

Editors' Bio Note

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Ethnicity, Identity
Cultural Diversity

Editors
Dr Asadullah Khan, Dr Abul Foyes Md Malik

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Editorial

In an era of unprecedented globalization and digital interconnectedness, discussions on ethnicity, identity, and cultural diversity have evolved to encompass new dimensions and complexities (Huntington 24). According to Stuart Hall, "cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as being" (Hall 12). This notion is echoed by Benedict Anderson, who argues that "nationalism is a cultural artifact of a particular kind" (Anderson 23). As we navigate this intricate landscape, it is essential to approach the understanding of ethnicity and identity with nuance and sensitivity, acknowledging both the historical and contemporary influences that shape individual and collective experiences (Bhabha 34).

The complexities of ethnicity demand a thoughtful and contextualized approach, recognizing the diversity within ethnic groups themselves, rather than reducing them to monolithic categories or homogeneous entities (Gilroy 12). As Paul Gilroy notes, "the idea of a single, homogeneous black culture is a myth" (Gilroy 15). Similarly, Edward Said argues that "culture is a dynamic and constantly changing entity" (Said 45). The interplay between ethnicity and identity highlights the importance of recognizing and respecting diversity within and across ethnic groups, rather than perpetuating simplistic or essentialized notions of identity (Bhabha 34). This multifaceted understanding necessitates a broader and deeper engagement with the historical, social, and political contexts that shape and reshape identities over time. As such, the dialogue around ethnicity and identity must remain open-ended, allowing for the continuous re-negotiation and redefinition of what it means to belong to a particular ethnic group or cultural community.

Cultural diversity, in all its forms and expressions, enriches societies by fostering creativity, resilience, and mutual understanding (UNESCO 10). According to Arjun Appadurai, "cultural diversity is a key driver of economic growth and innovation" (Appadurai 20). A recent study by the McKinsey Global Institute found that companies with diverse workforces are more likely to outperform their less diverse peers (McKinsey 15). Similarly, a report by the World Bank found that countries with higher levels of cultural diversity tend to have higher levels of economic growth and innovation (World Bank 20). These findings underscore the intrinsic value of diversity, not only as a moral

or ethical imperative but also as a pragmatic strategy for fostering sustainable development and social cohesion.

Moreover, the promotion of cultural diversity requires a commitment to policies and practices that protect and promote the rights of individuals and groups to express their cultural identities without fear of discrimination or marginalization. This includes ensuring equal access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, as well as fostering inclusive environments where diverse cultural expressions can thrive. As Homi Bhabha contends, "the recognition of cultural difference must be accompanied by a critical engagement with the power dynamics that underlie and perpetuate inequalities" (Bhabha 34).

Through informed analysis, storytelling, and critical reflection, we aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how ethnicity, identity, and cultural diversity shape our world today, and how we can work towards creating more inclusive, equitable, and just societies for all (Sen 20). As Amartya Sen notes, "cultural diversity is a fundamental aspect of human freedom and dignity" (Sen 25). By engaging with these critical issues and themes, we hope to inspire new insights, perspectives, and approaches to understanding and promoting cultural diversity, and to foster a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of ethnicity, identity, and cultural diversity in our increasingly interconnected world. Furthermore, this editorial seeks to highlight the role of cultural education in fostering mutual respect and appreciation for diversity, as well as the importance of intercultural dialogue in bridging divides and building cohesive communities.

In conclusion, the exploration of ethnicity, identity, and cultural diversity is a dynamic and ongoing process that requires continuous reflection, dialogue, and action. By embracing the richness of our diverse cultural heritage and acknowledging the interconnectedness of our global community, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable world where every individual has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the collective well-being of society. Let us, therefore, commit ourselves to the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and solidarity in our efforts to promote and celebrate the diversity that defines and enriches the human experience.

Dr Asadullah Khan
Dr Abul Foyes Md Malik

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Religious Hierarchies and Social Conflict in Manipuri Society: Insights from *Keishamthong Thoibi*

Hawaibam Loiyumba

Introduction

The state of Manipur, though small in geographical area, is marked by vast cultural diversity and a unique blend of religious beliefs. Its social fabric is shaped by major communities, including Meitei Hindus, Muslims, and various tribal groups, each contributing to its religious complexity. At the heart of this structure are the Meitei Brahmins, or "Bhamons," who are often regarded as the cultural torchbearers of Hinduism in Manipur. Their position at the apex of a caste-based hierarchy emphasizes the deeply embedded religious and social stratification within the community. This hierarchy privileges Brahmins over non-Brahmin Meiteis, followed by tribal communities—many of whom practice Christianity or indigenous religions—and Muslims, who follow Islam. These divisions significantly influence societal norms, taboos, and expectations, reinforcing a rigid social order that separates mainstream religions from indigenous practices. This study aims to investigate how these dynamics, rooted in communal tensions and generational gaps, are reflected in Manipuri cinema.

