Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The aim and objective of the present study is to give an exhausted and detailed phonetic description of Meiteilon (Manipuri). Meiteilon is one of the major languages spoken in the North East region, in the state of Manipur. It has developed into a literary language and produced many works. Some of the literary writings have been awarded by the Sahitya Academy of India, in recent years. But, unfortunately, very little work has been done on the language itself, especially in the field of phonetics. To fill this gap at least to some extent, I undertake this subject, phonetic study of Meiteilon. In this study I propose to give here a detailed and an exhaustive description of the speech sounds of Meiteilon.

1.1. Meiteilon

"Meithei is the chief language of the Manipur valley, and has apparently had a long and independent development. Meithei is the (chief) official language of the state which all other tribes have to use in their dealings with the rulers. It is probable that a closer examination will show that the apparent gulf between Meithei and the other Kuki-chin languages is filled up by intermediate dialects. But this much seems certain, that Meithei has preserved some tracks of a more ancient stage of phonetically development. It sometimes agrees more closely with Burmese, and even with Tibetan, than with the Kuki-Chin languages proper" (Grierson, 1967, p. 8).
"The valley of Manipur is inhabited by a people who call themselves Meithei. According to their own traditions, the Mayarang tribe has come from the South, the Khumals from the east, and the Meithei proper and the Luyangs from the North-West. The surrounding hill tribes assert that they are the progenitors of the Manipuri race" (Grierson, 1967, p. 20).

Meiteilon, a language of Kuki-Chin group (Grierson), in the Tibeto-Burman family, is an agglutinative language. It is spoken by a population of 12,04,966 according to the 1991 census of India, in the valley of Mainpur surrounded by nine mountain ranges, situated at the most eastern part of India, bordering Burma in the east and south Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the south and Assam in the west. Meiteilon is also spoken in the neighboring places such as Burma, Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal and Bangladesh. It is the official language of the state and lingua-franca between different tribes who speak different dialects (see maps on pp. 2-4).

Meiteilon has its own script in Bramhanical script known as Meitei script. From the time of Maharaja Garibniwaz (1709-1748), Devanagri script was found use on the coins. Next from the time of king Laabanga Chandra (1798-1801 A.D.), eldest surviving son and successor of Maharaja Bhagya Chandra, coins were stamped in Assamese-Bengali script (Manipuri Language by Khellchandra). From this we can assume that the old Meitei script might have been in use till the end of 17th century. Further, we can assume that by the end of the second-half of 16th century, the Hindu missionaries had come to Mainpur for preaching Hindu religion. This new religion was adopted by the kings and those who were in the court and thus the use of Devanagri
script was started at least on the coins. Then, by the mid 18th century, another group, the Bengali missionaries came to preach Vishnavism in Mainpur. This time the event was quite different from the previous preaching. Influenced by these Bengali missionaries the king collected all the written literary works and burnt them down to dust which were written in the old script. Thus, the new Bengali script was forced on to all the common people who were not ready to do that. This is how the old Meitei script was destroyed and the new Bengali script came to exist. Even then in part of the valley the old script was found to be used. (Administration Report 1893, page 12). There have been constant attempt to revive this old script by the revivalists group and now this script has come to life again by putting it to schools and use in different fields. It has very recently (21st August 1993) been included as one of the 18 National languages of India in the eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

To sum up, from the numismatic evidence so far discovered, three types of alphabets were current in Manipur. It was found that coins were stamped in Meitei script before Maharaja Garibniwaz. From the time of Maharaja Garibniwaz, Devanagri script was used on the coin. From the time of King Laabanga Chandra, coin were stamped in Assamese-Bengali script.

1.2. Meiteilon And Kuki-Chin Group

The territory inhabited by the Kuki-Chin Tribes extends from the Naga Hills in the north down into the Sandowy District of Burma in the south; from the Myittha river in the east, almost to the Bay of Bengal in the west. It is almost filled up by hills and mountain ridges, separated by deep valleys.
A great chain of mountains suddenly rises from the plains of eastern Bengal, about 220 miles North of Calcutta, and stretches eastward in a bordering mass of spur and fidgets, called successively the Garo, Khasi, and Naga Hills. The elevation of the highest points increases towards the east, from about 3,000 feet in the Garo Hills to 8,000 and 9,000 in the region of Manipur.

This chain merges, in the east, into the spurs which the Himalayas shoot out from the north of Assam towards the south. From here a great mass of mountain ridges starts southwards, enclosing the alluvial valley of Manipur, and thence spreads out westwards to the south of Sylhet. It then runs almost due north and south, with crossing ridges of smaller elevation, through the districts known as the Chin hills, the Lushai hills, hill Tipperah, and the Chittagong hill tracts. Farther south the mountainous region continues, through the Arakan hill tracts, and the Arakan Yoma, until it finally sinks into the sea at Cape Negroes, the total length of the range being some seven hundred miles.

