The State of the Rural Manipuri’s in Bangladesh

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For the Manipuris of Chitlia and Shogaon village
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This is a small initiative to know about an ethnic system. We remember the venerable philosophical tradition- ‘it might create more questions than answers’. However, efforts have been made not to simply restate earlier findings done by others, rather, to understand deeper structural issues that go beyond immediate causes and consequences.

This report has been possible due to the support of the Manipuri people of Chitlia and Songaon villages. We are grateful to the villagers for allowing us to document their life experiences.

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Needless to say, responsibilities for the orientation of the research and for the interpretation derived there from are ours alone.

Faisal Ahmmed

Lakshmikantha Singh
List of Abbreviations

RDC Research and Development Collective
CPSU Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit
UNHCHR
ICITP Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples
ILO International Labor Organization
UNESCO
GB Grameen Bank
ASA Association for Social Advancement
HEED
CHTs Chittagong Hill Tracts
UN United Nations
NGO Non Governmental Organizations
AITPN Asian Tribal and Indigenous Peoples Network
ECOSOC
SEHD Society for Environment and Human Development
BBS Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
VGF Vulnerable Group Feeding
VARD Voluntary Association for Rural Development
UNDP United Nations Development Program
CAIP Commonwealth Association of Indigenous Peoples
ECDO Ethnic Community Development Organization
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**Glossary**

Kabiraji (Maiba): Traditional method of treatment based on barks, leaves and roots of different trees. Sometimes this herbal medicine is administered orally, sometimes it used externally.

Panchyet (Leipaak): Village organization of the Manipuri’s. Older people are the leader of this organization. Though it has no government or legal approval, Manipuri community is operated under its jurisdiction.

Rash Purnima: One of the largest religious festivals of the Manipuri’s.

Meiteis: Migrated from Manipur province of India with original Manipuri ethnic background. The term Meitei is used as synonym of Manipuri.

Jum: Shifting cultivation used by the indigenous peoples of Chittagong Hill Tracts

Mondop (Laisang-Mondop): Prayer home of the Manipuri’s designed according to religious customs

Vishnupria: A section of the population who migrated from the Manipur province of India who claim themselves as Manipuri’s but Meiteis disagree their claim as Manipuri ethnic group, rather they consider them as migrants from Manipur with Vishnupria status.
Executive Summery

Bangladesh is a country enriched by its multi cultural character. Indigenous people have contributed exotic and distinct cultural practices to the national culture. **These cultural practices translate in multi dimensional ways of life of her population.** Bangladesh is home not only to mainstream Bengali’s but also to more than forty five indigenous groups mainly residing throughout the hilly forest areas of the country. For many years, indigenous groups have also lived in the plain lands and coastal zones. Each different indigenous group has distinct cultural practices which distinguishes one indigenous group from another. The distinct characteristics of the indigenous communities are reflected within their distinct way of life (Munda 2002). Historical evidence suggests that indigenous groups were the original inhabitants of the soil, and have lived in their present locality for **centuries.** Despite such a historical attachment to the soil, these groups are suffering severely in most aspects of their life. Their life is under constant threat from the mainstream people. Though the Government generally respects the human rights of its citizens in some areas; it remains unable to protect human rights in many significant areas, notably the rights of minority communities. Indigenous people’s human rights are frequently violated. They are subjected to insecurity, discrimination, exploitation, and general injustices as part of their everyday life. Located physically and politically away from the centre of power, their views and voices remain on the periphery. Being poor, indigenous, and exploited are still synonymous around the world. Indigenous status limits their potential to be active citizens, workers and member of today’s society and infringes on their access to fundamental rights (Ahmmed 2006). Cultural distinction is played out in the form of harsh and painful discrimination in the daily lives of most of the world’s indigenous people. Manipuri is one of the indigenous communities living in the lowland regions of Sylhet division. Their major concentration is in Kamolgonj thana of Moulovibazar district in Sylhet division. They are dispersed in small pockets of settlement that are surrounded by areas inhabited by the mainstream people of Bangladesh. Similar to all other indigenous groups in Sylhet region, Manipuri people tend to be ignored from research work and studies. This has created a huge
information gap regarding these indigenous people. The unique nature of their livelihood, way of life, and rich culture has a distinct character which is less known to the mass people resulting in most of the information regarding this ethnic group being a mixture of assumptions and stereotypes. Literature on Manipuri people is incredibly limited in Bangladesh. As a result of such a void in accurate information and understanding of Manipuri community, we initiated an investigation in order to draw a comprehensive picture of the socio-economic condition and problems of the Manipuri community based on qualitative social research. A research team selected two Manipuri villages as research sites and all of the households of these two villages have been intensively studied. Formal and informal discussions, in-depth individual interviews and observations were used as the major tools of gathering data. Researchers gathered information as participant observers for about nine months, taking part in every possible aspect of Manipuri life. This created a valid ground to assimilate accurate data from the participants which reflected on their ordinary, everyday lives. This study explored important characteristics of population structure, family pattern, socio-cultural life and traditions of the Manipuri community. These characteristics highlight fundamental points of divergence from the mainstream society of Bangladesh. The total inhabitants of the villages we studied were 378 and about 54 per cent of them were female. Among them (women), 48 per cent were found to be economically active. The majority of mainstream women are not involved in or are restricted from engaging in earning activities however, more than one third of the Manipuri women were found to be involved in earning activities (mainly handloom). Although the literacy rate is low among the older people, it is rapidly increasing and among the school going age group, all children are going to school. Unfortunately the rate of receiving higher education remains very low. This is mainly due to poverty and the absence of higher educational institutions close to their community. Manipuri people prefer smaller sized families. This preference is derived from their ancestors tendencies. Participants believed that they are following this trend of maintaining a small family due to their community tradition. More than half of the participant couples had only a maximum of three children. Joint families is another strong trend within Manipuri’s social structure. It is evident that the overwhelming majority (more than seventy per cent) of the Manipuri families of studied villages have joint family structures. Relationships
among family members are interdependent, a factor that seems to create intimacy, satisfy needs and strengthen group allegiance in Manipuri community. Economically a few of the Manipuri’s have been successful and are permanently residing in urban areas, having migrated from villages. Despite a move into the middle class, relocation from the city to suburbs they maintain their original distinct practices and do not assimilate with the mainstream people. Their food habit, garbing, and home interior decoration have a special and distinct character. Although very few of the educated younger try to assimilate with mainstream garbing and food, it is highly restricted and prohibited inside their communities. Their custom punishes a person who dishonors or ignores their tradition. Manipuri’s have their own traditional judiciary system. Their village council is a powerful organization where all types of disputes are solved. Older people are selected as leader of the council. Older people enjoy a very high status according to Manipuri custom and are prioritized in most aspects of their life. The traditional joint family system arranges security and services for the older people and other dependent members of the community. The community takes responsibility for dependent people who face severe poverty and have nobody to take care of them. Manipuri people feel dishonored if dependent people have to resort to seeking help outside of their community. Community people ensure that somehow they will solve all problems including violence and clashes between community members. Socially degrading livelihoods (begging, household aide, rickshaw pulling or pushing, day laboring, porter etc) are not evident among the Manipuri’s. If a community member faces severe poverty, then the rest of the community will work together to help the person so that he or she does not need to engage in such degrading jobs. Manipuri’s are Hindus. Most of their religious festivals and rituals are similar in principle with the mainstream Hindus of Bangladesh. However they have their own distinct style to celebrate their festivals. *Rash Purnima* is regarded as their largest religious festival. Research findings suggests that many common beliefs and assumptions form misunderstandings regarding the economic situation, livelihood and problems of the Manipuri’s. Manipuri are mainly agriculturists. In addition to agriculture, some are involved in small business, handloom work, paid employment etc earning activities. The Manipuri people, both male and female, tend to be accustomed to laborious earning activities. Although only a few women are involved in agriculture, most of them are
engaged in handloom, which is regarded as their ancestral traditional occupation. Affluent farmers or businessmen are rarely found within the community. Despite being such a hard laboring community, most of the Manipuri people still have to struggle for survival. Their agricultural products fail to meet most of their regular needs due to lack of available land under their community ownership. Home based handloom was once one of the best earning sources for the Manipuri’s. Now, this industry is under threat due to an imbalanced competition with the products of textile industries. Lack of capital, appropriate training and modern technology has made it impossible for the Manipuri people to make this business profitable. In most cases women who are involved in this industry and are skilled can earn a maximum of thirty to forty taka (about 0.50 US dollar) a day. A few non-government agencies have provided micro credit to help Manipuri women promote their home based handloom industry, yet handloom workers view this as creating extra pressure on them. Most of the micro credit has to be returned in weekly installments. It is observed that many of them have to sell their products in advance (before it is produced) at a lower price due to the pressure of installment payments. Most of the handloom workers claim that they do not get an appropriate price of their products. Due to this reality, people are loosing their interest in this traditional industry. The lack of higher education, appropriate skills, training and knowledge means that most of the community are still dependent upon agriculture which creates extreme poverty among the community. Livestock rearing once helped them to earn an additional income and was popular among the Manipuri’s. However, due to insecurity of their livestock and lack of available grass lands, this additional earning source was limited in scope. Carpentry was another occupation which operated with goodwill. Unfortunately Manipuri carpenters are loosing their interest due to the lack of available work and raw materials. In urban areas of Sylhet region, Manipuri’s were at one point in time, the owners of most of the automobile factories. Although they continue this business, the numbers and extent is decreasing due to imbalanced competition with mainstream people. Gold making and the business of gold is also under the pressure of competition and lack of available capital. A very small number of people are still seen to be operating in this business. Despite such limited choices in earning practices, the average literacy rate is very high among them. However, the number of highly educated people is low which limits them when
competing for paid and socially well dignified employment. A very limited number of the Manipuri’s are employed in honorable positions of government and non-government agencies. The Government of Bangladesh has a provision to preserve and distribute specific areas of employment for the indigenous people recognizing them as an underdeveloped section of the population. Though they are ethnically and ancestrally included within the indigenous section of population in Bangladesh, the Manipuri’s (Meiteis) feel dishonored to introduce themselves as indigenous. This attitude restricts them from gaining positive discrimination in governments jobs. Moreover this group of people do not want to express their needs and problems outside of their community, considering it as a dishonor. Needless to say, development activity is mainly operated by the mainstream people who have little or no idea about the needs and problems of the Manipuri’s. Therefore their demands remain unnoticed within the boundaries of development affairs. It is also not uncommon that mainstream policy makers ignore or give less attention towards Manipuri people’s needs. Given their position on the periphery of Government and Developmental agenda’s, Manipuri people try to solve their problems within the community which usually fails to fulfill their important needs due to lack of available opportunities and resources.

Manipuri people are vegetarian and they prefer less spicy foods. All of them drink fresh water. Cleanliness is their tradition. While these practices help them to maintain good health, they suffer from different common diseases. Though medical facilities are comparatively better, the availability of facilities varies from village to village. For the villages that have good road communication links, Manipuri people in a good economic condition can reach modern medical facilities. Kamalganj thana health center and a private hospital located in the thana headquarter are the main sources of their modern treatment. But for emergency cases, they often encounter difficulties to receive treatment from government hospitals as the thana health complex is at such a distance. It becomes particularly difficult for older people and pregnant women to receive treatment from there due to difficulties of travel. A very small proportion of the population who have the capacity to afford high cost private medical facilities go to private practitioners who come from thana headquarter to a bazar within the Manipuri locality. The villagers
without good road communication usually avoid going to the thana headquarter for treatment and they rely on medicine vendors and local health workers. In many cases Manipuri people show a deep trust for their traditional treatment methods which is based on natural seeds, leaves, branches, roots and bark of different wild trees. They call it Kabiraji treatment. Due to lack of modern medical facilities near to their community and poverty most of the people of Manipuri community are still isolated from modern medical treatment.

As an ethnic minority group Manipuri’s have to encounter different challenges which have been explored through our insightful observations and thorough investigation. Although the Manipuri’s tend to live together within their own territory, they still encounter some serious challenges. It used to be customary for mainstream people to live outside or at a distance from the Manipuri community. Now the scenario is different, mainstream people have entered inside their territory. Many Manipuri people have left the country by selling their lands to mainstream people and in this way mainstream people are continuously infiltrating Manipuri villages. In addition to this, the population of mainstream people is increasing rapidly which emphasizes the need to build new settlements which are slowly encroaching on Manipuri territories. If this trend continues, Manipuri’s will be the minority inside their own territory. This will result in different social, cultural and economic problems. Manipuri’s livestock, crops, fruits are frequently stolen by mainstream people. Sometimes even house fences are taken from their property. Cleanliness is an important feature of Manipuri culture but their clean backyards and roads are damaged frequently by the mainstream people. Mainstream livestock is left free to roam in Manipuri farmland and houses. Manipuri people are continuously becoming the minority inside their territory which creates uncertainty and insecurity among them. Government agencies also neglect their needs. Road infrastructures are very vulnerable and people face severe problems trying to contact thana headquarters or even going to market places during rainy season when all of the roads become muddy and almost useless. Poor Manipuri people are often ignored from government assistance during serious situations. Old age allowance, widowhood allowance, Vulnerable Group Feeding cards etc are rarely distributed among the
But many poor Manipuri people are eligible for receiving such assistance from government agencies. Although a few NGOs are providing micro credit especially in handloom sectors, it is barely helping them. Rather high rates of interest and pressure for regular installment payment is creating an extra burden and tension among them.

