

## JUXTAPOSING SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION OF LOIS IN MANIPUR

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### ABSTRACT

*The issue of social exclusion and inclusion is relative and always contextual. Understanding various cases of exclusion and inclusion of sections of people from different parts of India will enhance comprehension of the issue and it will ultimately help in better policy formulation. This paper focuses on the case of Lois, an indigenous community in Manipur, Northeast India. Lois were once existing as an independent community in Manipur but after the arrival of Hinduism and imported caste system, they were outcaste as untouchables. In due course of time, some Lois got the recognition as Scheduled Caste but some were left behind. In this backdrop, this paper juxtaposes inclusion and exclusion of Lois in Manipur and identifies contextual factors leading to the inclusion or exclusion of them in or from the list of Scheduled Castes.*

**Keywords:** Social exclusion and inclusion, Manipur, Northeast India, Lois, Scheduled Caste, etc.

### **Introduction**

Lois, an indigenous community in Manipur is an integral part of the larger Meitei community. Literally, the word 'Lois', applied to the inhabitants of a number of villages spread over distant places from Imphal, who have for long been in subjection. They are living both in rural and urban settings. In certain forms, social exclusion of Lois was always evident in the evolutionary history of Meitei's social structure. Meitei community always strictly observed the system of *Sagei* (clan) in marriage and many other rites and rituals (Meetei, 1996; Singh, 2006; Basanta, 2010; etc.). *Lois*, the original inhabitants were regarded as the lowest caste at the advent of Hinduism (Hodson, 1908; Sanajaoba, 1988; Sen, 1992; etc.). Today, parts of Lois have been recognized as Scheduled Caste during the post-independent India. However, Scheduled Castes of Manipur are not same in terms of their origin, status, economic functions, and level of social exclusion as in other parts of India where dominant castes dominate ritualistically as well as economically. So

far, most of the studies on Lois focus only on Lois ever since they have been identified as SC in 1953 but Non-SC Lois have been ignored. Though all Lois has been placed to the same social status, SCs and Non-SCs Lois enjoy different constitutional privileges. Such a situation demands in-depth study. This study is an effort to juxtapose inclusion and exclusion and find out the contextual factors leading to the inclusion and exclusion of sections of Lois into or from the list of Scheduled Caste.

### **Juxtaposing Inclusion and Exclusion of Lois**

As a consequence of the formation of Kakasaheb Kelelkar Commission in January 1953, some Lois of Manipur under the aegis of 'Loi Association' started efforts to gain recognition as 'Scheduled Caste' but only a few Loi villages responded to association's mobilisation due to their apprehension of suffering from the stigma of a low caste or untouchables (Chaoba, 1993). Thus, 1953 marked the beginning of the demand for Scheduled Caste status among the Lois. In response to the demand, the Kakasaheb Kelelkar Commission visited Manipur from 29 November to 1<sup>st</sup> December 1953 and after observing their socio-economic backwardness and dissimilar lifestyle from the Hindu Meiteis, the Commission agreed to enlist the seven Loi villages i.e. Sekmai, Khurkhul, Phayeng, Leimaram, Tairenpokpi, Andro and Kwatha as the Scheduled Caste villages of Manipur. Later the official notification came out in 1956 giving recognition to the above seven/ eight villages as SC villages of Manipur.

In March 1992, District Magistrate of Thoubal District under the directive of Government of Manipur issued SC certificates to the residents of Kakching village (now a town) and by 30 June 1992, approximately 2500 SC certificates were issued. Questioning the validity of the issued SC certificates, residents of other Loi villages like Awang Sekmai and Andro and their elected MLAs protested against issuance of SC certificates to residents of Kakching Loi. Representing the protesting group, the All Manipur Scheduled Caste Students' Union, and other organisations demanded the cancellation of the issued SC certificates and filed litigations at the Gauhati High Court against Kakching Lois. Government of Manipur responded by constituting a three member committee on 30 June 1992 to enquire on the matter. The said enquiry committee submitted its report and some recommendations to the state government on 23 March 1993 but the conclusive decision was rest on the government of Manipur. In line of the Committee's recommendation, and accepting the demands of the AMSCSO (All Manipur Scheduled Caste Students' Union) and AMSCWA (All Manipur Scheduled Caste Welfare Association), the

Government of Manipur on 30 June 1994, declared the issuance of around 2500 SC certificates to the residents of Kakching village as invalid. However, the residents of Kakching under the aegis of the Representative of Lois (ROL) and All Manipur Lois Students' Union (AMLSU) protested the invalidation move of their SC certificates and filled litigation at the Gauhati High Court. The Gauhati High Court quashed invalidation of the issuance of SC certificates to the Lois of Kakching by the State government on 17 November 1995 (CR No. 800/94). The legal fight is still pending at the Supreme Court of India, but the Government of Manipur communicated its 'final stand' to the Government of India on 26 June 2004 that maintained the status quo of the existing Presidential Order thereby making no amendment on 'Lois' community. Hence, 'all Lois, irrespective of area restriction are Scheduled Caste in Manipur' (ROL, 2011: 52).

