

The Youpal Ceremony and the Role of the Meipi: Exploring Marriage Ritual Traditions Among the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community

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ABSTRACT

Marriage rituals among the Bishnupriya Manipuri community reflect a distinctive blend of Vaishnavite beliefs, indigenous traditions, and folk spirituality. This study examines the Youpal ceremony and the role of the Meipi, an elderly woman who performs and guides important ritual practices. The study focuses on the religious, cultural, symbolic, and gendered dimensions of the ceremony and its significance in preserving traditional knowledge. Using a qualitative and descriptive approach, the study draws on primary data collected through interviews with selected community members in Masughat village, Cachar, Assam, along with direct observation and secondary sources. The study highlights how the Youpal ceremony contributes to the sanctification of marriage and the continuity of community traditions, while the Meipi plays an important role as a ritual practitioner and transmitter of cultural knowledge. The study also addresses the limited academic documentation of Bishnupriya Manipuri marriage rituals and contributes to the documentation and understanding of their cultural heritage.

Keywords: Bishnupriya Manipuri, Youpal Ceremony, Meipi, Marriage Rituals, Folk Spirituality, Vaishnavism, Cultural Heritage, Traditional Knowledge.

1. Introduction:

Marriage, as one of humanity's oldest social institutions, performs vital social, biological, and cultural functions. It is universally recognized as a means of regulating relationships, sustaining kinship, and ensuring the continuity of lineage. According to sociologist Kingsley Davis (1939), marriage represents "a complex of social norms and values that channel biological facts into culturally approved forms."¹ Contemporary sociological research notes that marriage rituals

¹ Davis, K. (1939). Human Society. Macmillan.

often reflect the interplay between tradition and modernity (Sharma & Singh, 2022).² In India, marriage continues to be seen as a sacramental union (sanskara) imbued with spiritual meaning rather than a purely contractual arrangement (Kumar, 2021).³

The Bishnupriya Manipuri community, migrated from Manipur and residing mainly in the state Assam and Tripura of India presents a remarkable example of how marriage has retained its spiritual essence while adapting to social change. Their marriage system combines Vaishnavite Hindu ideals with indigenous ritual traditions, representing a synthesis of classical devotion and folk spirituality. Within this structure, a series of rituals—including and relating to *Barton Chalani*⁴, *Apokpa Homadena*⁵, *Baronor Dou*⁶, *Matir Githanak*⁷, and *Youpal*⁸—are performed to sanctify the marital bond as an act of divine and ancestral continuity. Among these, the *Youpal* ritual holds exceptional cultural significance. It is a prayer and purification ceremony performed by the *Meipi*⁹, an elderly woman chosen for her ritual wisdom and moral purity.

Despite the social and cultural value of such rituals, academic attention to Bishnupriya Manipuri marriage traditions remains limited. Most existing research on the community focuses on linguistic and identity issues, with little documentation of its religious and social practices. There is a pressing need to study these rituals systematically. Thus, the problem addressed in this research is the lack of scholarly documentation and analysis of the *Youpal* ceremony and the *Meipi*'s role in Bishnupriya Manipuri marriage rituals.

2. Review of Literature:

Most studies on the Bishnupriya Manipuri community have focused on their language, identity, and migration history, while only a few have discussed their cultural or religious life in detail. However, research on marriage rituals and the role of women in these rituals remains very limited.

Singha (2019) studied the cultural identity of Bishnupriya Manipuris in Assam and observed that their traditions, including marriage and festivals, reflect a mix of Vaishnavite Hindu practices and

² Sharma, P., & Singh, R. (2022). Changing patterns of marriage rituals in India: Negotiating tradition and modernity. *Asian Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, 11(3), 45–58.

³ Kumar, S. (2021). Marriage as sacrament: The continuity of Hindu ideals in contemporary Indian society. *Journal of Social and Cultural Research*, 9(2), 60–72.

⁴ Barton Chalani- invitation offering.

⁵ Apokpa — the ancestral guardian spirit of the clan worshipped in each Bishnupriya Manipuri household.

⁶ Baronor Dou- Also called Goror Girok, is the Lord of the House, representing strength, stability and continuity of the family line.

⁷ Matir Githanak — literally “Mother Earth,” representing fertility and nurturing energy in Bishnupriya Manipuri belief.

⁸ Youpal — a prayer ritual performed on the day of marriage, invoking divine blessing and symbolising purification.