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5.1 Major Findings

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Chapter One

1.1: Introduction

Ethnic groups exist in many societies around the world. Ethnicity is a vital element to the lives of many different groups. The human family is a tapestry of enormous beauty and diversity. The indigenous peoples of the world are a rich and integral part of that tapestry. They have much to be proud of and much to teach the other members of the human family (Anan, 2003). Bangladesh is a country with a rich cultural heritage and a land of variety and diversity. It is not only the Bengalis (majority people) who have contributed to this culture, but also the indigenous communities of the country (Odhikar, 2001) who are distinctly different from the majority Bengali Muslim population in their culture, religion, tradition, customs, ethnic origin etc. They lead an exotic cultural life, which is remarkable for its simplicity of beliefs and diversity (Sattar, 1971). Indigenous people from more than forty five different ethno-linguistic groups have been living in Bangladesh for many centuries. They are scattered mainly in hilly parts of Bangladesh, in the districts of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Sylhet and Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) consisting of Khagrachari, Rangamati, and Bandarban districts. The prominent groups are Chakmas, Marmas, Murungs, Chaks, Bowms, Pankoos, Khiyangs, Khumis, Tripuras, and Lushais of the CHTs who are collectively known as Jumma because they cultivate their land in a specific way called Jum or
shifting cultivation; and Hajongs, Khasis, Garos, Shantals, Oraons, Rajbangshi, Manipuri’s etc in other districts (Chakma, 1999). The indigenous people lead a simple life and are generally self-reliant, produce their own food and drink and wear distinct clothes (Ahmmed, 2005). They share physical or cultural characteristics that distinguish them from the dominant majority group and they have strong sense of group solidarity (Schaefer and Lamm, 1995). They are the subunits of the society and members of these groups transmit their heritage, marry endogamous (within the group), and maintain a lifestyle distinct from that of the majority society (Gelfand, 1982). These distinct characteristics have been the major motivating factors in the indigenous people’s struggle against outside intrusion (Munda, 2002). They experience unequal treatment and are the subordinate groups whose members have significantly less control or power over their own lives than the members of the majority groups have over theirs (Schaefer and Lamm, 1995). Though functionalist viewpoints justify that such discrimination serves the interest of the powerful e.g. majority people, this unequal treatment can also be dysfunctional to a society and even to its dominant group (Schaefer and Lamm, 1995).

The indigenous people tend to be away from the centre of power. Therefore policy initiatives and development activities undertaken by the non-indigenous policy makers and planners usually cannot address their real needs. There are different conventions and laws ratified by member states of the United States under its framework to protect and uphold indigenous people’s right but little improvement has been achieved. Political and social commitments of the ruling powers operated by non-indigenous people are usually seen as insufficient for the promotion and development of indigenous people’s rights throughout the world. Violations of human rights, systematic deprivation from all forms of development activities, cultural antagonism, insecurity and extreme poverty have become the part of their life. At least 350 million people worldwide are considered to be indigenous and in Bangladesh about two million indigenous people of 45 different distinct communities are living throughout the country (Gateway, Hossain, 2003). These people with distinctive social and cultural practices, languages and customs are commonly known as ‘Adivasis’ by themselves. Among them the Manipuri is one of the Adivasi communities living mainly in Sylhet and Moulvibazar districts of the
country, having migrated from the Manipur state of India. They are dispersed in small pockets of settlements that are surrounded by areas inhabited by Bengali-speaking people (Roy, 2002).

Among these migrants, three sections of the population in Bangladesh all identify themselves as Manipuri. Among them Meiteis identify themselves as an ethnic minority but they never consider themselves as tribal, Adivasi or indigenous rather they are more interested to be introduced as part of the mainstream Hindu community of Bangladesh. But other sections (known as Visnupria and Manipuri Muslim or Pangan) do not hesitate to introduce themselves as Adivasi or indigenous (Gain and others, 2000). However, Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum and other non-governmental organizations as well as governmental agencies consider and count all of them as indigenous peoples due to their distinct ethnic background and cultural practices. Interestingly, the ethnic formation of the Meiteis proves its indigenous status. Like most of the indigenous communities in Bangladesh the Manipuri nation is formed out of several early tribes and races (Sheram, 2005). Every indigenous group has an ethnic identity and one very dominant characteristic of an indigenous group is its ethnicity (Doshi, 1990). All of the native ethnic groups of the present state of Manipur had, at one time or another, been the cognate of the Meitei in Manipur. Meiteis themselves were a melting pot of seven leading ethnic groups belonging to seven major principalities (Sanajaoba, 2005). The members of an ethnic group share a common ethnicity and ethnicity itself has its own historiography. It is like a cultural system which presses from generation to generation (Doshi, 1990). The Meiteis have their own history of ethnic formation, biological character and special racial and cultural character which passes from their ancestors. Doshi (1990) identified a few non-biological characteristics along with biological character to identify an indigenous group that include cultural distinctiveness, language, religion, collective self-consciousness, self identity, common customs, tradition and institutions and common pride in the land of origin and ethno political traits. Although it is difficult indeed to bring out a precise meaning of an indigenous group, considering the ethnic formation and similarity with above characteristics the Meiteis may be considered as an indigenous group. However, we do
not have the intention of influencing the *Meeteis* personal identity regarding their status as ‘ethnic minority’ –not indigenous.

Although the Meeteis have been living in Bangladesh for more than three centuries and have made great contributions in different important stages of nation building efforts, their lives are not trouble-free. While their human rights situation is better than other indigenous communities in Bangladesh, there are lots of problems they encounter during their everyday life. Like other plain land indigenous communities they do not have direct representation at national policy making and planning levels. Poverty and landlessness is increasing at an alarming rate and it has become a threat to their ancestral agriculture based livelihood. Livestock rearing was their prime source of additional income which has now almost disappeared due to land and financial insecurity. The traditional rich and artistic handloom industry is now under threat due to a lack of capital and a competitive market which undercuts their costs and production. Large numbers of mainstream people’s settlement close to or even inside their community creates insecurity and threatens their indigenous culture and practices. They are more or less subject to systematic discrimination in different aspects including education, employment, development activities and social relations. This is largely because policy initiatives have not addressed the specific needs of this group. Although the government and a few international development agencies have initiated some programs mainly addressing the needs of indigenous communities in Chittagong Hill Tracts region, Manipuri community are still largely ignored by the government’s development activities like other plain land indigenous communities throughout the country. Although these people are receiving education in large numbers through their own efforts, earning multilevel skills, connecting themselves with the mainstream systems; they are still left behind mainstream development. Their circumstances and needs are still largely unnoticed and are not systematically explored since the issues have not been under the focus of in-depth research. As a result, most Officials and agencies do not have available information regarding their needs and the extent of problems that they encounter. Since research available on this issue is negligible and there is a huge information gap, it is expected and hoped that the findings of the present research will partially fill these gaps.
As indigenous people are under threat and discrimination all around the world, the United Nations General Assembly has formed a permanent forum on indigenous issues, the year of 1993 was declared and observed as the international year of the world’s indigenous peoples as well as declaring 1995 to 2004 as the international decade of the world’s indigenous peoples. After celebrating the first decade, the permanent forum observed that the main objectives of the decade had not been achieved. Although several studies have been completed by the Working Group on the relationship of indigenous peoples to land, on treaties and agreements and on the protection of the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples, indigenous peoples around the world continue to be among the most marginalized and their way of life, cultural heritage and languages continues to be threatened (ECOSOC, 2000). Given this reality, the second decade (from 2005 to 2014) has declared that its target is the overall development of the indigenous people throughout the world. According to the United Nations policy the protection and promotion of their rights and culture is of fundamental importance to all states and all peoples (Anan, 2003). It also emphasizes intensive research in order to explore indigenous system, culture, extent of their problems, severity of human rights violation, exploitation and injustice against indigenous peoples. Lack of a database related to indigenous people’s issues restricts policy makers and organizations to understand the overall situation of indigenous people all around the world. In Bangladesh it has very limited authentic information regarding indigenous issues due to a lack of available research initiatives. This research will contribute to filling the shortage of information about the Manipuri community of Bangladesh.

1.2 Review of Existing Literature on the Manipuris

The first international initiative to explore the issue of indigenous people in general was carried out by International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1957 (Ghali, 2000). Another landmark study was undertaken by the United Nations Sub commission on the Protection of Minorities and Prevention of Discrimination in the 1970s (ECOSOC, 2000) which made indigenous issues public throughout the world. Since then research on
indigenous issue has become more important and many studies have been conducted worldwide focusing on the overall situation of indigenous people. In Bangladesh, studies on indigenous people are mainly limited to the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. Studies on plain land indigenous peoples are still limited. In particular, indigenous peoples from greater Sylhet region have received very little or in many cases, no attention in research. Although a few studies have been conducted on indigenous issue in general, the number of studies particularly on Manipuri community are scarce.

A survey report entitled “Discrepancies in Census and Socio-economic status of Ethnic Communities” was published in 2000. The survey was carried out in plain land ethnic peoples concentrated in five Upazillas (Gain and others, 2000). Among those Kamalgonj was one of the surveyed Upazillas where Manipuri people have been living from more than three centuries. The survey successfully explored different aspects of Manipuri society. The survey shows that the Manipuri people are in a better socio-economic condition than other plain land indigenous people in Bangladesh. It shows that their literacy rate is higher than mainstream people. Agriculture was observed as their prime earning source and most of the households were found to have only one income source. The poor who have no land to cultivate sell their labor to other farmland. Data shows that one third of the Manipuri people’s economic situation is vulnerable and they survive only by selling labor. The survey indicates the overall poor economic situation of the Manipuris. Although it was a broader initiative to explore Manipuri systems, it poses some limitations. Firstly, it used a survey method to understand the life of an ethnic group which is limited in its scope to intensively explore indigenous systems. Indigenous communities have a unique character of life that only can successfully be explored by a participatory approach (Patton, 1999). Secondly, although every indigenous community has its own way of life distinct from others, this fact has been unexplored or ignored in this survey. Thirdly, the survey is focused on creating a socio-demographic datasheet giving less importance to problem related issues which are essential to formulate policy, plans and programs for the development of this group.

Another study was conducted by the Institute of Forestry and Environmental Sciences at Chittagong University in 2002. The study focuses on indigenous agro forestry system of Manipuri people. In addition to the main objective, the study focuses on the
socio-economic background of the Manipuri community. Study findings indicate a high rate of education among the Manipuris. SEHD survey indicates that there is a single occupation of these people however, this study contradicts with those findings and it identified various occupations e.g. handloom work, business, governmental and non-governmental services etc and many of the family were found who had more than one earning sources. As this study has been conducted focusing on agro forestry system, quite logically it was able to cover a very small minor aspect of Manipuri people. As the research was conducted as part of an academic exercise, achieving academic performances was given more importance than community people’s interest, problems and expectation.

Two academic studies were conducted by the Students of Shah Jalal University of Science and Technology at Sylhet. One was conducted by students of Anthropology department in 2004 and another was done by the students of Social Work department in 2001. Both of the studies were conducted within a short duration to explore the socio-economic situation of the Manipuris. Both of the study findings observed that as a laborious group, Manipuri people love working and all members of their community are involved in activity until the very last part of their lives. Agriculture and handloom work were explored as their prime occupation. Although the number of workers in formal sectors (service holders) was found to be very small, many of them were found to be involved in carpentry, automobile work, gold making and business. These studies were conducted in urban areas within a very short duration with a small sample of participants. Therefore it is difficult to have an accurate idea of the real Manipuri system as most of the Manipuris live in rural areas and have remarkable different lifestyles and occupations to urban people. Moreover these studies did not explore the extent of the problems evident in Manipuri community. Karim and others (1999) explored the indigenous care system, needs and problems of urban Manipuri older people. In their study “Situation of Manipuri Older people” they also explored indigenous traditions, values and norms related to older people. This study was conducted using a sample survey on a very small number of participants. Moreover its focus was only on the issue of old age which in itself is an innovative area of research for Bangladesh let alone for the Manipuri older people. It is difficult for a researcher with a non-indigenous background to explore any indigenous system within a very limited period of time. Outsider researchers may not be
well accepted by indigenous people within a short period of time. Therefore, time limitations, a very small urban based sample and lack of selection of appropriate methodology made this research less useful.

Keeping those limitations in mind and considering the objective of the study which is to increase awareness about the challenging aspects of everyday life of this rich cultural ethnic group we designed the study so that a thorough, in-depth investigation using qualitative research could be undertaken. The research team ensured that a sufficient amount of time was allocated to field work phase. This helped to collect appropriate data on the original Manipuri system.

Chapter Two

Brief Profile of the Manipuri Community

2.1: Settlement in Bangladesh

The dispersal of the Meeteis and their settlements in several countries and parts of Asia, the emergence of Manipuri Diaspora beyond their original root in the state of Manipur had been the legacy of Manipuri history of Asia. Manipuri settlements in Bangladesh could be traced to medieval period and even to the remote past. Although different historical evidence suggest that the Meiteis could have settled in Sylhet during the regime of Manipur King Pamheiba (Garibnawaz) in the period 1709-1748 (Sanajaoba, 2005), it is also evident that the Manipuri settlement began much prior to that era (Sheram, 2005). Different historical events like Burmese invasions, devastation, and wars mainly against Burmese, forced the Manipuri deportation into neighboring countries. On the other hand some settlements occurred as reciprocal affairs based on
inter connection and good relationship between the Manipuris and friendly neighboring states like Assam (Sanajaoba, 2005).

2.2 Total Population

Actually it is difficult to calculate the accurate number of total Manipuri people living in Bangladesh. Similar to other ethnic minority people of the county, the Government census tends to underestimate and ignore their numbers. Even though Manipuri people are educated, conscious and they have contacts with mainstream people and organizations, they have not initiated any valid data gathering missions regarding their population. Non-governmental organizations have little attention on any ethnic people. A Non-Governmental organization - Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) conducted an intensive survey on ethnic people in five thanas of Bangladesh between 1996-1997. This survey covered Manipuris living in Kamalgonj Thana in Moulovibazar district. The survey result indicates that there were 15,309 Manipuri people living in Kamolgonj Thana (Gain, et al, 2000). Sheram (1996) mentioned that more than fifty per cent of the total Manipuri people live in Kamolgonj Thana. Using this opinion, the total number can be calculated as 30,618. On the other hand Sheram (1996) claimed that the total number of the Manipuri people will be forty to fifty thousand. Above evidence arises contradictions over the accurate number of Manipuri people living in Bangladesh. Due to a lack of available and reliable updated data their accurate number is still suspicious.

