CHAPTER - III

HISTORY OF THE EVOLUTION OF MANIPURI SCRIPT - The Myth
CHAPTER-III
HISTORY OF THE EVOLUTION OF MANIPURI SCRIPT

(MEITEI MAYEK) - The Myth

The birth of alphabet or script is the most momentous part of all the achievements of the human mind. Script, like man, have now an ancestry and the ancestry of words making them capable of great things\(^1\). Professor Lehmann said ‘the origin of the world script was to be expected from one origin, though many models are yet available with different entity of their own peculiar practice of writing system from various countries or nations\(^2\). According to ‘Mayek Laisak Takpa Puya’, a manuscriptological booklet mentions that - the origin of the script is connected with the formation of seven (7) days. It further mentioned that since inventions and events had taken place in the seven days i.e. a week the formation of the script was also originated with seven days concept\(^3\).

Durgadas Lahiri claimed that each of the written script available in the world has mythological background. The ancient Egyptians attributed about the written script and its creation as a whole either to God Thoth, who was believed to be the inventor of all the cultural elements, or to temple goddess of Isis. It is also said that the idea of script was first invented by Nebo, the god of writing who was also the son of Marduk’s. This is the idea of Babylonian believed and so they treated Nebo as the god of destiny

---

2. Winfred P. Lehmann : Historical Linguistic - An introduction, University of Texas, Pub. 1962, P.65
of human being. An ancient Jewish tradition considered Moses as the inventor of script. Greek myths attributed writing to Hermes or to other gods. The ancient Chinese, Indian and many other peoples also believed the concept of the “divine origin of script”. The Indians believed that god Brahma was the creator of earth as well as the inventor of Brahmi Script.

Like other groups of people, Manipur also had enjoyed a lot of interesting mythological account about the origin of their script. It is mentioned that the art of picture script was drawn at heaven in the cosmological era of Ko-Hangko⁴. The exact date of the development of writing system in Manipur is not known. There is a lot of divergent view about the date of the origin of Manipuri script. Some writer suggested that the Manipuri script had its existence in the late fourth or early third millennium B.C. According to Professor Kalidas Nag, the Meitei script has developed long before the period of Asoka⁵. Further, it is believed that Meitei script was invented in the late Haya Chak (second age) i.e, before the division of caste system among the Hindus⁶.

By virtue of ‘Meiteikum’ meaning of the Meitei Calander, year began to be deciphered from the choice of chronologically significant date of playing ‘Sagolkangjei’. The ‘Sagolkangjei’ which was played by seven players on each side is also known as ‘Pana Kangjei’. In this game a particular norms

---

4. There are four era in Manipur. They are Hayi Chak, Haya Chak, Langba Chak and Konna Chak. The Ko-Hangko is equivalent to Hayi Chak i.e., Satya Yug of Hindu People.
5. THambal Angou Singh : Meitei Mayek, Imphal 1947, P.2
was introduced to count the winner, looser and equalise. The very significant
is clearly indicates that the used of countable and numerical system were
fully developed in Manipur just long before this event. Moreover, this
celebrated game ‘Sagol Kangjei (Polo game) was introduced for the first
time in Manipur since the year 3100 B.C.\(^7\). This fact is declared by Guiness
Book of World Record in 1992 to the world community.

The ‘Taobirolai Yangbi’ an important ancient literature mentions
about the mythological history of the origin of script. The local version runs
like this “TAIBANG SEMBA MAPU MARU SIDABANA KOROU DA
PUTHOKKHIBA LOINA MAYEKPU MITTAGI PUTHOKTUNA
YEKKHI HAIBAGI MITTAGI MAYEK KOU-I”\(^8\). i.e, Since immortal
God lord Maru Sidaba had invented the script from his divine eyes means
‘mit’, it is known as Mayek (script). It is also mentioned that first he drawn
the picture as snake and this form is locally known as ‘Taobirolai Sidaba’
means ‘eternal snake god’ which is also regarded as the “Script of the eyes”.

