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Reconstructing a Meitei identity: A case study of script and language movement of Naoria Phulo and Apokpa Marup

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide a detailed account of the movement for revival of Meitei (Manipuri) script. Laying the historical genesis of the movement in the infamous 'Puya Mei-thaba', which orchestrated a systemic destruction of ancient Meitei texts and manuscript, it underlines the argument of Naoriya Phulo that loss of indigenous script and language led to depletion of traditional repository of knowledge, ultimately affecting the Meitei economy and way of life. The article traces the beginning of the movement with the formation of Apokpa Marup by Phulo in 1930 under the moto, "Language is the father, and script is the mother." It also covers the controversy surrounding the number of alphabets in the original script, eventually leading to the adoption of 27 alphabets (18 major alphabets and 9 derivatives). The article concludes that script and language are central components in the construction and preservation of a distinct Meitei identity as opposed to the acquired identity of being Hindus among the Meitei Vaishnavites.

Keywords: Apokpa Marup, Naoria Phulo, Mangba-Sengba, Bengali Script, Puya Meithaba and Cachar

Introduction

The reasons for Meiteis as a community to have spread throughout the Northeast region stems not only from the event of *Seven Years of Devastation* when the Kingdom of Manipur was under tyrannical Burmese occupation; during which many fled and settled down in different neighbouring regions. Among those regions, Cachar^[1] was the preferred choice since it already had a large Meitei population. Cachar, while being the safe haven for the royal family members, was a melting pot where the migrated Hinduised Meiteis came into close contact with Bengali culture and language.

In the context of having a shared religion with the Bengalis, the Meiteis of Cachar in the process of adaptation to Bengali culture and language developed distinctive customs and practices. Such as, sweeping the courtyard and backyard as a first act of the day, every morning done by any member of the family. Women in the household have to take bath in the morning and thereafter, usually carry out the responsibility to fetch water from the nearest river or a pond. And upon returning, cleans the front of the courtyard tulsi plant with water, then apply sandalwood on their foreheads to perform the morning ceremonial prayers by lighting incense sticks around the tulsi plant. This ceremonial act is repeated again in the afternoon, and one more time in the evening. For the elders of the family, upon waking up each morning they practice touching the ground by the side of the bed and pray. Then, the elders proceed to the courtyard to pray to the Sun God (Surya) and then brush their teeth with toothbrushes made from Saneibi (thorny bamboo) stored in a small basket on the right side of the house. Occasionally, they also brush their teeth with the ashes (Utningthou).

Mandatorily has to be either cleaned properly or sprinkled with water before having a meal. Any member of the family, who had visited a marketplace, upon return had to change clothes before re- entering the house again. A man must wear a *Khudei* and a woman *Phanek* while entering inside the house.

¹ Cachar is a district of Assam. Phulo was born in Jaribon which is a village in Haikaldi, one of Cachar's subdivisions.

And in all the schools of Cachar, Bangla was used in place of Meitei Mayek, the script of the native language. In 1885-86, when school education was introduced in Manipur, Bangla language and script was used as medium of instruction^[2] Progressively, Bangla became the dominant language in the spheres of religion, art and culture, education, literature. In Manipur, Churachand Maharaj took steps to further consolidate the Hindu religion around this time. Thus began the exclusive usage of Bangla, in all the hymns, rites and rituals of the Meiteis Vaishnavites. As such, communicating in Meiteilon (Manipuri) in public was considered undesirable and looked down on as inferior status and Bangla was preferred on the basis of societal notions which considered people speaking Bangla and Sanskrit as educated and learned. Given the state of education in Cachar at the time, Meiteis of Cachar willfully learned Bangla as it presumably warranted them a higher status among the Meiteis^[3]. The following is an excerpt which indicates the use of Bangla in speech by Meiteis then residing outside of Manipur:

“Eigya ebungo Shricharanda tollaba nanaina namravaktikaga loinana nivedan prathana toujei. Eigya ebungona kripa parvash oibiduna dash gi adunash oiriba nanaibu ghrahan toubiduna safal manorash oihanbigani haina toujei”^[4].