2.3: Education

The number of Manipuris receiving education is high. The average literacy rate of Manipuris is above 80% which is higher than the national statistics. However, the rate of receiving higher education is still very low. Due to poverty many of them cannot arrange higher education for their children. Educational institutions for higher studies are far from their communities, and they have less capability to compete with mainstream people. Although Shah Jalal University of Science and Technology, a reputed public University is about 125 kilometers from their territories, very few Manipuri students are admitted there. As a disadvantaged group they do not have positive discrimination for admission.
As a result, their children usually do not have the opportunity due to such high competition for places. Manipuri people demand that a special quota for the indigenous people of this public University is created.

2.4: Main Occupation

Manipuris are agriculturists. It is their traditional livelihood and has been for centuries. As a plain land inhabitant, the system of agriculture is similar to the mainstream people of Bangladesh which is mainly based on traditional knowledge. Like mainstream people nowadays they are introducing a few modern technologies and equipments in agro farming. They produce both food and seed grain on their farmlands.

2.5: Additional livelihoods

In addition to agriculture, Manipuri people are involved in various earning activities. Their home based handloom industry is famous for its unique design and process. Although work such as day laboring and rickshaw pulling are almost obsolete among them, many of the poor Manipuris are involved as shared agro farmers with their solvent neighbors and relatives. A few poor females work as paid handloom workers at their neighbor’s home who have no hand loom of their own. Carpentry is another occupation of some Manipuris. In urban areas Manipuris are involved in automobile industries and workshops, handloom goods business and gold making. Very few of them are found to be leading businessmen in Sylhet city. A number of educated Manipuris both from urban and rural areas are serving as high officials in governmental and non-governmental agencies.

2.6: Language

Manipuris have their own rich language which has its own alphabet. A Number of books and brochures have been published in Manipuri language in Bangladesh. Their language has 27 letters. In Manipur of India, academic books are published in Manipuri language. In several universities in India it is possible to pursue a PhD in ancient Manipuri poetry. This recognition should demonstrate to us the richness and complexity of this cultural heritage and inspire us to ensure that it is preserved and celebrated in this country.
2.7: Geographical Concentrations

Manipuris have settled in Sylhet region of Bangladesh coming from outside of the country. Manipuris, as the name itself suggests, were once inhabitants of the Manipur kingdom of Assam. In 1765 the king of Burma fought against King Vagya Chandra Joy Singh of Manipur kingdom. King Vagya Chandra was defeated and compelled to flee to Kachar district of Indian Assam. At the same time many of the kings’ followers also took refuge in Sylhet district (Sattar, 1971). At the time, Sylhet district was home to the most concentrated number of Manipuris however, some of the Manipuris also took shelter in Tejgaon locality of Dhaka city, Durgapur region of Netrokona district and Kashba region of Comilla district in Bangladesh (Sheram, 1996; Satter, 1971). Now Manipuri people are living in different plain places of Sylhet division only. Sylhet division is located in the north eastern zone of Bangladesh. Among all other districts of Sylhet division, Moulovibazar has the highest concentration of Manipuri people. The table below shows the concentration of Manipuri people within Sylhet region:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.1: Present Manipuri inhabited areas in Bangladesh*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunamgonj</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* The list has been made on the basis of Manipuri people’s oral information
Chapter Three
Research context and Methods

3.1 Study Objectives
The general objective of this study was to draw a comprehensive picture of the socio-economic condition and problems of the Manipuri community. However, the specific objectives were as follows:
1. To make a socio-demographic profile (education, nature of family, cultural practices, customs, values etc) of the Manipuri people
2. To explore the economic situation (economic activities, professional involvements, property ownership, livelihood strategies etc) of the Manipuri people
3. To identify socio-economic problems encountered by the Manipuri community
4. To gather suggestions from the Manipuri people for their own development.

3.2 Conceptualizing the terms and concepts

State
Every community has needs, problems and their own way of life which faces different situations and passes through various experiences. The term ‘state’ indicates the mental, emotional or physical condition or situation that a person, community or thing is in (Wehmeier et al (ed), 2002) and this can be both positive and negative. As an ethnic group the Manipuris have livelihoods, customs, cultural practices, norms and values that are distinct in character. The majority of the population in Bangladesh encounter different problems during their everyday life. However, people know very little about the needs and problems of Manipuri people due to lack of scientific studies. Although, as an
indigenous group these people may suffer the same degree of problems as other indigenous groups that have already been reported and noticed. The manner in which these ethnic people enjoy their family and socio-cultural lives, the nature and extent of their problems, their economic condition and livelihood was the subjects of exploration of this research and all of these subjects have been treated as ‘state’ to understand the overall condition of the lives of the Manipuris.

**Manipuri**

The terms “Manipuri” and “Meitei” are used inter-changeably in different Indian literature according to the ethnic history of these people. Historical evidence suggests that before, the name of the present Manipur state was *Meitei-Leipak* and over a course of time the state became known under its present name. The group of people now known as Manipuri were also historically known as “Meitei” and until now they introduce themselves as “Meitei” (Sheram, 2005). Grierson (1904) also described the Manipuris as “Meitei” and he mentioned that the Manipuris are those who call themselves Meiteis and are called by others Manipuri. Sattar (1971) also described Meitei people as the original Manipuri nation. In Bangladesh there is a discrepancy over the identification of Manipuris. Three groups of people with their distinct ethnic background migrated to Bangladesh from the Indian state of Manipur. All of these groups introduce themselves as Manipuris. However, the Meeteis claim that they were the inhabitants of the original Manipuri nation and the others were the inhabitants of Manipur state but ethnically and racially not Manipuri nation. There are arguments in favor of these notions. First of all the Meitei nation was formed during the Eighth Century and renamed Manipuri during king Gharib Newazs regime but Vishnuprias migrated to Manipur from Comilla, Chittagong and Tripura after the Thirteenth Century (Sheram, 1996). This supports and affirms the notion that the claim of the Meiteis is true. Secondly, the physical structures of Meitei people and Vishnuprias are different. Such physical differences indicate their different origin. Thirdly, Meitei and Vishnupria people have cultural inequality. Their language and cultural practices are different despite both belonging to Hindu religion. It is impossible to have various cultural practices and languages within a single ethnic group. Such differences indicate a different identity (Ahmmmed, 2006). Given the above circumstances, it is assumed that three ethnic groups migrated at the same time to
Bangladesh from Manipuri state of India. They are known as Meitei or Manipuri, Vishnupria and Manipuri Muslim. Although Vishnupria people have their own distinct language and cultural practices, Manipuri muslims are similar with Meiteis in language and many other cultural heritages. Considering all of this evidence, the present research has identified Meiteis as Manipuris and data has been gathered from the Meitei people to represent the original Manipuri system.

3.3 Methodology
3.3.1 Design of the Research

The research project was carried out using a blend of qualitative and quantitative methods aimed at assessing the overall situation, needs and difficulties encountered by the Manipuri community. The research was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, a quantitative design that followed the principles of Participatory Learning Approach (PLA) was used to understand the predicaments of the Manipuris. The second phase was required the use of a qualitative design. The design was constructed in a way that provided an opportunity for in-depth explorations of the factors that facilitate and those that encumber the lives of the Manipuris. The third phase was also in the ambit of qualitative design however, it had a different focus and a broader participatory group which included the views of civil society, researchers, academic experts and other allied agencies thinking in the same domain.

The overall design of the research was carefully developed in a fashion that ensured that in every stage, the principles of a participatory model for gathering information from the participants were used so that participants could share their stories and shape the conclusions of their experiences which they deem to have contributed to their livelihood. On the other hand, the quantitative approaches provided the capability to analyze, generalize and present the landscape of Manipuri people’s lives. The study was fundamentally guided by a grounded theory methodological approach, which specifies a style of analysis for conceptualizing social interactions and processes. Consistent with the perspective of symbolic interactionism and similar ideas contained within various
strands of constructivist thought (Berger and Luckman 1967), grounded theory rests upon
the idea that the study of inter subjective realities held by participants within a social
setting provides a window into social processes (Strauss 1993). These perspectives hold
that everyday practices and routines arise out of individually and collectively held social
constructions, and hence are best apprehended by studying the actors’ viewpoints. This
method was therefore considered a suitable choice for the study of customs, traditions
and the overall aspects of an indigenous community which has its distinct character.

Grounded theory does not represent a single unified method, but rather could be
described as a style or family of methods which may be used flexibly to treat an array of
data sources, such as interviews, observations, historical and text documents, and visual
media (Strauss 1987; May 1996). This study was designed to make use of both
naturalistic observation and interview narratives to capture and depict the Manipuri
system.

3.3.2 Sampling

The sample population that was relevant to this research included all of the
household heads of selected Manipuri villages. A list of the Manipuri villages was made
using the documents of Manipuri Sahitta Parishad. From this list, two villages were
purposively selected due to the availability of participants from different backgrounds in
order to ensure the objectives the study were achieved. In addition to this reason, the
villages were selected as the researchers had close contact, were familiar with these
villagers and had personal relations with a few people of the villages which is essential to
gather data from a distinct ethnic group. Secondly both of the selected villages have a
unique character which reflects original Manipuri culture and livelihood. It is observed
that in many of Manipuri villages’ mainstream people already have entered within
Manipuri territory and are creating tension and influencing Manipuri systems. Within the
selected villages, Manipuri concentrated areas are totally separate from mainstream
peoples’ habitats. The density of Manipuri people was another important factor in
selecting these villages. We found eighty households in the studied villages. All of the
household heads were included as the participants of the research. It helped to have a full
representation from a wide cross-section of Manipuri people from different backgrounds;
e.g. economic condition, age, occupation, sex etc. Considering Daily and Smith’s (2000: 13) the notion household was considered to be a group of two or more related people who reside in the same dwelling, regard themselves as a household and who make common provision of food and other essentials for living. Among the participants twenty four were female which helps to understand the dimension of gender among the Manipuris.

3.3.3 Data Collection

The researchers had to encounter a number of challenges during the data collection phase including a the barrier of having very limited knowledge on Manipuri language, limited time and shortage of funds. To expedite the data gathering process researchers were directly involved during the whole period of data collection. Language related limitations were overcome by the researchers themselves as one of the researchers was the member of Manipuri community and so had command of the language. Both of the researchers have previous experience in empirical research which helped to select and follow appropriate learning procedures. Taking into consideration the sensitivity of the information and the risk of accessibility inside the community as an outsider, the help of two retired person’s (one from each village) was enlisted. They hold a leadership role in their respective villages and had a deep interest in research. Moreover they provided valuable information about different dimensions of their community life that enriched the research substantially.

At the beginning of data collection a decision was made to incorporate participatory approaches as the central tenet of data collection. To meet this end, four data collection techniques were used for the research: 1) individual, face to face interview with household heads; 2) in-depth interviews with the experienced and educated older Manipuris as key informants; 3) formal and informal discussion with the villagers and 4) an open discussion on findings in the presence of, researchers, academics, Manipuri community leaders, journalists and some other respectable citizens belonging to civil society. Observation technique was also carefully and widely used in order to depict the original habits and practices of the Manipuri people.

Individual interviews
It was decided that each data collector would conduct individual face-to-face interviews with the respondents. To this extent, semi-structured open-ended interview guidelines were designed to obtain responses that encompassed the needs and problems they face in their daily life, nature of earning activities, problem coping mechanism, access to the mainstream development activities and services, nature of exploitation and the type of negligence they encounter as an ethnic minority group.

Before administering the interview the research team carefully designed a pre-test model to explore the problems and set backs (e.g. reluctance of interviewees to give enough time, sensitive information, and non-cooperation from the participants and villagers) which could potentially impede, participation, cooperation and the flow of information from the participants. Several findings emerged from this endeavor and researchers were instrumental in overcoming such set backs. In all cases, before the interviews were conducted, researchers met the participants to introduce themselves and to arrange a mutually agreeable interview time. For the first meeting with the participants, one retired person (who was the resident and leader figure of respective village) sacrificed his time with the researchers which helped to gain easy access and the trust of the participants. Moreover one of the researcher’s identity as Manipuri helped substantially in this phase. It was observed that almost all of the participants were earning members and most of the time of day they were involved in their personal work. Given this reality researchers used ‘approach again and again’ technique to counter this challenge and successfully gathered data from the participants.

The duration of each interview took approximately sixty to seventy five minutes. Researchers were flexible enough to respond to any requests from the participants on the duration of a session. In many cases researchers even visited more than one time to the participants if time shortage or business arose for the participants. Participants, personal opinion and choice were considered to be the first priority when selecting the time of the session. The data was collected mainly in written form. However, tape recorders was also used on the permission of the participants. The same steps and techniques were also followed for interviewing the key informants.
Formal and informal discussion

A friendly and open discussion creates an opportunity to share people’s feelings and ideas freely in an ordinary fashion. Bearing this in mind, researchers arranged two formal discussion sessions in each of the studied villages. Some steps and preparations were undertaken to make this endeavor successful. At the time of individual interview an informal and good relationship was established between the researchers and the participants as well as with the whole community. Living inside the studied villages for a long time helped to establish trust among the villagers and the researchers were invited to their different religious festivals. Informal discussions continued during the whole field work phase. Researchers carefully built informal relationships with the villagers with a motive of collecting accurate information in a very casual fashion yet researchers were always sensitive regarding their relationship so that it did not reflect on their investigation. During the last phase of data collection they showed their interest to meet with the villagers. The villagers themselves decided how, where and when this session will be conducted. Everything was decided by the village leaders (mainly older people) spontaneously and they voluntarily circulated this decision to the villagers. It was observed that the whole process was carried out in such a way that the villagers (both adult male and female) were participating voluntarily at their own meetings. An older male and a younger male played roles as facilitating the sessions. Researchers provided discussion guidelines and clearly stated which issues should be discussed in the session. Researchers simply documented the discussion session and kept their presence as participant observers.