On the basis of this mythological as well as literary sources, it can be
suggested that like other countries Manipur also had her own independent
cosmic theory about the development of script into a particular indication
of etymological justification that Manipur script (Meitei Mayek) is the
manifestation of the different part of the human body. According to
manuscript ‘Taobirolai Yangbi’ Kuru Sidabi God the immortal goddess
hailed picture script from the heaven and produced it (script) on the earth
from her body.

\(^7\) Guinness Book of World Records-1992, P.627
\(^8\) MSS : Taobirolai Yangbi.
According to “Mayek Laishak Takpa Puya” the first alphabet ‘Ka’ comes from the Knee (in Manipuri ‘Khu’ of Kuru Sidabi universal Goddess), ‘Kha’ from the back of the clust (Namgandagi), ‘Ga’ from condyle (khumittagi), ‘Gha’ from hand (khuttagi), ‘Nga’ from eyes (mittagi), ‘Cha’ from abdomen (shoudombidagi), ‘Sha’ from testicle (lumdagii), ‘Ja’ from ear (nakongdagii), ‘Jha’ from spine (yangnamdagii), ‘Nya’ from umbilicus (khoidagi), ‘Ta’ from testicles (lum anidagi), ‘Tha’ produced from vagina (thudagi), ‘Da’ from vaginal tube (thukhundagi), ‘Na’ from anus (hoirongdagii), ‘Ta’ from one plam (khut tang anidagi) ‘Da’ from bones (sarudagi), ‘dha’ from abdomen (thajindagi), ‘Na’ from deltoid (langdondagi), ‘Pa’ from ear (nakhongdagii), ‘Fa’ from lower prietal (lutungdagii), ‘Ba’ from occipital (lukhamdagii), ‘Bha’ from prietal (lawaidagi), ‘Ma’ from forehead (laipaktagi), ‘aa’ from right eye (mityettagi), ‘Ya’ from left eye (mitoidagi), ‘Wa’ from throat (khounaadagii), ‘Sha’ from Coccyx (Kongloudagi), ‘Sa’ produced from Gallbladder (Yupungdagii), ‘Sa’ from armpit (Khongsabidagi), ‘Ha’ from umbilical chord (khoidou Narindagi), and ‘Ksha’ produced from the four corner of umbilicus (Khoidou yapham Marimaktagi)⁹.

According to another mythological source Atingkok Kuru (Supreme god) asked his two sons ‘Atiya and Asiba to create universe. Then the “Kuru”, the father opened his mouth and showed the divine picture script. Then Atiya called out all the gods of different form the body of his father and made a new dance form called ‘Thengkou’ (creative dance) this type

of spiritual dance was performed on the basis of certain forms i.e., different form of script models. There are different types ‘They are known as Leihou Leishem Leitai Leiroy Nonghou etc.\textsuperscript{10}

At the process of the stages of the creation of this universe god Atiya performed different types of ‘Thangkou’ the spiritual dance on the model of some imaginary script.

The Leihou Thengkou dance form was like the letters of ka, kha, ga, gha, nga.

The Leishem Thangkou dance form was like the letters of cha, chha, ja, jha, nya.

The Leitai Thengkou was like the letters of ta, tha, da, dha, na.

The Lairoi Thengkou was like to letter of pa, pha, ba, bha, ma.\textsuperscript{11}

Then with the help of “Laipunghous” (divine youths) and “Lainuras” (divine girls), Atiya another God demonstrated various forms of Thangkows (dance) during the process of the creation of universe. It is also mentioned that, water was the only existing objects just before the creation of this

\textsuperscript{10} M.S.S : Mayek Laishak Takpa.
\textsuperscript{11} “Thang-Taga Manipuri Jagoi Amasung Pung Cholomga Leinaba Mari” Paper summited by Rajkumar Achoubi Sana at “Lecture cum Demonstration” under the Dept. of Art and Culture, Manipur and East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur at G.M. Hall Imphal 25\textsuperscript{th} May 2001.
earth. In the mythical period it was known as ‘Nonglum’ which means ‘zero’. Then in order to create the earth the nine laipungthous viz, Thangjing, Marjing, Koubru, Loyalakpa, Nongpok Apamba, Wangbren, Sanamahi, Lokningthou, Achiba collected earth from the heart of “Kuru” and from that earth they created with the co-operation of seven Lainuras, the Laipunghou constructed the earth which is known as ‘Pung’.