Justification made by the Lois of Kakching and other newly enlisted SC villages for their inclusion into SC list can be seen in the rationalization put forwarded by ROL and AMLSU. As found in personal interviews of some Loi leaders and secondary sources (Poknapham, 2005; Maibam, 2011; etc.); Lois of Kakching or other aspiring Lois claim SC status on some grounds. Firstly, the historicity of Kakching (or other similar villages) as a Loi village is a fact which is reflected in the ancient chronicles of Manipur. Therefore, all the 34 Loi villages in Manipur can demand inclusion in the SC list. Secondly, the Presidential notification of 1956 does not give a clear definition of 'Lois'<sup>1</sup> and do not give a geographical limit as 'Lois' of this particular locale/ villages. Therefore, it can be construed that all Loi locales in Manipur are entitled to be SC villages/ towns. Thirdly, the SC and ST (amendment) Act, 1976 only mention the word 'Lois' and does not specify any particular villages as Loi villages. Therefore, not necessary 'Lois' only meant residents of seven/ eight Loi villages but all the Lois in Manipur. Fourth jurisdiction is in the legal framework, it says that recognition of individuals or groups as SC is under the purview of the Presidential Orders of 1956 and 1976, and Article 341 of the Constitution of India. Thus, the state (Manipur) government's decision of invalidation of Lois residents of Kakching as SC Lois (or against other aspiring Loi villages in future) does not hold in the eyes of law, thereby making all Lois qualified to be SC. Fifthly, some leaders of 'New-SC Lois'<sup>2</sup> and Lois aspiring for SC status (Non-SC Lois) argue that Lois as a whole (community) including those who are not yet included in SC list suffer from the stigma of an outcaste community, therefore safeguards and provisions (like reservation) should be meant for all Lois who deserved to be included in the SC list. Another reason that they often reiterated in support of their demand or justification for SC status is the relative socio-economic backwardness of Lois from other non-Loi Meiteis. Last but

not the least, the supporters of Lois' inclusion into SC list often emphasized the historical and contemporary popularity of the unified 'Loi' identity thereby preventing the fragmented assertion of identities among Lois. Their argument is supported by Lois' socio-cultural differences from other inhabitants of Manipur as reflected in their unique cockney accent Manipuri language. These are some of the justifications for inclusion that emerged from the present research as put forwarded by those Lois who have been recently included and of those Lois who are aspiring to be included in the SC list.

On the other hand, exclusion of some Lois from the list of Scheduled Caste can be understood from a perspective put forwarded by 'Old-SC Lois'.<sup>3</sup> Inclusion of Kakching or the demand for inclusion of other Loi locales that were not among the eight initially recognized SC-Loi villages have been challenged by Sekmai and other already recognized SC-Loi villages on the following grounds (Maibam, 2015). Firstly, Sanskritization of Kakching Lois as Meitei *Kshetriyas* has been since long time back, and their revival of 'Loi identity' is late and it coincided with their demand for recognition as SC. Therefore, 'Old SC-Lois' argue that Kakching Lois or other Lois do not deserve to be SCs. Second reason is the exclusion of Kakching and other Loi villages from the list of Scheduled Caste villages sent by Chief Commissioners of Manipur (only seven/ eight villages) in June 1955 while responding to Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India's letter dated 19 May 1955. Kakching and 'New-SC Lois' despite their large population in 2001 Census have not challenged formation and existence of Sekmai constituency as the only SC constituency; therefore, the 'Old SC-Lois' used it to substantiate their arguments against inclusion of Kakching Lois into SC list. Old SC Loi villages justifies their demand for exclusion of Kakching and other Loi villages (which were not in the SC villages enlisted in 1956) because they were not recorded as SC villages in 1961 and 1991 Censuses which tantamount to their late identity assertion for the motive of some affirmative gain. Issuance of SC certificate to the residents of Kakching in 1992 has been challenged on the ground that those certificates were issued without any proper verification. Last but not the least, exclusion of some Lois from the list of Scheduled Caste has been justified by putting that there was no administrative inquiry committee recommending inclusion of Kakching and other Loi villages as SC and it is not in line with the Article 341 of the Constitution of India. On these stated grounds, residents of Sekmai in particular and other old-SC villages challenged the inclusion of Kakching in particular and other Loi villages in the list of SC.

## Concluding Remarks

Subtle understanding of caste-based discrimination and identity of Lois, lack of awareness about the similarity and differences among Lois, obscurity in the concept of 'Lois' in the Article 341 of the Constitution of India, and confusion among the academicians and policy makers on Lo is also contribute towards persisting controversy over demand for reservation or inclusion/ exclusion of Lo is. Differential political mobilization among the Lo is settled in different locales of Manipur as communities resulted at inclusion into or exclusion from SC list. Resistance from fellow SC Lo is, even going to the court of law, is one of the major reasons behind delay in the recognition of some Lo i villages as SC village/ town.

## Endnotes:

1. Article 341 of the Constitution of India deals with Scheduled Caste but there is no clear definition of the term Scheduled Caste. Likewise, Presidential notification of 1956 regarding Scheduled Castes only mentioned 'Lois', but did not define it.
2. 'New-SC Lo is': Those SC-Lo is who are the residents of SC-Lo i locales which have been newly enlisted in SC list only after the Census of 1991; for examples, the Lo is of Kakching town (1992), Thanga village (2005) and Chairen village (2005).
3. 'Old-SC Lo is': Those SC-Lo is who are the residents of seven/ eight SC-Lo i locales which had been previously enlisted in SC list by the Presidential notification of 1956; for examples, the Lo is (or Chakpa Lo is) of Sekmai, Khurkhul, Phayeng, Leimaram (or/ and Leimaram Khunou), Tairenpokpi, Andro and Kwatha.

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