Reflecting on the declining state of Meiteilon (Manipuri), Naoria Phulo observed, “Only Gouriya language is left to be exhibited”, our mother tongue has been completely forgotten. However, Meitei at that point of time was the third largest ethnic group inhabiting around the Barak Valley. Nonetheless, Bangla language was used exclusively for both educational and communication purposes. The above quote from Naoria indicates that Bangla had replaced Meiteilon in all social and community affairs as well in daily lives. Bangla names were assigned to Meitei settlement areas in the region such as Rajeshworpur, Bhatigram, Gwalipur, Bijumukhi, etc. Meitei residents of Cachar, particularly the peasants and daily bread earners with limited sources of income had to give away offerings to Hindu deities. The practice of feast-offerings to Mayang Brahmins were important reasons for the worsening economic conditions of the people. As such Naoria observed, “excessive offerings are made to Brahmin deities, excessive feasts are organised by inviting Mayang Gurus (Priests). Grains stored for annual consumption are used up in three months” (*Bamon laida pangkatta katli, mayang gurusing kou kouduna pangbida pijare. Chahi chagadaba cheng phou tha ahumda loisilleh*)^[5]. Further

Naoria, pointed out that the social practice of offering exorbitant expenses on all the rites and rituals, from birth to death, were responsible for the economic backwardness of Meitei society. Thus, he expressed, “Meeteis have to mandatorily celebrate *swasti* on giving birth, thereby incurring a lot of expenses” (*meeteina macha pokle swasti toudaba yadeh haiduna sen kaya tinghallel*). On seeing the huge expenses made for death ceremonies, rather than observing the basic rituals, he observed, “The death shall not come back, so better offer everything one can afford to. Such is what the Meeteis feel” (*Sikhrabanina amuk hallakadaba leiteh, leijaba makhei haphourageh haiduna meeteina pukningda kannha khalli*)^[6].

After death, a feast would be offered for a large number of people. After *Shradda* (death ceremony) is observed, *Phiroi* (which is observed after one year of the death) will be held where again a feast would be offered to numerous guests. As such, the granary meant for yearly consumption was completely exhausted in matters of months. After *Phiroi*, arrangements would be made for pilgrimage to holy places for releasing *asti* sometime at the cost of selling off agricultural lands, if not a portion of one’s housing plot. On returning, one was not allowed to enter his/her home unless having offered an *utsab* yet another feast.. In case of having borrowed money to finance their pilgrimage on interest, many had to resort to selling agricultural lands or other properties so as to pay off the debt. All those offered to God/deities practically ended up to meet the requirements of the Brahmin households. In this regard, Naoria stated,

Mapana laida katlamba lupani, machasingna lupa tara tara katpa ngamnaba haiduna hotnei amasung lepnei. Chahi 20 suraba faoba mayang bamon lupa singba loiba naideh.....meeteina marou yonduna mayang bamongi lupa singdok –e^[7].

Such as feeding the Mayang beggars, to serving the Vaishnavs, to making multiple offering to the Brahmin deities, in short, mandatory exorbitant expenditures in religious rituals, makes it evident that Meeteis became vulnerable to incurring debts which in turn compromised the chance of leading a stable and peaceful life.

Script and Language Movement

The event of *Puya Meithaba*^[8] in the late eighteenth century, marked the beginning of introduction of Bengali script to the Meiteis^[9]. Thereafter, under the royal patronage, the Bengali script soon became the dominant medium of writing. The

² Thokchom Mangoljao, Manipurda Nongchuplomgi Siksha, Imphal, 1989, p. 3

³ Naoria Phulo, Meitei Haoufam Wari, Meitei Leipak, 1990, p. 80

⁴ Ibid, p. 79

⁵ Naoria Phulo, Eigi Wareng, Apokpa Marup, Luwangsangbam, Meitei Leipak, 1994, p. 26

⁶ Ibid. p.27

⁷ Ibid, p. 39. Loosely translation, ‘Fathers offer one rupee to God, while the sons resolve attempts to offer ten rupees. Even after twenty years, the debt of Mayang Brahmins could not be paid off. Meeteis repay the debt of Mayang Brahmins by selling their agricultural lands’.