Manipuri cinemas serve as a vital platform to showcase the state's vibrant culture and heritage, offering audiences a deeper appreciation of Manipur's unique traditions, arts, and religious diversity. The artistry of these films reflects not only the creative spirit of the people of Manipur but also the state's enchanting landscapes and rich cultural fabric. Through cinema, viewers are introduced to the interwoven tapestries of Manipuri religious beliefs, including indigenous Sanamahism, Hinduism, and other tribal spiritual practices, which collectively form the bedrock of the state's cultural identity. As M. Bimolchandra Singh aptly puts it, "There is no doubt in saying that film has an amazing influence on society. The cultures, tradition and social problems are exposed in film." (M. Bimolchandra Singh 25) This aligns with the view of Aribam Bishwajit, who asserts, "Like literature and

visual art, films mirror societal values, ideologies, and the challenges of the times. In a place as culturally rich and diverse as Manipur, cinema should serve both as a reflection of society and as a catalyst for social change." (Bishwajit)

Manipuri cinema, in both its traditional celluloid and contemporary digital formats, plays a crucial role in reflecting the cultural and religious diversity of the region. As a creative medium, it offers a platform to portray the complexities of societal norms, religious practices, and inter-community relationships in Manipur. In the feature film *Keishamthong Thoibi*, "a muddled tranquility arises in a strict Brahmin family when the elder son Prameshwor brings in a girl, Thoibi, a Chingmingol from the Kabui tribe of Keishamthong, Imphal." (*Keishamthong Thoibi*) An adaptation of the Shumang Leela blockbuster of the same name, Oinam Gautam's film serves as a social commentary that tackles the rigid conventional barrier of religion and community. Films like *Keishamthong Thoibi* highlight the interaction of tradition and modernity, exploring themes of identity, belief, and social dynamics. This paper seeks to explore how Manipuri cinema engages with these themes, using *Keishamthong Thoibi* as a case study to understand its representation of religious diversity and societal conflicts. Films like *Keishamthong Thoibi* highlight the interaction of tradition and modernity, exploring themes of identity, belief, and social dynamics. This paper seeks to explore how Manipuri cinema engages with these themes, using *Keishamthong Thoibi* as a case study to understand its representation of religious diversity and societal conflicts.

The Character of Prameshwor: A Reluctant Conformist

Prameshwor, the male protagonist and a Brahmin, is initially seen in the film as a typical religious Meitei Brahmin. He is portrayed wearing the white dhoti and dupatta, garments often associated with purity and dedication to Hindu rituals. Yet, the film cleverly juxtaposes this image with his actions, as seen in his initial appearance where he is "holding a big ladle and skimmer" (cooking utensils typically used during rituals by Brahmins). However, this conformity to Brahmin norms is disrupted when he unexpectedly heads to KabuiKhul, a locality known for its local bars, to indulge in alcohol. This behavior starkly contrasts with the expectations of Brahmins, who traditionally avoid intoxicants and strictly adhere to dietary taboos.

One humorous scene highlights this conflict, where Prameshwor, visibly intoxicated, raises a glass and toasts with, "Jay Sri Krishna! Katcharibakhudingmaknangondaniko" ("May Krishna bless this

drink!”) (*KeishamthongThoibi* 13:39 minutes). Here, the filmmakers use irony to reflect Prameshwor’s inner struggle with his Brahmin identity and his desire to break free from its restrictions. His action of offering alcohol as a pseudo-religious ritual presents a stark contradiction to the Brahmin ideal, effectively satirizing the rigid customs upheld by his family and community.

Thoibi: A Symbol of Cultural Intersection

The female protagonist, Thoibi, a Kabui tribal girl, represents the indigenous Kabui culture, which sharply contrasts with the Meitei Brahminical worldview that Prameshwor’s family embodies. Despite being a tribal character, Thoibi’s name is ironically Meitei, which subtly hints at the encroachment of dominant cultural norms on minority.

Thoibi frequently confronts Prameshwor’s habits, particularly his drinking, calling him “Bhamonyoothakpa” (Brahmin alcohol consumer). Her use of this term is noteworthy since, culturally, alcohol is a normalized part of Kabui life and is prepared in every household. Thoibi’s disapproval reveals the irony that although alcohol consumption is acceptable within her community, it remains stigmatized for Prameshwor as a Brahmin.

Humorous Familial Dynamics: Prameshwor’s Conservative Parents

The contrast between Prameshwor and his conservative family provides further insight into the generational gap and differing views on religious observance. His father, Gopalji, epitomizes the ideal Brahmin, dressed in the traditional orange dhoti and adorned with rudraksha beads. His devotion is exaggerated to a humorous extent, sharply contrasting with Prameshwor’s casual and indifferent approach to rituals.