Seminar Presentation

The findings of the research were presented in front of an audience of researchers, academics, journalists, respective community leaders and some other respectable citizens belonging to civil society. It was deemed essential to incorporate the views of this group as they are key informants on indigenous issues and recommendations that are to be made from the research. At the beginning of the meeting, researchers made a brief presentation emphasizing major findings and afterwards the audience was asked to reflect on the matter and express their suggestion(s) about how the problem could be meaningfully
dealt with in the present socio-economic situation. The suggestions obtained from the Manipuri community leaders, researchers, academics etc. contributed a great extent towards drafting recommendations.

3.3.4 Analysis of Data and Presentation

The research followed a combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques. In quantitative analysis, the data were coded, grouped and formatted into a tabulation sheet. Since the nature of data was descriptive and explanatory, the useful statistical procedure as suggested by Babbie (1998) is percentage, mean and median. The research followed the suggestions and presented the findings in the above format.

In the qualitative format, the analysis was manually conducted by the researchers. The primary goal of the analysis was to figure out the diversity of the data and facilitate the formation of themes and categories that were firmly grounded in data. To begin with qualitative questions included in the in-depth interview schedule were separated and coded. Notes taken during the individual interviews were examined for key words that were frequently used and referred to. These key words were then grouped and re-grouped on the basis of their similarity. The grouping of these key words then formed the base for developing a set of categories, which reflected the meanings in the participant’s response.

Results of the data are provided in table form with a description of the categories that provide an understanding of the life of the Manipuri community. Anecdotes from participants retained the integrity of analysis. The report has been prepared consisting of four chapters. Chapter one and two focuses on an introductory analysis containing background, importance, conceptualizations and methodologies uses in the study whereas chapter three and four is mostly based on empirical data. Chapter one also presents a few research literatures which are related to the study. Chapter three broadly presents the overall situation of the Manipuri people based on the findings of the research. Qualitative data has been analyzed and described in detail here. (MOVE UP?) The research is sustained by empirical quantitative data sets which give a clear picture of the socio-cultural lives, economic situation, livelihoods, needs and problems of this community
people. Chapter four presents concluding observations and remarks as well as policy recommendations.

3.4 Structure of the Text

This text is divided into five chapters. Every chapter contains a blend of secondary and primary data where as chapter four and five is mainly based on empirical data. Chapter one provides the background, scope and an explanation of research literature. Chapter two provides an orientation of the Manipuri community gathering information from different secondary sources. This chapter describes settlement history, socio-cultural life and present habitats of the Manipuri people. Chapter three discusses the methodological aspects of the study. This chapter also includes objectives of the study and conceptualizations of terms used as heading of this text. Chapter four presents findings of the study. This chapter discusses elaborately the socio-economic and cultural life of the rural Manipuris based on empirical data. Major findings and key policy recommendations have been presented within chapter five as concluding observations.

Chapter Four

How Rural Manipuris Enjoy their Lives

Introduction

Bangladesh is a poor country with a large population of about 130 million. It is the most densely populated country in the world and one of the world’s least developed countries. Annual per capital income is approximately 360 US dollars. Slightly more than half of all children are chronically malnourished. Seventy percent of the work force is involved in agriculture, which accounts for one-fourth of the gross domestic product. About seventy five per cent of the total population inhabit rural areas (U.S. Department of State, 2002). Landlessness, unemployment, underemployment, lack of education and skills accelerate extreme poverty among rural people. Poverty itself works as an agent of different problems. The majority of the population are Muslim and the national culture is represented and dominated by the majority people of the country. However people from
different ethnic groups lead very distinct lives to the dominant group, Manipuri people are in many ways similar to mainstream rural people. However as a minority and ethnic group they have their own system, custom, values, livelihoods as well as problems and a coping mechanism that is distinct from the mainstream people of Bangladesh. Present research has emphasized their distinct character and has been reflected in the findings given below in this chapter.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Age Structure

At the time of data collection, researchers and participants gathered demographic information of the populations living in the studied villages to understand the demographic characteristics of the villagers. As we had identified the household head as the participants of the study, most of our participants were aged sixty years and above. Traditionally Manipuri people have a deep respect towards older people and in the presence of an older member, other family members will not take family headship. None of the participant were aged less than 20 years. Participants of age group 20 to 29 were negligible (three per cent) whereas the age group 45 to 59 was substantial in number (thirty one per cent). We also observed the age structure of the total population. We found a total of 378 people living in the two studied villages at the time of our data collection. Among all villagers most of them were found to be less than 20 years of age. This indicates the density and high numbers of the younger population which is consistent with national statistics.

Gender

Nearly three fourths of the participants were male. Manipuri community is dominated by males and the majority of household heads are male. Females can only act as the head of her household if her husband is no longer alive. Due to this demographic trend, the number of female participants was only about one forth of the total participants. Surprisingly among all villagers, the number of females was higher than males. Among
378 population 204 were found to be female which is inconsistent with the national statistics (male female ratio is 100: 103.8 (BBS, 2001)).

**Marital Status**

Early marriage, separation, divorce, polygamy is barely seen among the Manipuris. Among the villagers no case of early marriage was evident. Only one case of separation was found among the studied villagers which was a very complicated case. Her husband left the country at the time of independence war of Bangladesh and he did not return. As far as the woman and her relatives know, the husband is still alive and living in India. One divorced man and woman were found in a village. Though polygamy is not prohibited and a man can have maximum of five wives after taking permission from his first or other wives (Mohen, 2005), it is not practiced among the Manipuris. However, one can marry after the death of his/her spouse. One male was found in this category. He got married after the death of his first wife. In such a marriage they usually prefer to bring the wife from relatives e.g. sister-in-law. They justify this because the children will not be neglected and are cared for in the same way as their late mother. One of our key informants reported,

“First of all we discourage marriage after the death of a spouse. Though it is not prohibited by social and religious laws, if someone becomes widow or widower after the age of forty, they do not get married again. But in the case of widowhood at an early age people usually get married again. Taking care of children from the first wife is the basis for such marriage. If the issue of the children’s safety is a major concern then a second wife is usually searched for from the family of the first wife. A second time marriage among widows is not seen in our community.”

More than half of the participants were found to be enjoying married life. Among the female participants more than half were found to be widowed where as only about nine per cent of the male person were widower. Naturally Manipuri marriage ritual encourages an age gap between bride and groom and it must disfavor the bride. Usually the groom is
five to fifteen year senior to the bride which is similar to the majority people of Bangladesh. This reality creates more widowhood among women than their counterparts.

**Number of Children**

Manipuri people are conscious about their family life. They prefer to lead a balanced life. Therefore they limit the number of children per family on the basis of their economic capacity. Although this is not taught directly, it is injected to their family values and all Manipuris are loyal to their ancestral tradition. This tradition restricts them from allowing big families with a large number of children. Government family planning activities do not reach out to this population. However, these people are self motivated and even less educated people are conscious about the small family norm inherited from their ancestors. One participant asserted,

“We prefer small sized families. Nobody has to motivate us about the usefulness of a small family. We learn it from our prior generation. Simultaneously our next generation will learn it from us. You will find a very small number of people who have many children and this is our real practice through learning from our ancestors.”

It is evident that most couples have a maximum of three to four children. Parents of five or more children are rare among the Manipuris. This small family norm is highly practiced among the younger generations. Although some families consist of a maximum of ten members, all of these families are following a joint family structure where unmarried and married sons, grandchildren and parents live together.

**4.2 Family Pattern**

A family can be defined as a set of people related by blood, marriage (or some other agreed-upon relationship), or adoption who share the primary responsibility for reproduction and caring for members of society (Schaefer and Lamm, 1995:361) Family patterns differ from one culture to another and even within the same culture. However, the family is universal and found in every culture though varied in its organization and form. The joint family system is strongly practiced among Manipuri
people. They joint family is viewed as the preferred family arrangement. Traditionally this people are dependent upon agriculture. The rural auricular based economy of the Indian sub continent was the root of joint family norms. In agro based livelihood it is believed that joint efforts can bring more success in agro production. From such an outlook, most of the people prefer to be united within the joint family system. After urbanization and industrialization the concept of small family has emerged and now it is well practiced and popular among mainstream people in Bangladesh. Despite having a deep connection with mainstream community, the Manipuri people still respect their tradition and prefer the joint family system. Although the number of nuclear families has increased due to different causes such as urban based transferable livelihood, changed attitude of few young member etc; joint families are still dominant in number. The majority of Manipuri people see more benefits of the joint family system. One of the participant’s statements highlights the logics of forming a joint family of large number,

“Manipuri people always prefer to have joint family structures. Within joint family system you will find much usefulness. All members of a joint family feels secure. If any member falls into trouble he or she gets support from other members quickly. Especially older people and children are satisfactorily cared for and protected within our joint family system. Younger people can learn about our tradition, culture, norms etc from the older people. Older people can guide all other family members in every possible aspect of life. Relationships among family members remains strong within the joint family system. All members can share with each other and work together which will bring prosperity for the family.”

Among eighty families of the studied villages we found 43 joint families. The definition of a joint family has a special twist in Manipuri community (Ahmmed, 2006). Generally, Bangladeshi families could be divided into three patterns: nuclear, joint and extended (Das, 2004). The family consisting of husband, wife and their children is considered a nuclear family whereas husband, wife and their children, daughter-in-law, son-in-law and grand children form the basis of a joint family (Ahmmed, 2006). Two types of joint family are observed among the studied villages. Some of the couples were living at home along with their children, grand children and daughter-in-laws. In most
cases their employed son lives in his workplace with his own family mostly in city areas. However sons maintain strong ties with parents back home. Even though both families are separated they deem it as one single unit and are dedicated to the common welfare of the both families simultaneously (Ahmmed, 2006). Participants described it as a joint family. But from the theoretical points of view such a pattern is considered as an extended family (Das, 2004). On the other hand Schaefer and Lamm (1995) described extended family as the family in which relatives in addition to parents and children-such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles live in the same house. Therefore, considering the above descriptions we can consider Manipuri big families as an extended family. Besides this, another special type of family was found in the study area which could be termed as a single member family. Under this category, a single man or woman lives independently maintaining a strong tie with relatives and members of the community (Ahmmed, 2006). One woman was found in this category. She was separated from her husband without children and was living in her parent’s home taking support from relatives and neighbors.

4.3 Education

Different studies traced class differences in participation and performance throughout the education system (Reid, 1995). Ethnic identity restricts people from receiving available opportunities and services from the state providing organizations as they are labeled as lower class or a class without power and influence over the majority people. In addition to this, their personal practices such as language and culture sometimes creates barriers to benefited from existing opportunities. As an ethnic group Manipuri people have their distinct language and cultural practice that influences their everyday life. Their children struggle to receive education at schools which follow the majority language and cultural system. Despite these barriers, Manipuri people are conscious about the value of education. Although the rate of higher education is not satisfactory among the Manipuris, their literacy rate is higher than national statistics. Economic hardship and lack of higher education institutions close to their community substantially reduce the rate of Manipuris going onto complete higher education. In addition, traditional judgments regard higher education as a misuse of time and less profitable which discourages some Manipuris from arranging higher education for their
children. Among 80 participants we found 35 participants who did not have any formal education. Among the educated participants none of them had Bachelor level of education, which is regarded as higher education in the context of Bangladesh. Although we found six participants who had completed higher secondary level of education, none of them were female. Among all of the literate participants (45) only eight was female. In the midst of the female literate, seven had only primary level of education and only one had completed secondary level. Those who hold primary level of education can usually sign their name and read and write to a basic level. There are still a large number of Manipuri women involved in handloom industries, the majority of whom are unmarried girls. This trend was found as a major reason behind the lower education rate among the women. In rural areas, most families partially rely on income from handloom and most of the parents have a tendency to involve their girls in handloom industries just after finishing their primary education. Poverty is viewed as a pressing factor behind this attitude. One of the participants revealed how,

“Most of our girls cannot attend school for a long time and they have to leave schools before or just after completion of primary level. Due to poverty most of our families have to work hard to survive and all family members take part in survival activities as per their capacity. As handloom is our home based industry and women operate this, a girl learns it from her mother as an ancestral occupation at her young age. Due to poverty she has to do it professionally at a very young age to support her family. This process restricts girls from attending higher education. In addition to this we have a common tendency to give more priority to boy’s education than girls. Especially among poor families sons are a priority group when considering education.”

Among all villagers we found a high literacy rate in comparison to national statistics of Bangladesh. It was evident that about sixty five per cent of the population had different levels of education ranging from primary to master degree level. The members of the village displayed a similar trend of a decrease in higher education shown by the participants. The drop out rate was observed as very high among rural Manipuri children. This is another important cause behind the lower numbers of highly educated people among the Manipuris. School environment and language were identified as major causes
behind the alarming rate of drop-out from schools. Manipuris have their own language and quite naturally their children learn Manipuri language first as it is their mother tongue. When they come to school, most of them do not understand the language used in classes. Bangla is the official language for education at primary schools in Bangladesh. The lack of education among Manipuri parents creates problems for their children to complete home assignments given from schools. Without completing their home assignments children try to escape schools fearing punishment from teachers. One of victims parents stated,

“We have a son going to a Government primary school. But he always tries to escape schooling in order to avoid punishment. He cannot complete home assignments independently. There are causes behind not completion of his home task. First of all we cannot help due to our personal limitation i.e. we are illiterate. Second of all he cannot understand Bangla accurately and therefore fails to communicate to his teachers. Third of all we have nobody who will help our child to prepare his home assignments and we do not have economic capacity to employ private tutor for his assistance.”