⁹ Meipi — a senior woman who leads household and community rituals, chosen for her experience and moral purity.

indigenous local customs.¹⁰ Roy (2020) examined the role of women in folk religion in Northeast India and found that women are often the main preservers of ritual knowledge, purity, and community belief.¹¹

Sarma (2018) discussed how small ethnic groups of Assam maintain their folk rituals to keep their social unity and cultural resilience alive.¹² Similarly, Bhattacharjee (2021) highlighted that oral traditions and local ritual experts—both priests and elder women—act as keepers of faith and identity among various tribal and semi-tribal groups.¹³

From this review, it becomes clear that while general studies exist on Bishnupriya Manipuri culture, academic research on their marriage rituals is missing. The specific role of women and the *Meipi* in preserving and performing these ceremonies has not been studied systematically. Therefore, the present research attempts to fill this gap by focusing on the *Youpal* ritual and the *Meipi*'s leadership as expressions of folk spirituality and gendered tradition.

3. Research Gap, Objectives and Significance:

Most research on the Bishnupriya Manipuri community has focused mainly on language, migration, and identity, with very little written about their marriage rituals. The few available works only give general descriptions without analysing the meanings or functions of these ceremonies. There is almost no academic documentation of the *Youpal* ritual or the role of the *Meipi*, who performs it.

These rituals—particularly those conducted before and on the day of marriage—are important to understanding how the community combines Vaishnavite religious faith with folk spirituality and gives women an active ritual role. This study fills that gap by focusing on the *Youpal* ceremony and the *Meipi*'s leadership in Bishnupriya Manipuri marriage practices.

Objectives of the Study:

- I. To describe and interpret the *Youpal* ceremony as a central part of Bishnupriya Manipuri marriage rituals, highlighting its religious and cultural meanings.

¹⁰ Singha, M. (2019). Cultural practices and identity among Bishnupriya Manipuris of Assam. *Journal of North East Studies*, 7(2), 45–56.

¹¹ Roy, S. (2020). Women and folk religion in Northeast India. *Indian Anthropologist*, 50(1), 87–99.

¹² Sarma, B. (2018). Folk rituals and social resilience: Case studies from Assam. *Cultural Heritage Review*, 9(2), 67–82.

¹³ Bhattacharjee, P. (2021). Ritual continuity and change among the ethnic communities of Northeast India. *Journal of Indian Folklore Studies*, 12(1), 25–39.

- II. To study the role of the Meipi as the key ritual performer and spiritual guide in marriage ceremonies, showing how she preserves and transmits traditional knowledge within the community.

Significance of the Study:

This study is important as it documents and interprets the Youpal ceremony and the role of the Meipi, both of which form the spiritual core of Bishnupriya Manipuri marriage rituals. It contributes to the preservation of a folk tradition that reflects the community's unique blend of Vaishnavite belief and indigenous spirituality. The research highlights how the *Meipi*, through her inherited ritual knowledge and authority, represents an indigenous form of female priesthood, offering valuable insight into gender and religion in Northeast India. By drawing from the oral accounts of senior practitioners of traditional rituals such as Rajeswari Devi and Gita Sinha, and Nilakanta Sinha, the study preserves authentic cultural memory and provides a foundation for further research on the continuity and transformation of folk traditions among the Bishnupriya Manipuris.

4. Research Methodology and Limitations:

The present study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach, drawing upon both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from purposively selected informants from Masughat village of Cachar, Assam, who possess rich knowledge and experience of traditional rituals. Three key informants were interviewed- Mr. Nila Kanta Sinha (76 years), a socially active leader in local traditional and religious rituals who also happens to be a former kirtaniya and former President of a local Madir Committee; Mrs. Gita Sinha (73 years), a homemaker and mother of three married adults, with long experience in performing and observing various rituals related to marriage and ancestor worship; and Mrs. Rajeswari Devi (85 years), a mother of five and a practicing Meipi with years of active ritual leadership within her locality. Moreover, the researcher collected and verified the information through direct personal observation.

Secondary data was gathered from published literature, including journal articles, books, cultural reports, scholarly works on folk traditions and rituals and YouTube documentaries. The collected data was then interpreted descriptively and analytically, focusing on the symbolic, sociological, and gender-based dimensions of the rituals.

Limitations of the Study:

The study is limited by its qualitative scope and small sample size, as only three participants were interviewed due to time constraints. However, these informants were purposively selected for their exceptional ritual experience and social engagement, ensuring depth and authenticity of

information. As ritual practices can vary slightly across different Bishnupriya Manipuri settlements, minor regional variations may exist.