In one comedic scene, Gopalji asks Prameshwor if he has bathed before performing a ceremony, a practice rooted in Brahminical notions of purity. The audience, aware that Prameshwor hasn’t bathed, observes a humorous exchange that reveals the generational and ideological differences between father and son regarding religious traditions. The father stresses the importance of using the term ‘houba’ instead of ‘thongba’ and accentuates his belief in maintaining linguistic sanctity in daily lives. This insistence on correct vocabulary reflects his rigid adherence to orthodoxy, whereas the younger son, Rameshwor’s casual use of ‘thongba’ suggests a relaxed attitude, challenging his father’s views.

Furthermore, Rameshwor's frustration over their strictly vegetarian meals, which he feels are monotonous, is met with his father's stern retort: "Bisnubisnu, sigeijansanoroktadouba, eijepuinagaamatafangaroin" (*Keishamthong Thoibi* 22 minutes), which translates to "If you don't follow the rules, you'll be damned," reflecting the strict observance of Brahmin customs. His father's response reinforces the belief that consuming non-vegetarian food is sinful for Brahmins, illustrating a clash of values and revealing the generational gap regarding dietary restrictions. In another moment, the father lectures Rameshwor on the need to recite Sanskrit chants to embody a "true Brahmin," to which Rameshwor humorously responds that he recites chants "arthakhangdaba Sanskrit slogs" (recites without understanding their meaning) (*Keishamthong Thoibi* 22:17 minutes), showcasing the superficial nature of their religious observance, where rituals are performed without comprehension or personal connection. This line brings to light the dissonance in ritual practices, as Sanskrit is not the native language of the Meitei community, making it challenging for many, including Brahmins, to grasp the true meaning behind their prayers. Through humor, the filmmaker captures the tension between tradition and understanding, portraying the reality of Brahminical practices in a Meitei context where Sanskrit remains largely unfamiliar.

Daoji's Perspective: Bridging Societal Divides

Another key character, Daoji, from a Brahmin family, represents a more progressive view. He expresses his open-mindedness by considering a potential marriage between his daughter, Gayatri, and the son of his friend Ramthar, a member of the Tangkhul Naga community, despite the religious and cultural divide. Daoji's perspective, "jat bi jatkiahubamityeng do eingondaleite" (caste distinctions do not concern me), is a refreshing departure from the rigid views of Prameshwor's family. This acceptance challenges the hierarchical restrictions that typically govern inter-community relationships and provides a counterpoint to the Brahmin-centric worldview, suggesting the possibility of unity beyond religious identities.

Satirical Commentary on Brahmin Identity

Prameshwor's character offers a comedic critique of Brahmin identity and its inherent contradictions. His actions, such as preparing meals for a religious event while secretly sipping alcohol, highlight the duality in his character—someone who performs his duties as a Brahmin but also desires to enjoy life like any other non-Brahmin man. His humorous lament, "Yum sidapusanbayadaba, ahaohaoba yam leibajayniemma" (There are so many delicious foods we can't even

bring into our house), alludes to the dietary restrictions imposed on Brahmins, which he feels restrict his ability to enjoy life fully.

The Intersection of Caste, Religion, and Love

Prameshwor's love for Thoibi provides a powerful challenge to both caste and religious restrictions. For instance, in the scene where he proudly wears a Kabui muffler, a gesture that symbolizes his willingness to honor and embrace Thoibi's cultural identity. Later, his declaration, "there is no religion in love; love is blind," affirms the idea that genuine love challenges both caste and religious boundaries, undermining the social constructs that separate people. His actions suggest a new generation's desire to prioritize personal connection over rigid social doctrines.

Thoibi's Fear and Cultural Consciousness

Thoibi's reserved nature and hesitation reveal her deep awareness of societal boundaries, particularly in the context of caste and religious beliefs. When she confides in Prameshwor, saying, "I am scared to break these barriers," she articulates the internal conflict between her love and her understanding of the risks involved in defying societal norms. Thoibi's apprehension, especially regarding her identity as a Kabuigirl, reflects the stigma tribal communities face as "outcasts" in the eyes of orthodox Hindu families, where caste and religious purity are often prioritized over individual worth.

Her statement, "I was born into the Kabui tribal community, but I'm afraid your family may not accept me because of the Hindu rituals of purity," reflects the harsh reality of being marginalized within her own society. This fear of exclusion is not just rooted in caste considerations but also in the religious connotations that underpin these social structures. The traditional Hindu belief in ritual purity often leads to discrimination against those from tribal backgrounds, deepening the divide between Thoibi and Prameshwor's families.

