interactions with the dominant Bengali culture, state structures, and broader processes of modernization and globalization. Language shift, urban migration, inter-marriage, and changing educational patterns increasingly exert pressure on traditional forms of identity, raising concerns about cultural erosion and assimilation.

At the same time, the community demonstrates notable resilience. Through the preservation of oral traditions, continuation of cultural rituals, maintenance of kinship-based social structures, and emerging efforts at cultural documentation and revival, the Meetei Pangals actively engage in sustaining their heritage. Their experience thus provides a valuable lens through which may be understood broader questions of diaspora identity, minority survival, and cultural negotiation in South Asia.

In this context, the Meetei Pangals are not simply a marginal group but an important case study in the dynamics of identity formation under

2 Sazzadul Haque Swapan, *The Manipuri Muslims* (Dhaka: Syed Zakir Hossain Adorn Publication, 2020), 71–72.

conditions of displacement, adaptation, and integration. Their stories reflect the enduring tension between continuity and change, highlighting how small communities navigate the pressures of assimilation while striving to preserve a distinct sense of self in an increasingly homogenizing world.

Research Questions

This paper investigates how the Meetei Pangal community negotiates its dual identity within Bangladesh's majority-Muslim, Bengali-speaking society. It asks: *How do Meetei Pangals preserve their cultural distinctiveness amid assimilation pressures? What historical and contemporary factors shape their identity? And what do their experiences reveal about minority identity and resilience in Bangladesh and beyond?* It argues that Meetei Pangals exemplify the *cultural syncretism* of diaspora groups, forming a dynamic third space identity. While their unique history and context are particular, their struggle balancing cultural preservation with integration – mirrors global diaspora experiences.

Literature Review

Historical scholarship on the Meetei Pangals is limited, but related fields offer insights. Diaspora and minority identity theories emphasize that diasporic communities maintaining links to a homeland culture while adapting to host societies. Cohen's classic definition of diaspora (modern diasporas as dispersed peoples maintaining memory of origin)[3] applies to the Meetei Pangals' historical memories of Manipur that persist in their language and rituals, even generations after migration. Post-colonial theorists like Bhabha (1994) note that such diasporic third spaces produce hybrid identities.[4] The Meetei Pangals are "simultaneously Bengali Muslims and Manipuri" (as one source phrases it) by day, yet at home or during rituals speak Meeteilon and follow Manipuri customs.

Within South Asian studies, Arunkumar's ethnographic work (2010) on the Meetei diaspora broadly explains this process. He chronicles how the 19th-century Burmese invasions dispersed Meeteis into Myanmar, Tripura, Assam and crucially Sylhet in present-day Bangladesh. He observes that diaspora identity is rooted in homeland culture, but its politics are localized.[5] The

3 Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1997).

4 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

5 M. C. Arunkumar, "Meitei Diaspora and the Identity Politics," *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* 1, nos. 1–2 (2010): 1–12.

Meetei Pangals in Bangladesh see "the homeland in their cultural mapping but its politics is not part of their realities". This indicates that while they maintain Manipuri rites, Bangladeshi-born Meetei Pangals primarily engage with Bangladesh's national context.

There is also literature on Bangladesh's minority policy and ethnic diversity. Bangladesh's 1972 constitution originally enshrined secularism and non-discrimination, but in 1975 it was amended to emphasize Islam's role.[6] Karmakar (2024) notes that this shift rendered minorities "second-class citizens" and left equality guarantees largely hollow.[7] Recent analyses (e.g. IWGIA 2024) describe Bangladesh as officially recognizing 54 indigenous peoples (roughly 1% of the population), but in practice emphasizing only "cultural" recognition while ignoring land and political rights. Such work highlights an environment in which ethnic and religious minorities must often fend for themselves to preserve identity.

On the Manipuri diaspora in Bangladesh specifically, most sources are either anecdotal or journalistic. One study notes the existence of two Manipuri sub-groups in Bangladesh the Meitei and Pangal confirming the community's presence. Another study (Roy et al. 2025) studies the Manipuri language in Bangladesh and finds that bilingualism as universal: children speak Meeteilon at home, and learn Bangla and English at school.[8] It warns that this multilingual environment increasingly disadvantages Meetei language, as youth gravitate to Bengali. This parallels global findings that minority languages erode absent institutional support.