⁸ The Brahminical priests emptying began to ie the new traditions of the new religion, anded were trying to legitimize their claim that the or of peothe Manipur people was linked to that of the Indo-Aryans, for the Brahmins it was imperative to get rid of any texts of the natives wdicts such claimed otherwise. In this regard, the Puyains opposition to their goals. Theytherefore, had to devisea means to get rid of the native textsm. This led te and unfortunate regarding the Puyas in the history of ManipurMeitei civilization called the Puya Meithaba or the burning of the Puyas. The Royal Chronicle recorded that ‘17th ni nongmaijng meetei lairik manghalle’. The English translation is, “On the 17th day of Sunday in the year of 1654 saka (1732 A.D.), with the initiation of Guru Santidas, King Garibaniwaj s messengers on horseback to every corner of thehis kingdom, mostly to all the Meetei chous and instructed them to collect all the nativeold puyin front of Kangla Ultra and were destroyed them by burnting”. Khelchandra and L Ibungohal, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Manipur Sahitya Parishad, Imphal, 1989, opcit p. 93.

⁹ Under the King Pamheiba or Garibniwaz, Hinduism was introdduism in Manipur in the late eighteenth century. The King accepted Bengali script as a common medium ofg purpose as well as the language used in deliverance of ritual practices.

native Meitei/Manipuri script or Meitei Mayek was gradually side lined as 'impure' whereas, Bengali script was projected as 'pure' so as to gain popular acceptance. As such, any ritual practices and religious ceremonies were performed through reading Hindu religious texts written in Bengali script. The British chose not to interfere with the process of imposition of Bengali script by the king and instead opted to use the adopted Eastern Nagari or Bengali script for official writing purposes; which for political reasons validated the royal enterprise.

Movements forwarding ideas that called for the revival of the Meitei script can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century A.D, when Naoria Phulo in 1930, founded a socio-religious organization called the Apokpa Marup in Cachar (Assam). The reason for founding the organisation was that when he was in Narshing Madhya Banga, his colleagues used to tease him sometimes by asking where his own script was, to which he himself had to explain about the existence of his native script. His engagement with Hinduism from a point of being a critique and the experience of having needed to explain himself, exposed the reality of how Bengali has been preferred making it the dominant script. He viewed Hinduism as something that would ruin the Meitei community and given his lived experience in Narshing. Thus Phulo, became the pioneer of the Meitei revivalist movements.

Phulo also believed that the decline of the Meitei economy was due to the decline in intellectual power with respect to perception of the negating one's own identity in favour of the acquired Hindu identity and more significantly failure to acquire modern knowledge to adapt to the changes around led to the decline of the Manipuri economy^[10]. One can ask such a question as to why Phulo made efforts to promote the Meitei Language and wanted the masses to recognize the importance of one's own language? How did Phulo perceive the importance of language to assert for an identity? In Phulo's view, the revival of the script will help the Meiteis to reclaim their distinct identity, because one's own language not only enables the person to communicate effectively with its own members but it also expresses one's identity. Phulo equates upholding a distinct identity as one of the basic human right. Moreover, he advocated, compulsory primary education imparted through the mother tongue as a single step that will surely help the removal of illiteracy which in turn would lead to more efficient communication; thereby accelerating the process of development. Phulo propogated ideas that for the Meiteis 'language is father', 'script is mother', script is part and parcel of a particular culture, and thus without this the younger generation will not understand the philosophy and idea of the traditional texts written in the Puya^[11].

Phulo also expressed that,

"Meeteina mayangi Laining lamchat tamjarui haiduna mayang oigadaba leiteh. Meetei eikhoina mayangi laining lamchat lourui haiduna mayangi mapa mapubu eikhoigi epa epuni haiba yaba natteh. Laining lamchat haibasidi matam adugi chatnabini^[12].