Manipuri children cannot share their needs and problems to their teachers due to such limited knowledge of Bangla. Most of the students of primary school come from mainstream community. Although there are a few Manipuri people engaged in teaching at government primary schools in their locality, they cannot practice Manipuri language at school, as it is not officially accepted. It is frequently observed that children cannot even express their need to visit the toilet due to limited knowledge of Bangla language and urinate inside the class room. The language barrier is not taken into consideration by teachers who tend to punish the student for his/her misdemeanor. Such punishment will result in the child continuously trying to escape from the school before finally dropping-out. Lack of cooperation and awareness of the schools fails to protect against children’s dropout. The schools cannot accommodate for text books in the children’s own mother tongue language. The Government has not taken any initiative to introduce indigenous people’s own language at different levels of education. Manipuri language has a rich history and is rich with alphabets and grammar. It is already recognized as an important language and text books are available in their language in the
Indian Manipuri province. In Bangladesh however, as the school environment does not allow children to practice their mother language, they are forced to learn their second language, Bangla from a very early age. This learning process is aided by the fact that Manipuri people maintain a close proximity to majority Bengali people. This has both negative and positive connotations. Learning Bangla helps people to interact with majority people easily and overcome past difficulties of language barriers. On the other hand, many Bangla words are assimilating with Meetei vocabulary (Singha, 2005). Language related problems are not specifically faced by only the Manipuris; none of the indigenous communities in Bangladesh who study in government schools have their distinct languages treated as the medium of instruction.

4.4 Earning Activities

Manipuri people are renowned as laborious. Both males and females involve themselves in earning activities. It is very rare to find a Manipuri person who is not economically engaged in an earning activity. Among 378 residents of studied villages 261 was found to be involved in different earning activities. Except for dependents such as children, ill and elderly people almost all are working for survival. Although agriculture is their traditional and prime earning source, Manipuris are involved in different earning activities. Over the course of time, many are changing their occupation due to different circumstances e.g. scarcity of land for agriculture, less demanding traditional work, less benefit, lack of available work in rural areas, lack of capital etc. Those who are receiving higher education have started to involve themselves in different mainstream earning sources. They are involving both in government and non government organizations. A few Manipuris have gained positions as Government high Officials. The researchers found a few primary and high school teachers who are respected and have a good reputation. Although some people are receiving higher education, their number is very limited as aforementioned. It is this lower rate of higher education which particularly restricts Manipuri people from engaging in different institutional and socially dignified prestigious jobs which are essential for their own development. Although both males and females are involved in earning sources, most of their earning activities do not produce high incomes. Therefore they have to involve themselves in different activities.
simultaneously. Among our 80 participants we found 78 individuals who were involved in earning activities. Two of our participants who were not involved in any direct earning activity were very aged and retired from service. But they contributed to their families by gardening vegetables for family use. The earning sources were not consistent and we found different earning sources according to availability or work and the capacities of the earners. These activities can be ranked on the basis of the number of villagers involved including participants by the following table:

**Table 4.1: Earning activities of the Manipuris**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Earning Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handloom weaving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-government Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpentry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobile mechanics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldsmith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayurvedic treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock rearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photography work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agriculture was found to be the prime occupation of most of the Manipuris. Both males and females are engaged in this sector. However women of solvent families are
usually not involved in agricultural work. Females usually do comparatively light activities e.g. cleaning weeds, sowing seeds, planting and cutting paddy, gardening vegetables nearer to their yard etc. Crop processing is widely done by women. Among the participants forty percent were found to be directly involved in agriculture, however almost all of the participants have an indirect link with agriculture. Those who do not involve directly, either supervise, maintain or process agricultural products. One sixth of the female participants were directly involved in agricultural activities. The main agricultural product of the Manipuris is rice. Mustard, different varieties of *dal* and vegetables are also cultivated.

Figure 4.1: Manipuri Traditional Agriculture

(Field processing scenery) (by buffalos)

Figure 4.2: Some Manipuri women involved in Agriculture

(Scenery indicating that women are working in the field)

Handloom work is another dominant occupation of the Manipuris mainly done by females. Manipuri people view handloom as their tradition and it has a special artistic value which originates from Manipuri craft art. All of the female participants were found to be involved in commercial handloom activities. Income from handloom has an important contribution to helping family needs. Almost all Manipuri houses contains traditional handloom where women work commercially or occasionally. Those who work occasionally produce their own traditional cloths for personal family use. We found only one male participant involved in handloom work on a commercial basis. Another retired
school teacher established a handloom industry and is the acting director. Skilled women and girls work there for daily payment. He told us about the inspiration for it,

“Our handloom products are very good quality and it was once a demandable handicraft. Unfortunately due to lack of proper training, budget, patronization from government or any corner this rich handicraft product is loosing a market. Because of not having proper training on modern demanding design, it has become difficult to compete with markets where similar products have been smuggled from neighboring country. As a conscious member of this community I have committed to saving our tradition from such competition. From this view point I made a plan to establish this home based industry. As many of our skilled workers had already stopped their commercial production due to lack of capital and low price of their products it was essential to establish this industry where workers will be able to work without personal investment. Personal interest is not my motive, I want to utilize our people’s capacity which is currently diminishing. I have planned to arrange training for our workers so that they can produce cloths according to the demand of markets without loosing originality. Already I have started to do so. I also have a plan to operate a showroom and sales centre in the city area so that people can get an accurate price for their product.”

This initiative has taken some steps towards preserving traditional handloom. Our observations found that some young girls who are poor and do not have the capital to operate their own handloom, are working in this industry and able to earn money for their own family. Though it is not a big initiative, at least a few people are getting some benefits.

Figure 4.3: Traditional home based handloom of the Manipuris
(Scenery indicating that a Manipuri woman is working in her home based handloom)
Some of the Manipuris work as Carpenters. Manipuri carpentry is popular among the local people of Kamalgonj thana. They have a great reputation as carpenters producing high quality work. Historically their carpentry was renowned as being special and unique. Manipuri carpenters are able to imitate any well designed work easily and they became famous for imitating English carpentry work successfully (Shahs, 1997). Like handloom this is another ancestral occupation. Manipuri carpenters are highly skilled in making all types of furniture for the home. They are also skilled in wooden and corrugated iron house work. We found a few Manipuri people working in paid employment for different tea gardens as carpenters. Some work independently and produce work on a request to order basis. Gold making is another occupation commonly seen among the Manipuris. Their artistic ornaments are in huge demand in the ornament markets of Sylhet region. We found that most of the village gold shops are owned by the Manipuris. Their art products are unique and embellished with great beauty yet retain a simplicity. Participants noted that due to a shortage of available funds, the numbers working in this profession are decreasing. Automobile work was found to be another mentionable occupation among the Manipuris. Older participants remembered how most of the automobile shops of Sylhet region were once under the ownership of the Manipuris. Still now, a good number of Manipuris in urban areas are operating in this industry. Some come from the villages and work in different automobile shops as technicians. We also found a few tailoring and photography shops run by Manipuris. Livestock rearing was once a mentionable additional earning source; however it has substantially decreased over time. Nowadays their livestock is frequently stolen and grassing lands have decreased. As a result most of them have given-up commercial livestock rearing. One of the participants mentioned,

“We had to give up livestock rearing. But it was profitable. Our live stocks are frequently stolen. Once we had many lands abandoned as grassing lands where
live stocks could play. Now lands have come under cultivation on a large scale and most of the time of the year they remain under cultivation. So it has become difficult for us to continue. Though most of the majority people have a connection with the missing live stocks, we cannot protect it.”

Manipuris traditional home-based fried rice (*Chira, Muree*) industry is under threat and already most people have given up working in this sector. Participants told us that before, a substantial number of people could be sustained in this industry especially as Manipuri fried rice was in particular demand in Sylhet region. Women used to produce it and males could sell it in different village markets as well as in adjacent city markets. According to participants, the lack of available market access and imbalanced competition with artificial machine made products are the major reason behind the decrease in Manipuri production. *Ayurvedic* treatment is popular among the Manipuris. Some people still have a deep trust of it and a few of their community members are experienced on this traditional treatment where roots, barks, leafs of trees and different seeds are used as raw materials of the medicine. We found an older person who is highly experienced on it and he is even asked to attend urban areas to offer treatment. He informed us that he has already cured many patients who have been suffering from different complex diseases for a long time and were not cured after receiving modern treatment. People frequently come to him based on his success and receive his traditional treatment. He has no specific fees but people often offer him a handsome amount after receiving satisfactory treatment. The majority of traditional physicians, called *Kabiraj* (*Witch doctor*) are elderly people. The villagers observed that after the death’s of most *Kabiraj* this traditional treatment method will disappear. Many reputed *Kabiraj* have already died. Participants felt that the living experts should document their traditional medical knowledge from so that it can be used in the future as their heritage.

4.5: Land Ownership

Though Manipuri people are fundamentally dependent upon agriculture, no-one owns an abundant amount of land. Most of the families have less than 1.5 acres of land which is too small to arrange food and other essentials for the family. Others do not
own cultivable lands; they only have a piece of land which is used for their residence. Those who have more than 1.5 acres of land are able to arrange for their family needs though this is only possible due to their tendency to engage in such hard labor. Landlessness is becoming a threat for the Manipuri people. Nowadays it is not uncommon to find landless people although previously this was not the case. Influential majority people, government’s forest and land department, government illegal settlements programs and other development activities are the main causes for landlessness at such an alarming rate among the indigenous communities of Bangladesh. In addition to this indigenous people’s unconsciousness, ignorance, lack of land documents, non cooperation from law enforcement and other government officials etc. accelerates this landlessness process. It is not uncommon for mainstream people to make fake documents and forcefully uproot indigenous people from their ancestral land. However, among Manipuris, the process of landlessness occurred due to different reasons. Many Manipuris sold their lands during times of family economic crisis to meet emergency needs. One of the participants mentioned,

“Once I had available land from which I could arrange all of my family needs. I have sold land on many occasions e.g. for my treatment, at the time of my daughter’s marriage and when I had an acute family crisis. Now I have no cultivable land. I have become a share cropper on my own land.”

Land ownership is directly linked with agricultural production. As most have only a small amount of land naturally income from agriculture cannot fulfill their family needs. **One of the biggest reason for Manipuri’s present landlessness can be traced back to the time of the liberation war. At this time a large number of the community people were forced to flee across the Indian border to escape the threat of Ethnic violence. It was then that they were forced by the majority Bengali neighbors to sell their land at a very low price and not at its real value. If someone refused to sell then threat and torture were common punishments. As a result, many of them left their land unprotected or under the custody of the majority who were mainly their neighbors. After independence many Manipuris returned to their homes. Unfortunately, during this time their land had been grabbed by the use of fake documents by the majority population who were custodians.**
4.6 Income, Expenditure and Savings

Although both males and females work for most of the working day and they are involved in a variety of earning activities, most of their income is not sufficient enough to ensure a good quality of life. Participants mentioned how this is caused by being involved in less profitable but laborious activities. Most of their families have more than one earning members. Among the total 378 people of the studied villages, 261 was involved in earning activities. If only the number of earning members are considered it would appear that Manipuri people are enjoying their lives with economic solvency. But the reality is very different. It was difficult to collect information about the accurate income of the participants as well as their family members. As most of the Manipuri people involve themselves in non formal earning mainly arrangement by themselves, usually they do not count their earning accurately. However, a participant observer collected information regarding income which showed their expenditure and savings. Participants could estimate their average everyday cost of living and the savings they have above this. Both participants and their family members income was collected as an average. As most of the families had multiple earning members and families are operated using their joint income, we calculated the family income of the villages. We found that most of the Manipuri families are suffering from a shortage of income. More than half of the families’ income was less than two thousands taka per month. These families have to struggle to arrange basic needs (food, clothing, treatment and housing) for their members and do not have any arrangement for the immediate future. In a few cases, it was found that they had relatively good income as village dwellers but the amount was not more than 8500 taka. These families have multiple earning members and have a good amount of cultivable lands.

Manipuri people usually avoid expressing their economic vulnerability to anybody fearing loss of their status. The table presents the amount of family income of the participants:

Table 4.2: Monthly Family Income of the Participants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range (Taka)</th>
<th>Villages</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chitla</td>
<td>Shongaon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-900</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000-1400</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>06 (7.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500-1900</td>
<td>19 (23.75%)</td>
<td>15 (18.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2400</td>
<td>04 (5.00%)</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2500-2900</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3000-3400</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
<td>04 (5.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3500-3900</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
<td>02 (2.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4000-4400</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>03 (3.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4500-4900</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5000-5400</td>
<td>02 (2.50%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5500-5900</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6000-6400</td>
<td>04 (5.00%)</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6500-6900</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7000-7400</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>03 (3.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7500-7900</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8000-8400</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8500+</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nowadays, a large number of Manipuri people are receiving education and most of the families have at least one child receiving education at different levels (from primary to university). So the cost of education has become a basic expenditure for their families. One of the older Manipuri who was our key informant described,

“People did not have such an interest in education during our time. But our children are caring about education and interested to arrange education for their children at any cost. Even if someone does not have available income to fulfill their minimum needs, they are still sending their children to school. So the cost of education has become common among our families”

Along with food, other basic commodities are managed somehow by the small income of the families. As Manipuri people like to lead a simple life, they have a very simple food habit, live in comparatively low cost houses, their family expenditure is not too high and they can survive with their small income. In addition, many produce vegetables for family consumption which reduces expenditure. This situation can be explained in other light: due to such a shortage of income Manipuri people are compelled to lead a simple life, avoid luxuries and many other modern life equipments that are compulsory for middle class majority families. This perspective is rooted out from the younger generation of Manipuris. One young man expressed his attitude,

“Like solvent majority people we also want to live in a well made house, prefer to garb expensive dress, love good furniture for the home, and prefer to have good sanitation and treatment facilities. But how can we arrange it? We cannot earn enough even though we work hard. Our traditional agriculture and handloom have become less profitable. Shortage of income presses us to lead a so called simple life”
However, as their income is not sufficient most of their income has to be spent on fulfilling their basic needs. Therefore, savings are rare as money that is earned has to be spent almost immediately.