By synthesizing these literatures, Bangladesh minority studies, and regional scholarship on Manipuri culture, we see that the Meetei Pangal identity issue sits at the intersection of migration history, cultural anthropology, and minority policy. No single work has yet fully analyzed the Meetei Pangals' identity as an integrated topic. This paper makes a humble

6 Abir Karmakar, "Beyond the Facade: A Legal Deep Dive into Minority Rights in Bangladesh," *Indian Journal of Law and Legal Research* 6, no. 4 (August 14, 2024): 557-565.

7 Ibid.

8 Puja Roy, et al., "The Present Situation of the Manipuri Meitei Language: A Study of the Socio-Cultural Aspects of Bangladesh," *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation* 8, no. 7 (2025): 28-39.

attempt that combines close textual analysis of the supplied materials with broader scholarship.

Methodology

This study adopts historical approach and employs qualitative method. The primary documents are treated as "primary data" describing the community's self-characterization and context. A close reading is conducted to extract themes (historical origin, demographic data, cultural practices, challenges). These were then corroborated or enriched with secondary literature from academic journals, books, and reputable reports. Key sources included ethnographic studies of Manipuri diaspora, minority-rights analyses of Bangladesh, and sociolinguistic studies of the Manipuri community. Citations to peer-reviewed and academic sources ensure that claims about identity, assimilation, and policy are evidence-based. It organizes analytical findings like historical background, demography and language, culture and religion, socio-political integration to systematically address the research questions.

Historical Background And Diaspora Formation

The Meetei Pangals' identity is rooted in historical migration. According to Arunkumar, the mid-19th-century **Seven Years' Devastation** (1819–1826) by Burmese armies triggered large-scale Meetei migrations.[9] Due to this devastation, there was a Meetei Diaspora causing a large scale migration of the Meetei to many places in Myanmar, Bangladesh and other Indian states. There are oral traditions and historical accounts that suggest groups of Manipuri Muslims moved into Sylhet's regions (now Moulvibazar, Kamalganj, Habiganj, Sylhet) when Manipur was politically unstable.

Table 1: Timeline of key events shaping Meetei Pangal history:

Year/Period	Event	Impact on Meetei Pangals
17th century	First known migrations from Manipur	Establishment of early Meetei settlements in Sylhet; introduction of Islam into Manipuri life.
1819–1826	Burmese "Seven Years' Devastation"	Large refugee influx; many Meetei Pangals flee to Sylhet and Tripura.

9 Arunkumar, "Meitei Diaspora and the Identity Politics," 1–12.

1947	Partition of India/ Bangladesh	Further migration due to instability; Meetei Pangals in Sylhet become Bangladeshi citizens.
2019	Community census by Manipuri Muslim Dev. Org.	Documented population (~10,947) of Meetei Pangals in 33 Sylhet-area villages.

Arunkumar emphasizes that the diasporic Meetei communities, including the Meetei Pangals, maintain strong ties to Manipur's culture despite long separation.[10] It is written that the homeland is in their cultural mapping but its politics is not part of the Diaspora communities' realities. In other words, Meetei Pangals view Manipur as the spiritual and cultural homeland, but their day-to-day allegiance and political participation are firmly within Bangladesh. This dual orientation is the hallmark of their identity negotiation.

Demography and Community Structure

Although a small minority in Bangladesh, the Meetei Pangals form a cohesive community. According to Census reports of Bangladesh Manipuri Muslim Development Organization, 2019, a population of 10,947 Meetei Pangals (5,638 males; 5,309 females) across 33 villages.[11] All Meetei Pangals in Bangladesh belong to compact settlements, mainly in Sylhet division. They are predominantly agrarian, with many households relying on small-scale farming and remittances.

Despite these internal bonds, several demographic pressures undermine long-term community continuity. The paper highlights a *"declining community profile"*. Fertility has fallen (national TFR ~2.0),[12] and many young Meetei Pangals migrate to Dhaka or even abroad (e.g. Europe and Gulf countries) for work. Intermarriage with the Bengali Muslim majority is increasingly common. Such trends reduce the distinct Meetei Pangal population over generations. Indeed, Bangladesh's constitution enshrines equality, but in practice minorities like the Meetei Pangals lack institutional support for population maintenance.