The Laipungthous and Lainuras made eight “Pungs” (mounds). Here the “Pung” had carried two meanings i.e., “Mound” and another is “Time” which is equivalent to $22\frac{1}{2}$ minutes. So they made eight mounds in 180 minutes or hours and then they began to stamp the earth by kicking, jumping, turning waving, leaping and shaking etc. This kind of stamping earth with foot, are called “Leinet” or “Paring Langsang dance” (Thangkow). Then after the completion of making eight mounds in three hours, they took rest on the mounds by drinking wine. This relaxation period was called “Yuthak” which means time equivalent to three hours time. In this way, they constructed 64 mounds in 64 Pungs (equivalent to 24 hours).

This theory of traditional Yuthak or time keeping system has clearly evidenced that from the very ancient period the people of Manipur had developed the idea of counting by having knowledge of ‘Zero’. Another theory of the numerical scripts was also related to the re-production and evolutionary process of human beings. It is mentioned that the systematic counting practice during the period of pregnancy of a women was also already existed in this place. This was mentioned in an ancient text called

---

13. M.S.S. : Leisem Lol Ariba
“Mallem Nongkhong Koiba”. In this ancient text one “Leimaren Sidabi” who was regarded as a symbol of pregnant women claimed about the practice of counting system during the pregnancy period of Nongda Laien Pakhangba. Atombapu Sharma claimed that “the Meitei is an ancient nation having an ancient literatures more advanceely civilized than that of pre-vedic period\textsuperscript{15}. So, it can be suggested that Manipuri letter scripts and countable system has own genuine independent cosmic theory along with different entities.

The written chronicles of the Manipuri which deals with various aspects of the culture and history of the people shared that the number of Manipur alphabets are 36 (thirty six) which including ‘ANJI’. Actually ‘ANJI’ is not a script but it is regarded the beginning of alphabet and it is represented by this symbol \(\text{ampire} \). In the old tantric system of the people of Manipur, “ANJI” is regarded as “SUN” i.e., the source of strength and energy and head of the Taobiriolai divine script. Its also described as the beginner of alphabet.

Like any others scripts, the history of the origin and development of Manipur scripts is still quite obscured. Apart from this, there is also another problem particularly in the fixation of the numbers of alphabet. There are four groups of school, i.e., the school of 18 (eighteen) alphabets, 27 (twenty seven) alphabets and 35 (thirty five) alphabets, and 36 (thirty six) alphabets.

The school of 18 (eighteen) alphabets strongly claimed that the 18 letter script is the only original Manipuri script. They are of the opinioned that the origin of the development of the script is directly related with the

\textsuperscript{15} Atombpu Sharma, Panditraj : Meitei Gi Sangkriton Mahayagya, Imphal 1959, P. 39.
parts of the human body. Therefore, they claimed that the alphabets should be pronounced as:

1. Kok (Head)  2. Sam (Hair)  3. Lai (Forehead)
4. Mit (eye)  5. Pa (Eyelashes)  6. Na (Ear)
7. Chin (Mouth)  8. Tin (Saliva)  9. Khou (Throat)
10. Ngou (Adenoids)  11. Thou (Heart)  12. Waii (Heart)
13. Yaang (Spinal Cord)  14. Huk (Body)  15. Un (Skin)
16. Ee (Blood)  17. Fam (Abdomen)  18. Atiyaa (Space)

The school of 27 (twenty seven) letters claimed that the 27 written script is the only indigenous archaic script. According to their views, the letters should be pronounced as:

1. Kok (Head)  2. Sam (Hair)  3. Lai (Forehead)
4. Mit (eye)  5. Pa (Eyelashes)  6. Na (Ear)
7. Chin (Mouth)  8. Tin (Saliva)  9. Khou (Throat)
10. Ngou (Adenoids)  11. Thou (Heart)  12. Waii (Heart)
13. Yaang (Spinal Cord)  14. Huk (Body)  15. Un (Skin)
16. Ee (Blood)  17. Fam (Abdomen)  18. Atiyaa (Space)

And another 9 (nine) letters read as,


It is also said that the formation of this 27 script is developed from the parts of the human body. However, in the case of 9(nine) letters viz, Gok, Jham, Raai, Baa, Jil, Dil, Ghou, Bham they do not mentioned anything about the parts of human body from which the scripts is developed.

One of the 36 (thirty six) school of script known as ‘Phullo School of script’. This group has strongly claimed that the script was being an earliest script which used by Manipuri ancestors in ancient time. As per the observation of the script available in the form of coin, the chief epigraphy of India given his opinion that “the script is as old as Proto-Bengali”. Further, they suggested, toward the original sounding system of the script is divided into two features, like as “Thingdaba Mayek” (vowel) and “Phongdaba Mayek” (consonant). The original sound or pronunciation system of the script are as:

THINGDABA MAYEK

1. OM  2. ARA  3. ERA  4. RAK
5. UOON  6. OUM  7. ANG  8. ENG
9. YEM  10. YEI  11. AM.

PHONGDABA MAYEK

12. LAI  13. KAK  14. DHAN  15. NONG
16. YANG  17. TAN  18. PAN  19. CHAM
20. HAM  21. SAN  22. GAM  23. DAM
24. MEE  25. FAN  26. KHAN  27. GHAM
28. JAM  29. RANG  30. NGAM  31. BAM
32. THAK  33. JHAM  34. GHAM  35. WONG
36. ECHAM\textsuperscript{18}

The above phullo school of script is not only difference in pronunciation style but the figure and shape of the script also isolate when comparison with other available script of the style. But there is not yet found any scientific evidence or clear picture about the original theory and background the evolution of the script.

The school of 35 (thirty five) alphabet claims that the Manipur scripts is one of the oldest alphabet so far available in the human civilization.

The phonetical sounds of 35 letters script are as follows:

33. Sa. 34. Ha. 35. Ksha

Each of the 35 alphabet/letters are also accompanied with different parts of human body and divided into male, female and eunuch. P.Gunindro Singh said Manipur has its own script through indigenous enterprises. However, no fact has been established so far about the antiquity of writing in Manipur. The problem has been one of the most important controversy in the history

---

of Manipur which requires further investigation through interdisciplinary approaches.\textsuperscript{20}

The alphabet of 35 script was used during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakriti Singh of Manipur. This was evidenced in the correspondence between the Maharaja and British and it was published in the journal of "Asiatic Society of Bengal" in 1877.Dr.G.A.Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India.Vol.III Part III also mentioned that his information about 35 alphabet was on the basis of Sarang Pandit.

According to the traditional believe the following alphabets were developed through divine characters of gods. For example:

1. \( \text{Ka} \) - is male, it is Pakhangba
2. \( \text{Kha} \) - is male, it is Atiya Sidaba
3. \( \text{Ga} \) - is female, it is Laisana, Consort of Pakhangba
4. \( \text{Gha} \) - is female, it is Leimarel
5. \( \text{Nga} \) - is eunuch, it is Asiba (Primeval deity)
6. \( \text{Cha} \) - is male, it is Nongpok Apanba
7. \( \text{Chha} \) - is male, it is Nongpok Poklen
8. \( \text{Ja} \) - is female, it is Namungbi Leimarel