4.7: Ways of Mitigating Regular Needs

Agriculture is the prime occupation of the Manipuris, however most of them have to depend on other sources of income as agriculture cannot fulfill the majority of their needs. Factors such as having a small amount of land ownership, failure to cultivate lands by own family members, share cropping system etc have reduced the agricultural production of the Manipuris. Additionally, younger generations have a negative attitude towards their traditional agriculture based livelihood and have a tendency to be involved in different occupations. So dependency on agriculture is decreasing over time. Traditional handloom industry is also viewed as less important among the young generation because the economic gains are low and other professions are more profitable. However, it is still an important source of income of the families and in a few cases it is the only source of survival. One older person discussed her dependency solely on handloom,

“I have no cultivable land. My husband passed away before 20 years and I have no son. Among three of my daughters two are married. My younger daughter is living with me whose income from handloom is the only source of our survival. My eye sight is very poor so I cannot actively participate in weaving. I help my daughter indirectly. I only can bundle threads which helps as preparation before weaving”

Many of the Manipuris have adult children who are living in towns and earning from different formal and informal work as paid employees or self–employees. They can only offer minimum support to their family members who live in the village as they first must fulfill their personal need before providing for family members in native villages. However, some families are are mainly dependent upon such sources and their sons act as the main supporters of the family. Those who have a small piece of cultivable land, cultivate their neighbors land as share croppers to mitigate family needs. A few people
rear livestock as a source of additional income but not commercially. It is not uncommon that a few people have to borrow frequently from neighbors and banks for mere survival. Manipuris have a very strong kinship system where poor and dependents are cared for and served. Very poor people receive financial and other support from their relatives and community members to ensure their survival.

4.8: Access to Mainstream Services

It is a common trend that indigenous people throughout the world are neglected from mainstream services. Their demands and problems are frequently overlooked and they do not usually participate in the policy making phases of their own development. It results in unsuitable development activities which leads to less participation of the target people. For the Manipuri ethnic group in Bangladesh this situation is slightly different. Firstly, Manipuri people have very close contact with mainstream people. Their habitats are located within close territories of mainstream people. So as an ethnic group they do not suffer from the discrimination of the government’s overall development efforts related to infrastructures (road, schools, resource centers, health complex etc). Secondly, people who migrated from Manipur are divided into three groups. Although all of them claim to be Manipuri, Meiteis disagree with this and claim that they are the original Manipuri ethnic people and do not hold indigenous status. The other two groups (Vishnuprias and Pangans) do not hesitate to introduce themselves as indigenous people. This contradiction restricts Meiteis from receiving the Government’s special facility for indigenous communities which is connected with formal Government jobs, admission to public universities (a proportion of jobs and seats are preserved for the indigenous people as to uphold their disadvantaged status). Thirdly, Manipuri people do not bring their problems to the attention of the Government, they usually prefer to solve their problems with their own efforts. One of our key informants was an ex-member of the local government body (Union Parishad) and formally elected by the local people. He could do very little for his community people because they tend to refrain from expressing their needs in front of authorities who could help. Other members of local government bodies underestimate the problems of Manipuri people and so would refute his claims for Government assistance. He shared,
“If you do not cry, you mother will not even feed you, if you are hungry you need to express a need to have food. Our people have poverty, we have various problems to solve but we do not express it to anybody. We have a judgment that if we express our poverty in front of mainstream people our prestige will be hampered and they will devaluate us. So our problems are always remaining unnoticed. People think that we are solvent and we have no problems. So who will come to us and help us!”

However, Meiteis have to suffer a degree of discrimination. Manipuri people have a lower opportunity of taking part in local development activities. They have meager or no involvement or influence in local government bodies who operate local development activities. Therefore almost all of the development activities are operated by the mainstream people who have little knowledge about the needs of the Manipuri people. It is also not uncommon that mainstream policy makers sometimes ignore or give less attention towards Manipuri people’s needs. Government has taken a few security schemes for the poor people of the country e.g. old age allowance, widowhood allowance, vulnerable group feeding (VGF) etc. We found no Manipuri people who have ever received such assistance. Manipuri people suffer from severe poverty, they have older people who are very poor, they have many widows surviving from the assistance of their community people but it is very unusual to receive government assistance. Two older persons shared how they received government assistance when they were severely affected by a flood. One widow received widowhood allowance. Due to such low Government initiative attention, Manipuri people always try to solve their problems by themselves which usually fails to fulfill important needs of the community people.

4.9: Impact of Micro credit on Manipuri Handloom Industries

Already micro credit has gained international importance as the major tool for the development of rural poor. But unfortunately except for a few exceptions, micro credit has failed to develop the socio-economic condition of the poor Manipuris. Rather in most cases it has created an extra pressure on them. About sixty eight per cent of the families took loans from the institutional settings e.g. government banks and non-governmental
organization’s micro credit schemes. Among them about eighty seven per cent took loan from NGOs. Association for Social Advancement (ASA), …………………… (HEED), Grameen Bank (GB) and Voluntary Association for Rural Development (VARD) are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who are operating micro credit program among the Manipuris. Bangladesh Krishi Bank, Sonali Bank and Karmosangstan Bank are other sources of loan. Table 4.3 presents detail information of sources of loan of the villagers.

Table 4.3: Sources of Loan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Loan</th>
<th>Villages</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chitlia</td>
<td>Shongaon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(26.25%)</td>
<td>(28.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt. Bank</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.50%)</td>
<td>(1.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both NGOs and Govt. Bank</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.25%)</td>
<td>(2.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbors and Relativs</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.75%)</td>
<td>(8.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have no Loan</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.25%)</td>
<td>(13.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(45.00%)</td>
<td>(55.00%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Government banks rate of interest is lower than NGOs micro credit and people can return it over a long duration, however these loans cannot reach most of the needy poor families due to complex rules and regulations. These government banks offer loans only to the people who have available cultivable lands. According to the government banks rule, at the time of taking a loan, someone must submit his land document to the bank as security. Therefore landless people who really need such loans are left out from the credit facilities of government banks. Although very poor people can easily receive NGOs micro credit, it often results in other difficulties. Loan receivers have to pay small
installments on a regular basis within a short duration. For the majority of the loan period, people fail to arrange the amount of installment on time as it is simply not feasible to pay within the time period. As a result, alternative mechanisms have to be found to arrange money for installments. In many cases money is borrowed from neighbors to pay installments. Those who take loans for handloom are compelled to sell their products before they are ready for sale which leads to loosing a competitive price. Sometimes products may be sold without a profit margin due to the pressure of installments. We found a family where three female are commercially involved in handloom and are recieving micro credit from two NGOs. They discussed about their sufferings due to installments forcing the price of their products down,

“We have taken loans from two nongovernmental organizations in order to expand our production. But it has created problems. As we have to pay installment weekly, most of the time we have to sell our products to local businessmen in advance at a low price. This process is continuing and it has created an extra pressure on our industry. Before taking credit we had a crisis of capital but as much as we could produce we could sell at a competitive price and we had no psychological pressure of installment payment. We have already recovered a loan by selling our family property (wood) and have plans to return another by collecting money from other sources”

In some cases, they even have to take a loan from another source to pay installments of the previous loan. One of our participants described how,

“I am very poor. I took a loan for handloom. My daughter works in my home based handloom factory. I have to pay installments weekly. But my daughter works alone most of the time. She cannot arrange the amount of installment by selling products. Because it takes time to make a handloom product alone. With no other alternative, I have recently taken credit from another NGO and am paying installments of the previous loan using the new loan.”

In many cases, very poor people cannot utilize the micro credits for the purpose it was given for. At the time of severe family crisis they resort to using the money for
buying the essential commodities. As they fail to utilize the money in a proper way they
do not benefit from it and it becomes a burden for them. In this situation a few people sell
their livestock or other family property for the payment of installments of micro credit.
Many also borrow from neighbors and relatives for the same purpose. Table 4.4 presents
information about the reasons behind taking loan.

Table 4.4: Reasons behind Taking Loan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Villages</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chitlia</td>
<td>Shongaon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handloom</td>
<td>22 (27.50%)</td>
<td>23 (28.75%)</td>
<td>45 (56.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>04 (5.00%)</td>
<td>03 (3.75%)</td>
<td>07 (8.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For installment</td>
<td>04 (5.00%)</td>
<td>05 (6.25%)</td>
<td>09 (11.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payment</td>
<td>01 (1.25%)</td>
<td>02 (2.50%)</td>
<td>03 (3.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have no Loan</td>
<td>05 (6.25%)</td>
<td>11 (13.75%)</td>
<td>16 (20.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36 (45.00%)</td>
<td>44 (55.00%)</td>
<td>80 (100.00%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the often problematic results associated with micro credit, many Manipuri
people have a negative attitude towards micro credit provided by different non-
governmental organizations. Interestingly the need of credit facilities due to a shortage of
capital to operate their home based industry often outweighs the negative attitude. They
expressed a need for micro credit which can be paid in longer spaced installments with
very low interest. Those who took loans both from non-governmental organization and
government banks identified the government’s loan as suitable for them as it has a low
interest rate and the pressure of installments are lower than for NGOs.
4.10: Disease, Medical and Health Care and Sanitation

Manipuri people are health conscious. Their food habit is healthy and generally consists of a balanced diet. Therefore apart from a few exceptions, they do not usually suffer from any severe health problems. Their common ailments are flu, and cold allergies and older people and children are the main sufferers of these illnesses. Some older people are suffering from chronic ailment and they need frequent treatment. *Ayurvedic* treatment is popular among the older people of Manipuri community. It is a traditional method of treatment based on barks, leaves and roots of different trees. Sometimes this herbal medicine is administered orally, sometimes it is used externally. A few of the older people were found who are popular for their skill in traditional treatment. About one forth of the participants informed us that they trust traditional *Ayurvedic* treatment and they usually use traditional treatment. The younger generation’s attitude is changing and they are becoming more familiar with modern medical facilities and their use. But rural Manipuri villages isolated from urban centers where hospitals and medical centers are located. Such physical isolation means that during emergencies they have to depend upon village doctors who have little or no professional knowledge and skill about modern treatment. As a result many people are often prescribed the wrong treatment by the village doctors. They are unable to seek advice from professional physicians as it is expensive and most Manipuris cannot afford it. In a few cases, poor villagers go to medicine vendors and take medicine according to the vendor’s suggestions. A small section of Manipuris are able to receive treatment from the Government hospital located in the thana headquarter. A NGO hospital is also located in thana headquarter where a few Manipuris are able to seek treatment. Some of the villagers have the opportunity to be treated in well equipped clinics and private health centers but this is only when they have close relatives or children in town and they can arrange such expensive treatment. Table 4.5 shows information about sources of treatment of the villagers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Chitlia</th>
<th>Shongaon</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village Doctor</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5: Sources of Treatment
Adequate sanitation facilities to an acceptable standard are rare among the Manipuris due to such high rates of poverty. We found fifty families out of eighty who did not have hygienic sanitation and are using Kaccha latrine. Such unsanitary behaviour leads to the development and spread of water borne and contaminated diseases. Only six families were found who had sanitary latrines. A few also use slab latrines which is of a slightly higher sanitary standard. A summary of sanitation has been presented in the table below:

Table 4.6: Nature of Sanitation Facilities Available in Villages Studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Villages</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kaccha (Unhygienic)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slab-ring</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Manipuri people are fortunately less susceptible to water contaminated diseases and are usually not affected by them. This may be because they use fresh water for cooking and drinking. We found that almost all of the villagers using safe drinking water. More than one third of the families have their own tube well and others use their neighbor’s tube well as the source of safe drinking water.

Figure 3.5: Still most of the Manipuris are using Kaccha latrine

4.11: Food Habit and availability of food

Historical evidence suggests that there was a change in the diet of the Manipuris, mainly due to introduction of Hinduism at the beginning of eighteen century. The earlier reigns seem to have been one long feast with hecatombs of fat cattle and oceans of spirituous drinks, even culminating on more than one instance in fatalities due to an excessive appreciation of the good cheer (Shashi, 1997). But the official adoption of Hinduism created many food type prohibitions. Although fish is allowed, animal flesh is forbidden as well as eggs; onion and garlic. Manipuris are mainly vegetarian. Rice is the main staple food. But they have some different food habits to the mainstream people of Bangladesh. Dal and different leafy vegetables (including *yennum* which is used instead of onion) are favorite food items. Manipuri women tend to use less oil when cooking curries in comparison to the majority style of cooking. Milk and butter are also popular. Both males and females are inveterate chewers of *pan-suparee* and it is widely popular among the older people. Although tobacco is used by all classes and ages, female smokers are barely seen among Manipuris. While the cultural dietary rules are strictly
followed in rural areas, they are less so in urban areas, especially among the young. Young generations of urban areas largely interact with majority culture and try to follow many of their cultural practices including food habits. Mainstream food is widely popular among the urban Manipuris. When young groups go to their native villages, they try to continue the food habit in which they are familiar with in urban areas if there is nobody to resist this adapted food habits. We found a few villagers who are habituated with mainstream foods. But older people are still very strict and loyal to their tradition. Manipuri people produce their own foods. Most of the houses have vegetable gardens where they produce vegetables for their personal needs. A few also produce vegetables for commercial purposes. Rice, dal, and oil seeds are also homegrown. Although landownership is low, most of them have the capacity to fulfill their personal needs. Despite many Manipuri families facing severe poverty, none of the villagers were found to spend days without food. If someone does not have the means to feed themselves, relatives and community people help the person to arrange food.