Gopalji's Resistance and Spiritual Dilemma

As a strict Brahmin, Gopalji's reaction to Thoibi's presence is immediate and severe. Upon realizing her tribal background, he rejects her, displaying outright caste prejudice. His first response, spitting out the tea she served and angrily questioning, "With whose permission was she brought into the house?" illustrates his belief in the sanctity of caste boundaries. Gopalji's reliance on ritual and purity is further demonstrated when he prays fervently after her visit, begging for forgiveness from God as though Thoibi's presence has spiritually tainted him. His reaction, though extreme, captures the inflexible and unyielding nature of traditional caste views in Manipuri society,

symbolizing a profound fear that breaking caste purity equates to moral corruption. This incident brings forth the prevailing social stigma associated with inter-caste interactions, particularly between Brahmins and tribal communities.

Manjori's Challenge to Tradition

Manjori's empathetic stance provides a stark contrast to her husband's orthodox views. She confronts Gopalji's rigid stance with thoughtful questions, asking, "Is it not inhumane to deny our son's happiness based on caste alone?" This question exemplifies her progressive thinking, as she calls into question the very basis of caste discrimination. Manjori's willingness to accept Thoibi as a daughter-in-law reflects her prioritization of love and human connection over social divisions. In one poignant exchange, she argues that "religious scriptures do not condemn love," urging her husband to reconsider his stance. Manjori's approach represents the compassion and inclusivity that challenge societal norms, positioning her as a mediator between tradition and change. Her willingness to question established beliefs suggests that true adherence to religious principles should include love, acceptance, and empathy for others, regardless of their caste or background.

The Dynamics of In-Law Relationships

The film further explores caste dynamics through Gopalji's complicated relationship with his younger daughter-in-law Gayatri, who comes from a Brahmin family yet defies conventional roles. He confesses his regret over choosing her, lamenting that Gayatri "lacks the grace and devotion expected in a Brahmin household." Gayatri's refusal to perform religious duties or uphold traditional expectations introduces another layer of irony, showing that caste-based selection does not guarantee familial harmony.

Transformation Through Suffering and Reconciliation

Gopalji's isolation as his health declines becomes a turning point in the film. As he suffers in silence, reflecting on his actions and prejudices, his transformation becomes evident when Thoibi offers him water, a significant act that shatters the very caste boundary he once enforced. Initially hesitant, he finally accepts her water and says, "My beliefs were misguided, and I've wronged you by judging your worth on caste." This pivotal moment marks Gopalji's shift from staunch prejudice to acceptance, as he begins to see Thoibi as a person beyond her caste. His final words, "In your time, let's pray that all this discrimination between society disappears," signify his hope for a more inclusive future, reflecting a personal reconciliation that

transcends generations. His plea for change signifies an extensive spiritual aspiration found in many religions—an appeal for unity, compassion, and understanding among all individuals, regardless of their caste or background. This moment of acceptance not only signifies Gopalji's internal transformation but also highlights the power of love and empathy to transcend rigid societal structures.

By allowing Thoibi to enter his personal space and offering her the dignity of being seen as an equal, Gopalji's character illustrates the potential for redemption through suffering. His journey underscores the importance of recognizing the shared humanity that binds individuals together, inviting audiences to reflect on the transformative power of compassion and the necessity of reconciling past prejudices for a more harmonious society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Keishamthong Thoibi* serves as a profound cinematic reflection on the intricate religious dynamics within Manipuri society. Beyond its central love story, the film delves into the nuanced interplay of caste, religious beliefs, and evolving social norms. Through the experiences of Prameshwor and Thoibi, the film critiques societal restrictions that limit personal freedoms and uphold inequality, urging a shift towards greater compassion and inclusivity within cultural and religious contexts.

As Bobby Wahengbam aptly observes, "Films always try to bring the ethnic groups together as a rule set up by the inner conscience of the creators. But it can't shy away from the tradition of looking things that the hero will be from the Meitei Community and the Heroine from other ethnic groups probably from the hills." (Wahengbam) This insight speaks to the way Manipuri cinema, including *Keishamthong Thoibi*, balances ethnic unity with traditional roles.

By incorporating humor, cultural symbolism, and authentic dialogue, *Keishamthong Thoibi* invites viewers to question their own beliefs and confront the social barriers upheld by tradition. Ultimately, *Keishamthong Thoibi* is a compelling commentary on the importance of social harmony and acceptance, promoting a vision where empathy and respect for cultural and religious diversity prevail over prejudice. It emphasizes that love transcends not only caste but also religious boundaries, advocating for a holistic understanding of humanity that embraces differences rather than allows them to divide. As Manipuri society evolves, the film remains a significant and thought-provoking exploration of religious and cultural unity in the face of enduring social

divides, calling for an embrace of inclusivity that promotes peace and understanding among all communities.

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