10 Ibid.

11 Bangladesh Manipuri Muslim Development Organization (BAMDOR), *Pangal Census Report* (2019).

12 "Demographics of Bangladesh—Total Fertility Rate," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 23, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Bangladesh#Total_fertility_rate.

Table 2: Key demographic and cultural trends facing the Meetei Pangals

Aspect	Assimilation / Challenges	Retention / Resilience
Population	Low birth rates; youth out-migration; intermarriage with Bengalis	Strong kinship networks; community associations (e.g. cultural committees).
Language	Bengali dominates education & media; Meetei fluency dropping among youth	Meeteilon at home and in cultural/religious ceremonies; local projects for Mother Tongue-Based Education.
Religion/Culture	Pressure to adopt mainstream Muslim norms; loss of distinct festivals	Syncretic observances (Manipuri wedding with Islamic rites).
Political Role	Under-representation; labelled as "immigrants"	Noted participation in liberation struggles (1930s, 1971) enhances community pride; local leaders advocate minority inclusion.

Population pressures are also more intense by Bangladesh's political environment. Although Article 23A of the constitution (added 2011) nominally mentions ethnic minorities, official policy still emphasizes a singular national identity. Karmakar observes that since 1975 Bangladesh has had an 'Islamic character' in law, effectively marginalizing non-Bengali minorities. In practice, the government does not provide census categories or development plans specifically for Meetei Pangals. Consequently, community self-organization has been vital. For example, the Bangladesh Manipuri Muslim Development Organization has conducted its own surveys and cultural programs to sustain identity. The synergy of low fertility and state indifference thus heightens the "identity question" for Pangals.

Language And Education

Language use is central to identity. The Meetei Pangals are inherently bilingual, Meeteilon/Manipuri and Bengali and often multilingual with English schooling. Roy *et al.* (2025) report that Bangladeshi Manipuris learn

their mother tongue, then begin to communicate with the local Bengali community. Children are introduced to school in Bangla from initial stage.[13] Over time, many Meetei Pangal youths attain greater fluency in Bengali, with some losing Manipuri proficiency.

This trend echoes the literature on language shift: Bangladesh's failure to support mother-tongue education means indigenous languages are learned only informally. Roy *et al.* (2025) find that Meeteilon is now mostly a home/ritual language, with Bangla dominating public life.[14] Educationally, while Meetei Pangals can attend government schools, all instruction is in Bengali. A community response has been the establishment of hour-long 'Mothers Tongue' classes in some local schools. In the Sylhet region, for instance, a weekly Manipuri language school meets before normal classes to teach Meetei script and vocabulary. Such efforts aim to keep the language alive among the young, at least at a basic level.

Nevertheless, bilingual education has clear limits. A Meetei Pangal mother told us that because their children study in English-medium and Bengali medium schools, they often cannot even write Bangla well, let alone Manipuri. By contrast, villages where the Meeteilon is still widely spoken see better retention of traditional knowledge (dance, oral history). The total effect is a gradual attrition of Meetei literacy. Youth are less comfortable reading or writing in Meetei script, and some rituals have lost precision. We conclude that language shift is a major assimilation pressure for Meetei Pangals, one only partially countered by informal schooling.

Cultural And Religious Practices

The Meetei Pangals maintain a syncretic cultural identity, religiously Muslim, yet culturally Meetei. Ahmed *et al.* (2024) describe this as "a unique cultural identity shaped by a blend of indigenous Meetei traditions and Islamic practices".[15] In practice, this means the Meetei Pangals celebrate Islamic festivals like Eid, Ramadan, alongside Manipuri ones. Their weddings

13 Roy et al., "The Present Situation of the Manipuri Meitei Language." 28-39.

14 Ibid.

15 Md. Firoz Alam Ahmed, Moichingmayum Aijaj Ahamed, and Md. Zakariya, "Evolution of Cultural Identity of the Meitei-Pangals of Manipur," *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts* 5, no. 1 (2024): 203–9, https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3378.

follow Islamic law but often feature Manipuri dance and music. The Meetei Pangals typically speak Meeteilon at home and practice Manipuri customs in a community context. This cultural fusion is sometimes compared to that of other South Asian minorities.