The above lines can be loosely translated as

No matter how Meitei try to emulate religious practices and customs of Mayangs, they can never be Mayangs. Meiteis can never address progenitors of the Mayangs as their own ancestors, regardless of adopting their religious practices and customs. Religious practices are set by the cultural traditions of the time.

One day, he appeals to people by urging,

*Pokpham Houfam thiriba karigino? Masigi paokhumdi—
pokpham thiribadi eisi kanano haiba khangba ngamjei.
Eibu khangjarabadi ethou touba nungajare. Ethou
tourabadi eigi thouram pangjare. Eigi thouram
panglabadi thawai nungajare. Thawai nungairabadi
yaifaba haibadu oijare. Yaipharabadi pumnamakpu
nungsiba haiba wakhan ama lakani. Nungcha haiba
wakhallaklabadi thabak matonnlomjarani^[13].*

This can be loosely translated as

(What is the purpose of seeking one's origin and ancestry? The answer lies in that one is able to know oneself, in the search for origin. By knowing oneself, one is able to fulfil one's duties well. By fulfilling duties, one is able to achieve one's purpose. By achieving the purpose, one attains satisfaction. By attaining satisfaction, one accomplishes well-being. A state of well-being will bring forth a love for all. A feeling of love brings success)

According to Phulo, in order to develop a separate Meitei identity, Meiteis have to discontinue using the Bengali script. He lamented, "Meiteis become Hindus as soon as they die and are about to perform their funerals"^[14]. In such a Hindu-dominated social space, Phulo views became a dissenting voice that urged the people to perform the rituals in their own language (Meiteilon).

Phulo also points out that most of the elders of that time frequently commented on the utility of education, "Those schools of yours will be of no use to you, my children. If you want to prosper in life, go and learn 'pung, esei and palla'^[15]. He argues that many budding students of that time were diverted away from education and got into the economic activities related to ritual practices of the Hindu religion. Phulo expressed his disappointment over this deteriorating condition and despaired, "Gouriya or Hindu religion has destroyed every possible beneficial aspect of the Meeteis"^[16] With reference to Thongam Bipin,

Such a relegation of Meeteilon reached a point where Meetei of Cachar (Assam) began to think that learning ritual songs and playing pung constituted real education. Such religiously inclined activities were considered suitable for Meetei and gyan (knowledge) and bigyan (science) were reserved for the mayang. This division is symbolic of the hegemony exercised by the religion. Because of such a notion about themselves, Meeteis of Cachar generally hired teachers from Manipur to master the art. Interestingly, as Phulo attempts to highlight,

¹⁰ Joykumar, Singh, Religious Revitalisation Movements in Manipur. Akansha Publishing House, 2012, p 86.

¹¹ A.R Das, The Manipuri Script Movement, in K.S. Singh, (ed) Tribal Movement in India, Manohar, New Delhi, 1982, p. 120.

¹² Naoria Phulo, Meetei Houfam Wari, reprinted by Apokpa Marup under the Konsam Kulachand Meetei, Meetei Leima Rashe, Imphal, 1985. P. 31

¹³ Ibid p. 37

¹⁴ Phulo, Naoria. Laininghan Naoria Phulogi Wareng Apunba (Complete Works of Laininghan Naoria Phulo) Ibungo Laishramcha Minabanta, M.S. Tampha Publications, 2010. p. 81

¹⁵ Pung means drum, esei means song, and pala means when pung and esei both the art forms are combined and performed in the public space.

¹⁶ Ibid p. 29

the phenomenon of school dropout among Meitei children was not singularly because of language question but also due to religion, i.e., Hinduism. According to him, promotes non-educational activities, mostly related to religious practices such as devotion through Sankirtan, reading Hindu epics, etc [17].