\textsuperscript{20} "Origin and Development of Meetei Script" – Paper presented by Dr. P. Gunindro Singh, 20\textsuperscript{th} November 1988 (MU).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Jha - is male, it is Koubaren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Cha - is male, it is Nongpok Poklen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Ta - is male, it is Yangoi Ningthou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Tha - is male, it is Korouhanba, it is Lairen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Da - is female, it is Phuren Leima, tillun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Dha - is enuch it is both male and female, it is Panthoibi Lairun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Na - is male, it is Khana Chaoba, tillun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Ta - is male, it is Soraren, Apanba, Leirun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Tha - is male, it is Thongaren Lairun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Da - is female, it is Lammaba Lairun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Dha - is female, it is Iraileima, tillun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Na - is enuch, it is Laisna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Pa - is male, it is Nongpopk Asiba Lairun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Pha - is male, it is Sanathong Pummarunba, tillun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Ba - is female, it is Laikhurenbi, Lairun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>🌼</td>
<td>Bha - is female, it is Lamleima, Lairun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
25. Ḥa - is eunuch, it is Marjing, Leirun

26. ḫu - is male, it is Koubaren, tillun

27. ᶻ - is male, it is Pakhangba

28. ṭā - is female, is Numitleima, it is the amniotic covering of Pakhangba (Naoyom of Pakhangba)

29. ṣē - is enuch, is Leimarel Ireima, it is also called Mawao Leima

30. ṭu - is female, it is Panthoibi

31. ṣu - is male, it is Keirungba, eunuch, tillun

32. ṣa - is male, it is Taoroinai

33. ṣa - is male, it is Leipuba Chunabiba

34. ṣa - is male, it is Atiya Sidaba

35. ṭu - is male, it is Atiya Sidaba, Asiba and Konjin Tingthokpa

With the help of these letters, the ancient people of this place had successfully recorded all events in the “Puyas”\(^{22}\). Besides, they also maintained the zodiacal signs such as stars, planets and planetary movements on the basis of other letters. The use of these letters were mainly found in

---

the religious practices particularly in the hymn, prayers and chants, etc. In the early period of time the people used these letters in the form of the symbol of a particular religious belief.

Still it is quite obscure to know about the exact period of time from which the systematic writing system started. However, it was first evolved during regime of king Kiyamba (1467 - 1508 A.D.) and composition of the state chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba commenced from 33 A.D.. Subsequently, king Khagemba (1592 - 1652 A.D.) was during his time a large number of manuscripts of different aspects were written and all the folk stories was transformed to book form. But it is very interesting to note that all these works did not mention the name, the writer and time of his writing.

The ancient Manipur script was quite popular even during the period of king Garibaniwaz (1709-1478), Ramayana, Birat Parva, Data Karna and biographies of king Garibaniwaz viz, Takhel Ngamba and Samjok Ngamba etc. were written in ancient Manipuri script. The use of Manipuri script was continued till late period. In the agreement signed between Raja Gambhir Singh and East India Company on 10th April 1833, the king of Manipur put his signature in ancient Manipuri script. According to Prof. Kalidas Nag, “the Meitei script has existed long before the period of Asoka”.

According to Dr. Brown, the Manipuris posses a written character of their own which seems a modification of the Devanagari. This character

23. *Opcit : Thambal Angou Sing : Meitei Mayak Imphal 1947, P.2*
is said to be very ancient, only a few can write it of late years the Bengali character has been chiefly used, except in cases relating to Manipuri itself.

Mr. Damant says, the old Manipuri alphabet was introduced from Bengal in the reign of Charairongba who flourished about 1700 AD.25

The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Indian Empire mentioned that south of the Naga Hills lies the state of Manipur and known as Kuki-Chin-Meitei, the official language of the state is only one of them which possesses an alphabet and the literatures.26

Again T.C. Hudson observed that "Local tradition and the art of witting was acquired from the Chinese, who came to Manipur about 1540 A.D.27

However, it is very difficult to share the views of Mr. Damant and T.C. Hudson, because the Meitei script as evidenced by "Khoibu Inscription" was evolved during the period of King Sameirang (518 AD). And the early writing of Manipuri was acquired from China also may not be able to accept as the Chinese script is vertical and indeographic of pictorial (as discussed earlier on Chapter 2 of this thesis), whereas that of the Meitei script is horizontal.

26. Imperial Gazetteers of India, Vol.-1, Pub. under the authority of His Majesty’s Secretary of State for India, Oxford 1907, P. 387.