5. Field Documentation of Marriage Rituals Related to Youpal Ceremony:

5.1. Barton Chalani, Bopabopir Barton and Apokpa Homadena

According to Mr. Nilakanta Sinha, an active leader in traditional and religious rituals in the locality and a former *Kirtaniya*, after the Heiching (engagement ceremony) the main marriage rituals of Bishnupriya Manipuri community begin a day before the actual ceremony with the performance of *Barton Chalani*, i.e., the invitation ritual. This ritual symbolically announces the forthcoming marriage to both the divine and the human community.

The ceremony begins with the installation of a *Ghat*, an earthen pot filled with pure water and other sacred things like, betel nut and leaf, mango leaf, banana, etc. and placed inside the *Leisang*, a small temple situated in front of the house where a Tulsi plant (Holy Basil) and Shivalinga are worshipped daily. Along with the *Ghat*, *Pana Tangkha* (offering consisting of betel nut and leaf) and *Eira Tangkha* (offering consisting of fruits and white flower) is used in the prayer. The invitation is consecrated by the village priest with chants of sacred mantras, marking the start of the auspicious phase of marriage rituals.

The *Ghat* and *Barton (Pana Tangkha)* are consecrated by the village priest, who recites mantras to invoke divine protection for the couple and the ceremony. Once sanctified, a “pure” or ritually clean man carries the Barton (Several *Pana Tangkhas* placed on a brass thali and wrapped in a white cloth) first to the village temple, often dedicated to Shri Krishna and Shri Jagannath Mahaprabhu, requesting blessings for the bride or groom. The *Barton* is then offered among local priests and families of the Lokei and then other villagers, formally inviting them to attend the wedding and bless the couple.

When the priests are invited, they are requested not only to perform rituals but also to prepare the sacred food for the wedding day. As Nilakanta Sinha explained, food prepared for the marriage feast is considered sacred and must be cooked by priests only. Both male priests (Eiga) and female priests (Tharani), preferably of patronized priest family of the Lokei prepare the food. The purity of food symbolises the moral and spiritual sanctity of the occasion.

In the evening, prayers are offered to the *Bopabopi* (the ancestral spirits, mainly of seven generations) asking them to visit the household and bless the bride and groom the next morning. This ritual is called *Bopabopir Barton*. Offerings of fruits, betel nuts, and leaves are also made to Lord Brahma, Devi Ganga, and Dev Kuber, who are symbolically entrusted with ensuring

abundance, purity, and prosperity during the ceremony. The *Apokpa*, regarded as the ancestral guardian deity of the clan is also offered prayer.

All these pre-marital rituals, like, *Barton Chalani*, *Bopabopir Barton* and *Apokpa Homadena*, take place on the day before the marriage, transforming the household into a sacred space ready to host both divine and ancestral presences.

5.2. Baranor Dou, Matir Githanak, and Other Household Deities:

On the morning of the marriage, the household becomes a sacred space filled with ritual preparation. According to Mrs. Gita Sinha, who has long experience in performing domestic rituals, the marriage day always begins with the offering of prayers to the household deities. Near the *Baran*, the sacred traditional grain vessel placed in south-western corner for storing rice grains, a *Ghat* (an earthen pot filled with pure water and other sacred things like, betel nut and leaf, Mango Leaf, Banana etc.) is installed.

Beside the *Ghat*, five *Eira Pana Takha*—offerings of fruits, betel nuts, and betel leaves arranged neatly on specially cut banana leaves—are placed as a mark of devotion. The *Meipi*, who leads the day's rituals, performs the offerings to *Baranor Dou* and *Matir Githanak* (Mother Earth). Before the ritual begins, the *Meipi* herself is offered prayer and *Barton*, recognising her as the authorised conductor of the rituals. The *Barton* is offered mostly before the day of the ritual, but it can also be offered on the day of the ritual by the senior members of the family. As Mrs. Rajeswari Devi, an experienced *Meipi* with years of ritual practice, explained, "The offerings to *Matir Githanak* are kept on the right side, which means she is more important and placed above *Baranor Dou*." This placement symbolises the sacred balance of male and female divine forces within the home. *Baranor Dou* represents the male guardian, and *Matir Githanak* embodies the feminine source of fertility and protection.

The *Meipi* then extends the offerings to other protective deities of the household and surroundings. Among them are *Senamahik*, believed to reside in the southwestern corner of the house, and *Pahangpa*, who is believed to stay or roam in the southern direction of the house. Both are regarded as brother deities who safeguard the family. Prayers are also offered to the four corners of the house, the supporting pillars, and especially the *Jatra Palpa Girok*, the main central pillar whose foundation was first laid during the construction of the home. The *Jatra Palpa Girok* is viewed as a living spiritual presence, while his consort, *Modolei*, symbolises domestic harmony and nurturing energy.