This shows how the Brahmins projected the notion that learning Bengali or Sanskrit is a superior quality enterprise with tangible economic rewards than knowing one's own language that offers no similar rewards and thus is an inferior language. The Brahmins also considered the Meitei language as impure and thus not apt to be used in religious and public space. Phulo, also observed when a song is sung in Sanskrit in a funeral or any ceremony, the audience listens or witnesses the act without understanding the meaning of the song. Seeing the Meitei society in such a state wherein people deliberately negated one's own identity for the sake of leading an acquired Hindu life, Phulo collaborated with the Apokpa Marup to start the script revival movement. The script was named *Yelhou Meitei Mayek* and had 36 alphabets.)

Thus, with the foundation of Apokpa Marup by Naoria Phulo in 1930, a movement for revival for Meitei language and script emerge in Cachar. With spread of Meitei revivalist movement in Manipur valley in the second half of twentieth century, collective efforts were made to revive the Meitei script and promote its usage in place of Bengali. However, this movement was plagued by a controversy over the actual number of alphabets to be used in the script, with different schools propounding different number of alphabets. This is being discussed in the next section.

Controversy over Script

Meitei believes that 'language is father' and 'script is mother' to promote a Meitei identity through revival of the script. So, they formed various organisational groups to promote the script both within and outside Manipur. However, the script revival movement was soon faced by several challenges pertaining to the issue of what should be the actual number of alphabets. In 1958, *Mayek Luptin* was held and collected the letters. Another conference was held in 1969 at Mapal Kangeibung, Imphal in the name of *Mayek Ki Conference* and collected the letters from the experts present there [18]. Thereafter, a school of thought emerged claiming that the Meitei script has only 18 alphabets. Whereas, another school led by N Khelchandra claims that it has to be 35 alphabets. And yet another school claims that it should be 27 alphabets. In order to resolve the contesting claims, *Kangleipak Eyek Kanba Phamthon Lup*, a civil society organisation that concerned with Meitei script in association with 'All Manipur

Students Union' (AMSU) formed a 'Meitei Mayek Expert Committee' (MMEC) on 16 November, 1978. In order to ascertain the actual alphabets, the Committee analysed the available Meitei scriptures and *puyas*. As per the expert opinion form by the committee, it stands at 27 alphabets consisting of 18 major alphabets and 9 derivatives called *Lom Eyeks*. In response to this, the Government of Manipur passed a resolution, *The Manipur Official Language Bill* on 12th April 1979 A.D. and approved the script (recommended by the MMEC) and listed it in the Manipur 16 Gazette dated April 22, 1980. A.D [19]. With the purpose of developing and promoting the script, a society called *Eyek Maru Sannaba Thouranga Kanglup* was formed on 3rd April 1982 to teach people to read and write the script within and outside Manipur.

After the implementation of the script, another controversy ensue with regard to the characters of the script. Thokachanba, a Meitei script revivalist, claimed that *Wakholon Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok Puya*, (a manuscript that deals with the origin, cosmology and phonetic of Meitei Mayek) is more suitable to construct organic relation of Meitei and Meitei Mayek. However, it has been challenged by the Hindu scholars for its authenticity [20].

In 1983, the Manipur state government passed an order to introduce Meitei Mayek as a minor subject at the primary level. However, an organisation named MEELAL (Meitei Erol Eyek Loinasillon Apunba Lup) started a series of agitations to introduce Meitei mayek across all the classes. In course of the agitation, the Manipur Central Library was blazed to ground and around 145,000 books and manuscripts were destroyed [21]. After one month, the government adopted a decision to introduce the script progressively starting from the lowest primary classes. Continuing with the agitation, MEELAL started a campaign for using Meitei Mayek in signboard of shops, advertisements, billboards, political posters and newspapers. Posters, VCDs, cassettes of deviant persons were burnt publicly [22]. As a result of introduction of the Meitei script, a generation gap has started to emerge between the younger generation (who learnt the script as part of educational curriculum) and the older ones (who learnt Manipuri texts in Bengali text). Many renowned poets and writers are working and publishing in Bengali scripts. Moreover, major Manipuri newspapers are published in Bengali script.