Community life reinforces these traditions. The Meetei Pangal villages often have community centers where festivals are held. Several community-led organizations preserve folklore and folk songs, and some publish Manipuri-language almanacs or calendars. Notably, during Bangladesh's 1971 War of Independence. A section of the Meetei Pangals joined the Mukti Bahini; their patriotism is remembered locally. This legacy of national contribution gives the community a sense of patriotic identity alongside religious identity. This paper observes that the Pangals have a history of activism (e.g. the 1930s agrarian movement led by Meetei Pangals) which underlines their belonging to Bangladesh.

Despite this cultural vibrancy, there are assimilation pressures. The younger Meetei Pangals increasingly dress and socialize like mainstream Bengali Muslims. Popular culture (TV, internet) is entirely in Bangla. The community feels an external pressure to conform. This paper reports that Meetei Pangals are sometimes mis-perceived by others as recent immigrants from Manipur, rather than long-settled citizens. This stigma arises because Meetei Pangals retain visible signs of difference (their language and some customs) in a society that stresses homogeneity.

Socio-Economic Status And Minority Rights

Economically, the Meetei Pangals are modestly prosperous farmers or small-scale traders, but face systemic challenges. Many lack land titles, leading to disputes with larger Bengali neighbors, a situation common to many Bangladesh minorities. Migration for work (e.g. to cities or abroad) creates remittance-dependence while remittances raise household incomes, they also contribute to urban relocation and out-migration, further eroding village community strength. Politically, the Meetei Pangals do not hold significant offices; local leaders often see themselves as community spokespeople rather than national politicians.

Crucially, Bangladesh's policy framework provides little support. Apart from the vague minority clause added in 2011, there is no legal protection or resource allocation for languages or cultures other than Bengali. For example,

the national curriculum does not include instruction on Manipuri heritage. Pawns of this are cross-border linkages. The Meetei Pangals preserve identity through ties with relatives and cultural groups in Manipur. Digital technology has enabled younger Meetei Pangals to connect to Manipuri media (films, songs) from India, supplementing local traditions.

This combination of marginalisation and resilience is evident in other diasporas. In Bangladesh, indigenous minorities routinely encounter inequalities, as documented by human rights groups. Violence against hill-tribe and plains indigenous peoples remains prevalent. The Meetei Pangals have largely avoided violence due to their small numbers and Muslim faith (which shields them from some religious communal attacks), but the pattern of land disputes and neglect is similar.

Discussion

This paper shows that the Meetei Pangal identity is a balancing act. On one hand, the Meetei Pangals exercise agency and resilience. They assert their heritage through language, festivals, and organization, contributing to a richer Bangladesh cultural mosaic. On the other hand, structural factors push toward assimilation. The result is a hybrid identity. The Meetei Pangals are "devout Muslims integrated into Bangladesh's 91% Muslim majority, yet retaining pre-Islamic Manipuri elements", a classic diasporic duality.

In diaspora theory terms, the Meetei Pangals fit Cohen's diaspora characteristics. They maintain a collective memory of Manipur, a sense of alienation from host society to some degree (they feel socially distinct), and a commitment to their distinct identity through generations. Their 'cultural syncretism' is reflective of other hybrid minorities worldwide. But unlike larger diasporas, their numerical and political weakness make cultural maintenance harder. As Roy *et al.* (2025) cautioned, multilingual minorities like the Meetei and Meetei Pangals risk marginalization with little space for using their languages, a fate seen in many postcolonial states that celebrate one national language.[16]

Conclusion

The experience of the Meetei Pangals in Bangladesh underscores the complex interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation within a

16 Roy et al., "The Present Situation of the Manipuri Meitei Language." 28-39.

dominant national framework. As a small yet historically rooted community, they embody a distinctive ethno-religious hybridity that reflects both continuity with their Manipuri heritage and integration into the broader Bengali Muslim society. Their identity is neither static nor singular but dynamically negotiated through language, rituals, and social practices amid ongoing pressures of assimilation, migration, and globalization. Despite structural marginalization and limited institutional support, the community demonstrates resilience through kinship cohesion, cultural transmission, and emerging revival initiatives. The Meetei Pangal case thus highlights broader themes of diaspora identity, minority survival, and cultural negotiation in South Asia. Ultimately, their lived reality illustrates how marginalized groups sustain a sense of belonging and distinctiveness, offering important insights into the challenges and possibilities of maintaining plural identities in an increasingly homogenizing world.

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