Through these prayers, the *Meipi* invites all household and environmental deities to attend the marriage and bless the couple. The prayers are more or less specific; for property, peace,

happiness, for offspring-sons and daughters, long life, and the ability to serve both guardians of the family and the divine.

These rituals demonstrate how the Bishnupriya Manipuri worldview links the household, cosmos, and moral order. The structure of the home itself is treated as sacred, each direction and pillar inhabited by divine energies. By invoking these presences before the marriage, the *Meipi* ensures that the wedding takes place within a spiritually protected and harmonious environment.

5.3. The Youpal Ceremony:

According to Mrs. Rajeswari Devi, an 85-year-old practicing *Meipi* who has conducted numerous ceremonies, the *Youpal* (a pre-wedding prayer ritual) is among the most sacred components of the Bishnupriya Manipuri marriage ritual. It takes place in the morning of the wedding day, after the household deities have been worshipped. *Youpal* is considered an act of prayer, purification, and blessing performed for the bride and groom to ensure a harmonious married life and divine protection.

In the centre of the main hall of the house, a *Ghat* is placed, accompanied by a diya (lamp) and dhoop (incense) as part of ritual arrangement. Offerings such as *Eira Tangkha* (fruits placed on a specially cut and shaped banana leaf) and *Pana Tangkha* (betel nut and leaf similarly arranged) are also placed nearby. Beside them, a *Peetal Bati* (brass bowl) and another banana leaf are arranged. On this leaf are placed holy basil leaves (Tulsi), sesame seeds (Teel), Bermuda grass (Dhup gass), fresh white flowers, a coin, rice grains, and raw turmeric (Kacha Holud). Together, these items symbolise purity, prosperity, fertility, and protection.

During this *Youpal* ritual, three women, either all married or two married women with one young girl child, are invited to sit facing east, with the Ghat and offerings before them. Widows do not participate in this central seating, as the ceremony is linked with fertility and the blessings of marital prosperity. However, this rule doesn't apply in the case of the *Meipi*. The *Meipi* sits facing south and begins chanting Purei (sacred words of prayer) while adding pure water to a brass bowl. She mixes the ritual elements, which includes holy basil leaves, black sesame seeds, Bermuda grass, fresh flowers, a coin, rice grains, and raw turmeric one by one; chanting mantras and offering prayers to the deities and invoking their blessings for the couple's health, peace, prosperity, fertility, and protection.

Each time the *Meipi* completes the chant, she gently overturns the bowl onto a brass plate (*Peetal Thala*). She observes how the objects turmeric, holy basil, bermuda grass, and the coin settle. If most items rest upon or touch the coin, it is taken as a sign of good fortune and an auspicious marriage. This act is repeated three or five times.

The *Youpal* is unique in the sense that it is entirely women-led, with the *Meipi* guiding the ritual. It demonstrates the central role of women in maintaining spiritual order within Bishnupriya Manipuri society. Through her actions, the *Meipi* connects the divine, the ancestral, and the human worlds ensuring that the marriage begins with purity, harmony, and sacred balance.

In essence, the *Youpal* ceremony stands as a powerful symbol of the community's worldview: that every auspicious human act must start with prayer, purity, and respect to all forms of life — divine, ancestral, and earthly.

6. Findings and Conclusion:

The study reveals that the marriage rituals of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community are deeply rooted in a worldview that unites spirituality, family life, and gender harmony. The role of the *Meipi* as a ritual leader reflects both respect for tradition and the enduring presence of female spiritual power within the community.

Findings also show that the ritual structure symbolises cosmic balance through the joint veneration of *Baranor Dou* and *Matir Githanak*, representing masculine and feminine energies. Objects used in the ceremonies, such as turmeric, holy basil, bermuda grass, black sesame seeds, act as carriers of purity, prosperity, and protection, reflecting a close link between human life and nature.

Despite social changes, the community continues to uphold these rituals with devotion, showing strong cultural resilience. The oral transmission of knowledge by elders like Rajeswari Devi, Gita Sinha, and Nilakanta Sinha demonstrates that tradition survives not only through written texts but through lived experience and practice.

7. Suggestions and Scope for Further Research:

This study documents the *Youpal* ceremony and the *Meipi*'s role in Bishnupriya Manipuri marriage rituals, opening scope for wider research. Future studies may compare women-led rituals among other communities of Northeast India to understand shared cultural meanings.

Further fieldwork involving more *Meipis* and practitioners of traditional rituals can enrich knowledge about local variations in chants, offerings, and beliefs. It would also be valuable to explore how modern education, migration, and social change are shaping the community's ritual life.

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