Conclusion

After the advent of Hinduism, the Meitei kings sought to consolidate their reign by enforcing the Hindu religion. This inadvertently led to a royal policy that promoted the use of Bengali and Sanskrit (written in Eastern Nagari script) for

¹⁷ Thongam Bipin, Rethinking Emancipation: Meitei and Naoria Phulo, Prabuddha: Journal of Social Equality, 2021, 6 (1), pp. 66-76

¹⁸ Mayek Ki Conference letter submitted;

Yumnam Churachand Singh of Churachandpur for Meitei Yelhou Mayek. Mayengbam Samjai for Porei Meitei Mayek.

S. Udoichand Singh of Keishampat Thiyam Leirak for Pakhangba Mayek.

Haobam Kullabidu and Laishram Kullachandra for 27 alphabets.

Konsam Sangai, Kh. Phunildro and W. Kumarkanta for 35 letters.

Chongtham Iboyai, Mangshidam Bubol, Sougajiam Iboyaima and Samjetsabam Kala for 35 letters.

Y. Tamphajao, Th. Thokachanba, Longjam Kanhai, Ayekpam Tomba Meitei, Salam Patakchap, Potsangbam Rabeina and Tokbam Thawailamba etc. see from, file of Matei Mayek ki Conferemce of 1969, Manipur state Archive, Imphal.

¹⁹ Manipur Gazette (Extraordinary) No.33, Imphal, Tuesday, April 22, 1980; Wairokpm Ibenu Devi, op. cit., p.107. See also, Dr. Ningamba Singh, Manipuri Language Movement And Its Impact On Education And Eighth Schedule In Assam, Global Journal of Research Analyse, VOLUME-8, ISSUE-8, AUGUST-2019. Pp 1-4

²⁰ Meetei, N.M "Centrality of the Body Politics in Thokachanba Script and Cultural Revivalism in Manipur". In Noni and Sanatomba, Colonialism and Resistance: Society and State in Manipur, South Asia, New Delhi, Routledge, 2016 p. 219

²¹ Bhaumik, S. "Book Arson A Taliban Style Act", BBC News, April 15, 2005. http://new.s.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4443565.stm

²² Imphal Free Press, "Meelal, Bans Books", <https://www.facebook.com/ImphalFreePress/posts/meelal-bans-books-for-including-foreign-wordsimphal-december-4-as-part-of-its-dr/858524704179626/>

religious as well as official purposes. The logic of 'pure' and 'impure' was also applied in that Bengali was promoted as 'pure' language, thereby suitable for use for public, official or religious purposes, whereas Manipuri was relegated as 'impure'. Thus, formal education came to be imparted in Bengali language and script. The colonial British administration continued the use of Bengali to serve its administrative purposes and did not attempt to alter the status quo. The pre-dominance of Bengali script and language in educational, religious and public spheres was challenged with the establishment of Apokpa Marup by Naoria Phulo who initiated a movement for revival of Meitei (Manipuri) language, script and Sanamahi religion. With the reach of Meitei revivalist movement in Manipur Valley in later part of twentieth century, many organisation took the initiative of introducing Meitei mayek and subsequently replacing the Bengali script for the writing Manipuri language. However, the movement for revival of Meitei mayek had to face a controversy as there were many schools of thought claiming different number of alphabets for the script.

It can be concluded that the script movement initiated by Phulo had a profound impact on Manipuri society. Naoria Phulo's project on language and script serves to reinforce a distinct Meitei identity. This movement opened ways to imagine various forms of collective identity among the Meiteis. The script movement also shows the significance of the relation between language and identity. The script movement also serves as an important tool for Meitei nationalists to glorify Manipur's past. On the other hand, the predominance of Bengali script marks a historical rupture to this imagination of glorious past. Controversy over the Meitei script points to the existence of contesting notions of identity among the members of the community. Lastly, it can be argued that Meitei mayek has been used as a tool to justify the pre-existing domination of Meitei in Manipur by emphasizing its distinctiveness and rootedness in the land.

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