4.12: Needs and Problems

Many majority people assume that Manipuri people are economically solvent and are facing no problems. In a discussion with local majority people we explored these views. The reality is very different from the majority population’s preconception. Even though Manipuri people do not experience problems like land grabbing, illegal settlements and up-root for development which are common place for many of the indigenous people of Bangladesh, we found different problems and difficulties that the Manipuri people encounter during their everyday life. Economic hardship is one of the major problems of the rural Manipuris. As aforementioned, Manipuris are mainly agriculturists and are thus dependent upon the availability of land. Although total landlessness is barely seen among them, most of them have only limited land ownership which restricts them from producing crops according to their family needs. A very small proportion of Manipuris can arrange all of their needs from the production of agriculture. The remainder have to struggle to arrange for the livelihood of their families. As a hard laboring community almost all of their family members contribute some income for their
families and this helps ensure their survival. Although they do not face unemployment, many of their economic engagements can be termed as under-employment. Their earning is insufficient in comparison to their capacity, skill and hours of engagement. A lower economic capacity restricts many of them from buying available foods and other essential commodities. Due to such a shortage of capital most of the Manipuris cannot buy raw materials for their handloom industries. This influences their production negatively. To overcome this problem many people take loans mainly from NGOs which as earlier explored, can often be the cause of further problems. This is one of the major causes of their reduced income. Table: presents detailed information regarding the problems of the rural Manipuris:

**Table 4.7: Problems encountered by Rural Manipuris**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Problems</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic Problems</strong></td>
<td>Less Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shortage of Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low price of handloom products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less production of crops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of multi earning sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under-employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Landlessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unavailable land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burden of loan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education related Problems</strong></td>
<td>Hostile School Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education is not children’s mother language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have nobody at home who will help to learn lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents cannot arrange education cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High rate of drop-out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational institutions are away from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Proper Sanitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have no Government health intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Related Problems</td>
<td>Lack of sources of pure drinking water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of treatment facility closer to their community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High cost of treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of available food</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Problems</th>
<th>Bad road infrastructure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insecurity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discrimination both from the Government and Development Agencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sometimes it becomes difficult for Manipuri children to receive mainstream education at government primary schools due to language barriers. Children speak Manipuri language at home yet are taught Bangla in school, this lends itself to inherent communication problems between Manipuri children and teachers. Manipuri children are therefore beginning their educational life in a severely disadvantaged position. Many Manipuri children drop out of school because their parents cannot help them at home due to low literacy rates of guardians (in a few cases parents do not know how to read and write Bangla). Sometimes the children face punishment from their teachers for not preparing home tasks. This is regardless of the fact that Manipuri student’s have distinct problems regarding their different linguistic and cultural practices. Another hindering factor is material poverty which means that many Manipuri parents cannot arrange house tutors to help their children learn lessons in the home. As a result, many children fail to prepare their lessons. In this situation education as well as school becomes an unpleasant facet of the children’s lives. Fearing punishment for their failure, many of the Manipuri children drop out of the schools. Due to such a high cost of education and a lack of higher education institutions close to their community, many Manipuri people cannot send their children to higher educational institutions. The consequence of this is that the rate of higher education is not satisfactorily increasing among the Manipuris.
Lack of proper sanitation facilities is a fundamental health problem for Manipuri community. Living with a low economic capacity means that most of the population cannot construct a well built hygienic sanitation facility. Although, almost all of the villagers use tube well water for drinking purposes, other activities such as bathing, cooking and washing use unprotected pond water which may cause of many water contaminated diseases among them – NB EARLIER IT SAYS THEY DO NOT USUALLY SUFFER FROM WATER CONTAMINATED DISEASES. Furthermore most of the villagers do not have their own source of drinking water, and they have to depend on a neighbor’s source. There is no government hospital or health centers close to their community. The only Government hospital is located in the thana headquarter which is at a distance from the villages. This means that in any medical emergency, patients conditions can deteriorate quickly without receiving professional medical help.

The following case study illustrates this problem well. One evening a Manipuri woman suddenly became sick. After suffering for a few hours, her relatives summoned a village doctor whose experience and training does not qualify him to handle such a critical medical case. It was apparent that she required professional medical opinion, however the patient had to wait the whole night before moving her into the thana sadar hospital. This was the only case we observed during our field work, but villagers informed us that such situations occur frequently. The most vulnerable patients are pregnant women, older people and children. Pregnant women fail to have regular check ups. Some private practitioners (trained physicians) do come to the village resource center for few hours, however, most of the Manipuri people cannot go to them because of their high consultancy fees and the high cost of prescribed medicine. Villagers also commented on how Government immunization programmes have a very limited intervention in Manipuri inhabited areas. Awareness programmes on HIV/AIDS are absent in Manipuri villages, and the topic of HIV/AIDS remains a very stigmatized and sensitive area. Without interventions, awareness and access to medical facilities the Manipuri people living in rural areas are extremely vulnerable and susceptible to many contaminated and communicable diseases.
As an ethnic minority group Manipuri people experience numerous and varied problems. They are discriminated from development activities of the government in a similar way that other indigenous communities in Bangladesh are. Road communication is particularly poor to the rural Manipuri villages. This is particularly a problem during rainy season when muddy paths and lanes become dangerous and impassable. It therefore becomes difficult to maintain contact outside their villages and they usually avoid any non-essential movement. Despite living in unity among their community within their own territory, they encounter problems infringing on this unity. Majority people used to live outside or at a distance from Manipuri community. However, today the scenario is very different. As the country becomes increasingly populated, the demand for land becomes higher and majority people are entering into Manipuri territory. This problem is not only caused by external factors, in many circumstances it is self induced as some Manipuri people have migrated from Bangladesh, selling their lands to majority people. This trend has resulted in different social, cultural and economic problems. Manipuri livestock, crops and fruits are frequently stolen by majority people and in some situations, their house fences are taken. Cleanliness is a distinct feature of Manipuri culture but their clean backyards and roads are frequently damaged by majority people. Majority owned livestock is free to roam over Manipuri farmland and property. Comparatively less educated majority people tend to have very large families resulting in the total population of majority community rapidly increasing and Manipuri people continuously becoming a minority inside their own territories. This creates uncertainty, tension and insecurity among the once unified and separate community.

4.13: Household Pattern

It is commonly said that the dwelling houses of the Manipuris are all of the same form, but those of the rich are larger and constructed of better materials than those of the poor, that is the posts and beams of the frame are wood whilst those of the latter are of bamboo (Shashi, 1997). We found many instances in our field work that reiterated the above statement. Traditionally Manipuri people build their home out of bamboo, wood, mud and straw. Mud is used as the foundation and the roof is framed by bamboo and wood and then covered by straw. The walls are made out of bamboo, mud, cow dung and
rice skin. First a bamboo structure is made then a paste is prepared by mixing mud, cow dung and rice skin; this paste is applied to the bamboo structure. Once it is dried, the walls are painted a white color. Almost all of these traditional houses have a straight and large open verandah (balcony). The verandah is used by the family to sit in during the day, to entertain guests, and to do all household work except for cooking. Inside, the house is divided in to two to five rooms/part. But in most cases houses have only two rooms. Most of the dwelling houses face to the East. The design of their traditional houses was introduced by a mythical king named Khooi Ningon (Shashi, 1997). The kitchen is separate from the original house. Those who have livestock, have a separate house for the livestock. Most of the families have separate prayer home called Mandop. Most of the prayer homes are made of wood and corrugated iron sheet. Each village has central prayer rooms. This central prayer room is used as the religious and cultural festival venue as well as the venue for all community gathering. Manipuri traditional houses are similar with mainstream rural houses.

Figure 4.6: Traditional Manipuri house

Figure 4.7: Prayer home (Mandop) of the Manipuris

Nowadays, along with traditional houses, Manipuris build houses using modern equipment. Though concrete building are rare in Manipuri villages, semi concrete structure houses are commonly seen. These houses are made out of bricks, sand, cement, and wood with corrugated iron made roofs. However it is only the comparatively solvent families who have a steady flow of income from outside who can build such houses. A small proportion of the participants are able to build this standard of housing by taking loans from the bank.
Traditional houses tend to be occupied by the less solvent members of Manipuri community. Most of the participants live in traditional houses (sixty five out of eighty). We observed that a proportion of the participants do not have their own house and were living in their relatives houses (ten out of eighty). Manipuri people are adjusted to using modern commodities for their everyday lives. Almost all of the families have well decorated house despite acute poverty. This reflects their rich outlook and way of life. Their houses are very clean and they regularly plaster their houses with mud. Women utilize a big proportion of their time doing house maintenance. Almost all of the families have electricity in their houses. Only five families were found who did not use electricity because their poverty was so acute that it was impossible for them to pay monthly bills for electricity. Some very poor people were able to have electricity in their home because community people helped them to meet the primary costs e.g. wearing, service charge and other related costs.

4.14: Garbing

Manipuri people have their own unique dress called *Fanek, Innafi*, which is famous for its distinct artistic design. Females are still wearing their traditional clothing whereas males are assimilating with the majority culture in dress and style. Their dresses are homemade mainly by themselves. For special occasions, Manipuri women wear *Leifanek* which is a fanek embroidered with flower designs at the top and bottom and striped with different colours. Manipuris have a rich cultural background. Manipuri dance is renowned and famous both within Bangladesh and outside for its uniqueness and elegant style. Dancers use a special type of dress,
called Poloi which is very exquisite and expensive. There are only a few specialist Manipuri artisan dressmakers who have the skill to make this dress. Diversity in colors and artistic embellishment and adornment are the fundamental features of their traditional cloths.

Figure 4.9: Manipuri woman and man with traditional dress

4.15: Tradition, Custom and cultural-religious festivals

Respect, Sharing and Responsibility are the core values disseminated and practiced among the family as well as the community. Older people enjoy a high status. Although old age is considered to be an alarming problem among the majority people around the globe as well as in Bangladesh, old age is still regarded as a privilege among the Manipuris. Older people are appointed as leaders of the community, head of the household, key policy makers of any family and community festivals and programs. They are privileged in all aspects of the Manipuri system. People have deep community feelings, share responsibility, and help each other in need. Disputes are solved within the community following their own system where the older people mitigate grievances between the parties. They usually refrain from going to the police or court for justice.

Manipuri community is male dominant like the majority population of Bangladesh. Males have the sole authority regarding family and community affairs. However females are not neglected, they have a good respectable position within the family. In community affairs, females can play the role of participants but decisions and their execution is reserved for males. Community leadership is restricted for the older people who must be male. Their rich self-government system has a unique character. Community disputes are solved under the jurisdiction of this system. Everybody is loyal to the self-government, locally known as Leipaak (Community Mediation). Though this traditional administration has no legal recognition, Manipuri life is highly influenced by this system. Religious and cultural festivals, community judiciary etc are operated by the head of each Manipuri household in the village and each are a member of the Leipak.
Normally the senior and thus most experienced member is chosen as the leader (*Leipak Mapu*). In the event that this person is not suitable and will not conceivably be effective, an alternative member is selected by the *Leipak*. There is no fixed term that a leader serves for.

Within the Leipak is a chosen leader to deal specifically with religious concerns, called *Puren*. He is chosen amongst the Brahmins (priest caste), again usually for being the eldest, most experienced and well educated. Thus the *Puren’s* responsibility is to mediate and help resolve any religious issues, while the *Leipak Mapu’s* role is to do the same with regard to conflict in all other areas of life.

Religion is an integral part of Manipuri culture. They are Hindus. But they have some rituals that are different to the mainstream Hindus of Bangladesh. They still worship pre-Hinduism God and Goddess like *Sanamahi, Leimarel, Pakhangba and many Umanglai*. Most of the houses have a prayer house and each village has a central prayer house called *Laisang-Mondop*. This Laisang-Mondop is the central place of their religious social and cultural activities.

From birth to death Manipuris have distinct customs and tradition. **When a woman expects a baby certain rituals are observed.** The father’s family of the expectant mother visit her first, bringing fruit, fish and other nutritious foods, they are then followed by other relatives and members of the community who likewise come bearing gifts of such food. This is an age old Manipuri tradition. It demonstrates that Manipuris have historically had a strong awareness of the importance of maintaining a healthy diet for expectant mothers. Other rituals that we found widely practiced amongst villagers include that of taking a bath before cooking. On a cold morning older women take their bath and then go to the kitchen for cooking—**this practice is commonly observed among the villagers.** Taking a bath is compulsory after using the toilet and we observed that people are very loyal to these traditions. After birth there are other distinct religious rituals that are observed. First, the baby’s umbilical
cord is cut by a traditional birth attendant (Maibee) using a sharp bamboo skin while the Maibee utters the name of God. A special prayer is offered for the newly born baby so that no evil can harm him/her. After the sixth day of birth, different religious rituals are observed to purify the mother and infant. Religious books are cited for the wellbeing of the baby. After the twelfth day of birth, the hair of the baby is shaved as part of the purification. After one month, a priest purifies the baby by uttering a spell (Mantra). The same practice continues compulsorily for three months. A few people continue it up to five months. Marriage has a unique pattern of rituals and systems. The first step is formal discussion with the parties involved to arrange a marriage. After the discussion, naming God, the father of the bride formally declares the marriage in front of all honorable people of the community who are present at the discussion session. The marriage ceremony is observed at the bride’s parent’s home or a close Mondop. Religious songs are common at the ceremony. Add more on the actual wedding system – eg bride circles the groom 7 times with a glass of flowers and throws them over the groom.

The entire program is organized following religious systems. Rituals associated with death are very similar with the majority Hindus.

Manipuri people have a long history of rich cultural practices. Drama, religious songs, and dances are frequently observed in their community to mark different occasions. One of the most significant Manipuri religious festival is Rash Purnima which is a celebrated representation of the strong culture and religious spirit which still pervades the Manipuri customs. Religious songs, dancing, prayer are the major components of this prestigious festival. All sections of the population including majority Muslims also participate on these occasions.

Figure 4.10: Manipuri dance and other cultural festivals

4.16: Leisure and Recreation
Manipuri people have a deep fascination with cultural activities. They arrange drama, dance shows, religious songs etc on a regular basis. Males-females, young-old; all sections of the population take part in the aforementioned programs. At the time of our data collection, we participated in a few of these programmes. We saw an older person acting as the director and trainer of a drama. The older trainer’s devotion and willingness was spontaneous. Most of the other villagers frequently visited the practice session, enjoyed and provided suggestions for improvement. Religious songs were found to be another popular recreation tools especially among the older people. There are clubs found in Manipuri villages where young Manipuri enjoy different types of playing???. Manipuri people have deep community and there perspective is very much community orientated. Neighbors are inter-related with each other frequently visit each others houses. Visiting a neighbor’s house and gossiping is an important recreational activity of the Manipuris. This is particularly evident with older people and women who use this opportunity to enjoy their leisure time which is limited due to their laborious nature. Nowadays, most of the villager’s houses have electricity. Out of the eighty families of the studied two villages seventy five have electricity. This has created the opportunity to use electronic Medias for recreation. About half of the houses have a television and those without tend to go to a neighbor’s house to watch it. Older people have less interest in watching television. Instead, they enjoy listening to religious songs sung in their own language. Many bring cassettes and CDs from India and listen to them by a tape recorder. Radio is barely used as a recreational media. About forty three per cent of the participants reported that they do not have specific ways to enjoy their recreation. This is perhaps linked to the fact that this section of the population have no leisure time. Typically, their days begin before sun rise and end after mid-night. This was particularly applicable to women who are the dominant sector in this category.

Chapter Five
5.1: Major Findings

Indigenous people all over the globe are living under a constant threat of violence, discrimination and violation of human rights. Bangladesh is no exception to this scenario, the attitude towards indigenous minorities, embodied and perpetuated by all levels of society from its constitution, administration and legal system to its dominant population and culture is consistently undermining the rights of the minority indigenous populations. Development activities, government policies and laws frequently discriminate indigenous people. However the degree of this discrimination differs between different indigenous communities in different geographical and physical situations. It is evident that overall, Manipuri people are in many ways living in a comparatively better situation than other indigenous communities. The findings described in the above chapter depict and analyze the overall landscape of rural Manipuri life. Manipuri people are by nature hardworking and self reliant people. All members are incredibly family and community orientated, and most family members contribute to their family even if the amount is negligible in most cases. The traditional handloom industry is administered by women mainly within the home. This profession has provided women with an honorable status and position within the family. Manipuri patriarchic community ensures that women enjoy an important status in all aspects of their family life. However, women do not have participation in community leadership which is reserved for males. Although Manipuri women enjoy more rights than women under the dominant Muslim population, their role in decision making and leadership is still limited which undermines the gender equality of Manipuri community. Agriculture is the main and traditional livelihood, however today, many Manipuri people involve themselves in different livelihoods such as; carpentry, gold making, small business, paid employment etc. Despite living closer in proximity to the majority population of Bangladesh, Manipuri people are still maintaining a distinctive and diverse socio-cultural system. Although they do not face all of the problems encountered by most indigenous people of Bangladesh, the problems they do face are serious and consistently increasing in terms of type and impact. Poverty, unemployment, low incomes, the burden of loans restricts most of the Manipuri people from arranging
their regular and basic needs. As an ethnic minority group they are an inherently insecure group. They are insecure in terms of livelihood; their crops, livestock and properties are often stolen or destroyed by majority people. They are insecure in terms of education; their children are educated under a system which is operated under a majority curriculum, language and culture leading to barriers in communication and learning. High levels of poverty prevents many of them from arranging higher education for their children. Despite these fundamental limitations, the literacy rate is still higher than majority people. Community unity and interpersonal relationships work as strong forces to overcome the barriers and develop their community. Most Manipuris follow the system of joint family structures which means that every member is sheltered under the leadership of the most senior member of the family. As moral guardians, older people give advice to younger generations in all aspects of life. Loyalty towards older people is a rich custom which is strongly adhered to. This strong system of support encapsulates all members and as a result, no Manipuris beg for outside help. Very poor people can survive by taking support from relatives and community people. The rich cultural and social practices ensure security for all sections of the population. This support system is essential as they have limited access to mainstream services, and the Government is negligent towards their distinct needs. Manipuri people are famous for their rich cultural practices. Manipuri crafts and dances have gained international recognition due to its special and unique character. They lead their life in a simple manner that reflects their deeply believed legacy. Synonymous with this, they have adapted to the modern technological world, depending on their capacity. Educated and younger generation are scattered all over the country, serving different purposes which has proved their skills and capacity in diverse professions.

5.2: Key Policy Lesson

The situation of plain land indigenous communities of Bangladesh remains under reported and on the whole, unnoticed to policy makers, Manipuri people are undoubtedly included in this category. They do not have representation at the national policy making level, despite having some distinct characteristics, needs and problems. Instead there
problems are amassed with those of the majority population as they are perceived the same as rural agriculturists, and therefore it is assumed that all developmental activities will encompass Manipuris. This assumption is partially true but it fails to recognize that they also have different problems that require specific attention and activities. Manipuri agriculture is traditional, the use of modern equipment and material is less commonly practiced. Although farmers in the majority population produce crops all seasons of the year, most of the Manipuri farmers keep their land fallow after cutting paddy at the beginning of winter. An awareness program should be implemented to create opportunities to produce crops during the winter season and to learn about the importance of using modern scientific equipments. This may help to increase a more consistent earning source and thus, reduce poverty. As Manipuri people are lower middle class in general, the development of their economic condition should be of major, immediate concern. Community people feel that their socio-economic condition can be improved by increasing the number of different activities and thus their income. The traditional handloom industry is particularly facing a severe crisis. Although a few NGOs are providing micro credit in this sector, the effects are subversive as the high rate of interest, very frequent installment, strictness or repayment actually creates more tension and stress than before the credit was implemented. In order to collect money for installment most are forced to sell their products in advance which creates a substantial loss to their business. A handloom weaver can earn only 30 to 40 taka through working a whole day. Some have to sell their livestock or crops or take a loan from other sources to pay off the installments. To mitigate these problems, loans without interest or very small rate of interest should be introduced so that people are able to pay installments after a reasonable duration. Direct market access is essential for the success of this industry. As most do not have direct access to the market, they are unable to get competitive prices for their products. Innovative design, entrepreneurship and marketing training should be implemented so that they can hold their position in the competitive market. These training sessions should ensure development without overlooking or loosing the originality in Manipuri craft style. Another area that should be developed is to re-start livestock rearing. Their handicrafts, subsistence economy and traditional activities need to be recognized as important factors in maintaining their economic self-reliance and
development as the ILO Convention has determined. Multi diversification of crops needs to be introduced among them those who are profitable. Bangladesh Agriculture Development Board (BADC) and NGOs can take joint programs regarding this.

Security of crops is a major concern for Manipuri people. Law and order agencies in conjunction with local self government should be alert and sensitive to this issue. The National Constitution recognized that all citizens have equal rights to receive support from the state so the Government has an obligation to ensure their security in this respect. As well as this, Government service agencies should be more careful to ensure that discrimination does not infiltrate any development activities. Different human rights agencies and NGOs can work to establish and protect the rights of the Manipuris. Water and sanitation, immunization and other health services need to be available closer to their community. In particular, mother and child health care facilities are urgently needed which can be ensured by NGOs through arranging satellite clinics to their communities. The trend of frequent visits to neighboring countries such as India raises the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission therefore awareness campaigns on HIV/AIDS are particularly important. In order to make this initiative successful, massive community participation should be ensured. According to the ILO Convention (No.169) the Government is obliged to ensure adequate health services available to indigenous peoples as a member state of the United Nations. Involving the Manipuri Panchyet, NGOs and the Government can work together in this sector.

In the education sector, the high drop out rate from schooling has been identified as a major barrier to Manipuri’s successfully completing education. Differences in languages and cultures are significant factor which are forcing children to drop out of schools. Manipuri people feel that there should be a provision of school education which is conducted in Manipuri language. This will overcome the problem that children are talking in their mother language at home but in a different language at school. If Manipuri language can be introduced for a specific period in school and taught alongside Bangla and English, children can overcome these problems. NGOs can operate pre school programmes where Manipuri children can learn Bangla in their own language and are
taught by a Manipuri teacher. To ensure development throughout the education system, those who have merit but cannot progress to higher education due to poverty should be provided with scholarships or interest free study loans which may be refundable after employment by different development and financial organizations. It is essential to provide opportunities to increase the rate of higher education among the Manipuris. Participants observed how this will improve their socio-economic condition.

As Manipuri people receive very few benefits in the form of social security and assistance programs from the Government, it is essential to extend such programmes progressively so as to cover older people, the very poor, widows, disabled and other sections of the population without discrimination.

The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples includes detailed provisions on the rights to self-government, indigenous laws, land and resources rights, cultural rights and prominently, intellectual property rights (Coulter, 1997). Article xx contains strong and detailed requirements for the recognition and protection of indigenous cultural, technological and scientific heritage. Manipuris Ayurvedic treatment has a scientific basis. As there is no initiative to preserve it, this scientific heritage is under risk. So this traditional preventive care, healing practice and medicine should be well practiced and protected. Community people fear that it will disappear over the course of time and many of their cultural practices, rituals, songs will slowly diminish. In urban areas especially among the young group, the traditional cultural system is markedly less practiced. So the state as well as development agencies have an obligation to collect and preserve the original Manipuri tradition and cultural characteristics of the Manipuri community. Manipuri folklore should be protected under the UNESCO model protocol. Their institutions, traditional self-government system (Panchyet), customs and customary laws and traditions need to be accorded legal respect and protection. Both government and non-governmental agencies can play a vital role in this regard.

Indigenous peoples socio-economic situation remains at a low level, Manipuris are no exception to this trend. Indigenous people have many problems that are distinct
from majority people. Therefore, before taking any development activity their distinct needs should be specified and prioritized accurately. Their active participation in all phases of development activities can ensure a real progress for their development. In order to sustain this development, Manipuri people need to be conscious about their own problems and should have good communication with different organizations to increase awareness about their situation. A strong political commitment is essential to develop the human right situations of indigenous peoples of Bangladesh. The government has a separate ministry, which is working with the indigenous peoples of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs). This neglects the fact that the country has many other indigenous peoples living mainly in the plain lands. This ignorance or foresight of the plain lands is discriminatory against the plain land indigenous peoples including the Manipuris. In fact, the plain land indigenous communities are more scattered and thus less united than the CHT indigenous communities. This places even more importance on having a role in decision making as there is a limited network system for support or opportunity to unite and raise the voices of these diverse indigenous communities. So the ministry should be re-structured to include all indigenous peoples concerned. National and international development agencies also have discriminatory attitude towards plain land indigenous people. Development of the socio-economic condition of plain land indigenous peoples should be prioritized. Representation of plain land indigenous peoples in national policy level is essential in order to make their concerns public. Rectifying the issues of Indigenous people is part of bringing peace, promoting sustainable development, eradicating poverty, removing discrimination, promoting human rights, and strengthening democracy, as well as preserving the cultural diversity of this country.
References and Bibliography


Appendix 1

Interview Schedule for in-depth interview of the Manipuri people

Ethnic Community Development Organization (ECDO)
Sanwar Manshion (Near to Farhad Kha Pool), Shibgonj, Sylhet.

Interview Schedule of the research entitled “State of the Manipuris in Bangladesh”

(Anonymity of the information provided by the participants will be maintained and only be used as data of the research)

1. Personal Information of the Participant

Name
Address
Age
Sex
Marital Status
Age of first marriage
Duration of married life
Number of Children
Education

2. Family related Information

Family Structure/Pattern
Total number of family members, their education, occupation, age, Marital status etc
Causes behind being household head
Is there any gender bias between male and female inside the family?
Is there special indigenous system under which poor and dependent community members can be treated especially?

3. Livelihood Strategies

Occupation
Daily activities of the participants

Earning Sources of the Participant
Daily income of the participant
Number of earning members in the family, their earning activities and total income of the family

Sectors of expenditure
Land ownership (amount of land, how it is cultivated, amount of crops produced and how it contributes for mitigating family needs)
How lands are cultivate and administered
Whether the Participant has taken Loan,
Sources of Loan
Amount of Loan
Why Loan has been taken
Terms and conditions for installment payment
Evaluation about loan taken by the participant (how loan is helping to improve their condition, how micro credit helping their handloom industries etc.).
Difficulties they encounter to operate handloom industries
Marketing system of their handloom products

4. Housing, Health and Sanitation and Recreation
Nature of house where the participants live
How they have built house (sources of money etc.)
Whether house is under electricity coverage
Sources of Drinking water
Food habit
Nature of sanitation facility
Nature of treatment facilities available
How the participant spent his/her leisure
Recreation facilities available in which community people can participate
Extent of participation in religious activities

5. Needs Problems and its Coping mechanism
Nature of problems (both material and immaterial)
Mechanisms for fighting against problems
Access of the participant to the government and nongovernmental services
Access to modern medical facilities
Problems as an ethnic minority group
Expected services and opportunities from the state and development organizations which could make their life comfortable

6. Values and traditions
Traditional Judiciary
Cultural and Religious festivals
Indigenous customs and traditions that guide their way of life

Thank you so much for your cooperation and time that you have sacrificed.

Appendix 2

Discussion Checklist

(This checklist was used to guide group discussion with key informants who were leaders of the Manipuri communities)

We expect our discussion will be continued for about ninety minutes. We do expect spontaneous opinion and information from all of you regarding old age issue of your community. Thanks all of you participating in this discussion session.

I would be grateful for your views on the above issues:

Major occupation of your community people by which they earn
Average daily income on the basis of occupation
Sectors of expenditure
How lands are cultivate and administered
Sources of Loan
Why people take loan
Terms and conditions for installment payment
Evaluation about loan scheme existing in the community (how loan is helping to improve their condition, how micro credit helping their handloom industries etc.).
Difficulties they encounter to operate handloom industries
Marketing system of handloom products
Sources of Drinking water of the community
Food habit and food related rituals
Nature of sanitation facility of the community
Nature of treatment facilities available
How community people spent their leisure
Recreation facilities available in which community people can participate
Extent of participation in religious activities
Traditional judiciary system, customs

I would be grateful for your views on the above issues related with problems of your community

Nature of problems encountered by the people of your community (both material and immaterial)
Mechanisms for fighting against problems that your community encounter at everyday life
Please mention about the indigenous support system available in your community to support poor, disable and dependent.
Access of the participant to the government and nongovernmental services
Access to modern medical facilities and its barriers
Problems as an ethnic minority group

Finally, would you tell me what kind of support and opportunities from family, community, state you feel would assist in the wellbeing of your community?

Thank you so much for your cooperation and time that all of you have sacrificed.
Appendix 3: Community Profile/ Research site Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Villages Studied</th>
<th>Upazilla</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chitlia</td>
<td>Kamalgonj</td>
<td>Moulovibazar</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songaon</td>
<td>Kamalgonj</td>
<td>Moulovibazar</td>
<td>(Male-174; Female-204)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4: Map Showing the Research sites