The greatest elevation is found to the North of Manipur. Thence it gradually diminishes towards the south where the ridge enters the north of Arakan it again rises, with summits upwards of 8,000 feet high, and a mass of spurs is thrown off in all directions. Towards the south the western off-shoots diminish in length, leaving a track of alluvial land between them and the sea, while in the north the eastern off-shoots of the Arakan Yoma run down to the banks of the Irawaddy.

This vast mountainous region, from the Jaintia and Naga Hills in the north, is the home of the Kuki-Chin tribes. One can find them besides, in the valley of Manipur, and, in small settlements, in the Cachar plains and Sylhet.
According to Grierson, Meiteilon, the chief languages of Manipur, differs from other Kuki-Chin languages in many respects that it must be classified as a separate group. Probably owing to the fact it has developed into a literary language, their form of speech gives the impression of possessing a peculiar archaic character. Although they have become thoroughly subjected to Hinduism, they have not adopted any Aryan tongue. Meiteilon; is the official state language of the state and there are many dialects surrounding this language.

The Kuki-Chin languages are closely correlated with all the surrounding groups of Tibeto-Burman family, the Bodo and Naga languages to the North, Kachin to the east, and Burmese to the east and south. The Kuki-Chin languages must be subdivided into two branches, Meitei and the Kuki-Chin languages, especially, Meiteilon has closer link with the Kachin groups.

The link of these different dialects and the Kachin group and between Meiteilon and Kuki-Chin Languages proper can be observed from the vocabulary given below. Meiteilon, Thado, Lushei, Lai, Rangkhol, Khami, and Khyang have been given as representatives of the different sub-groups. The corresponding forms in Kachin have been added in an eighth column (Grierson, p.10, reproduced on p. 9).
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Meitei</th>
<th>Thado</th>
<th>Lushei</th>
<th>Lai</th>
<th>Rangkhol</th>
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The preceding list of vocabulary shows the close connection among all these mentioned has more points of agreement with Kachin than the other Kuki-Chin languages proper.

The close connection between Kachin and the Kuki Chin languages, especially, Meiteilon, can not be doubted, and Meitei must be considered as the link between the groups (Grierson, 13). But there are also many points of resemblance between Meitei and Kuki-Chin than between Meitei and any other Tibeto-Burman languages, such as
Grierson, even intended to call Meiteilon as Meitei-Chin. It has largely influenced the other dialects spoken in the surrounding hilly regions of Manipur and in some parts of Nagaland, Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, West-Bengal, Burma and in Bangladesh.

Meiteis are still animism in their religious beliefs, believing in a variety of good, neutral and evil spirits. However, the younger generation seems to discard their religious beliefs, under the influence of modern science and communism, although, they still believe in god and they are attending various religious ceremonies. From the religious point of view, the Meiteis can be divided into three groups: the Vaishnab Hindus, the Meitei Marup (Sanamahi cult), the Meitei Christians. There is also another section of people who claim that they do not believe in religious ceremonies either at home or outside.

The Meiteis were not originally Vaishnab Hindus. They were converted to Vaishnabism sometime around 1755. Even after their conversion, the Meiteis continued to worship their ancestral gods and goddesses along with the Hindus gods.

The Meitei Marup or Sanamahi cult are revivalists. They are trying their best to revive the old religion, script, and other ceremonies of the Meiteis.

1.3. Dialects And Cultural Subdivisions

The Meiteis are under seven clans, each clan having various surnames. The clans are: (a) Mangang, (b) Angom, (c) Luwang, (d) Khuman, (e) Moirang, (f) Khaba-Nganba, and (g) Chenglei or Sarangleishangthem. The various surnames coming under each of the clans are:
(a) Mangang - Sapam, Lourenbam, Thoudam, Waikhom, Khwairakpam, Yengkhom etc.
(b) Augom - Angom, Longjam, Lairellakpam, Wahengbam, Ningombam, Akoijam etc.
(c) Luwang - Khumukcham, Arangbam, Mayengbam, Abujam, Longkhumukcham etc.
(d) Khumnan - Laishram, Ngangbam, Panganbam, Sanjenbam, Yurenjam, Tokpam, etc.
(e) Moirang - Chongtham, Moirangthem, Thangjam, Kabrambam, Wayengbam etc.
(f) Khaba - Nganba - Khuraijam, Khumujam, Longjengbam etc.
(g) Chenglei-Leishangthem - Leishangthem, Soraisem, Tongbram etc. (P.C. Thondam, 1980; pp. xii-iii).

These clans although they are now united under the Meiteis, originally the Mangangs, were different kingdoms, and they were engaged in frequent wars among themselves. Although, these divisions have very little to do from the linguistic points of view, have certain amount of psychological and cultural validity. Till today, intermarriage within the same clan, even though they have different surnames, is not permissible. Apart from this, except the Mangangs or Ningthoujas, intermarriage among the clans are interacted, that is, the Mangangs or Ningthoujas clan intermarry with all the six clans while a Khuman or Luwang or Angom or Moirang can not marry with all the clans. The clan here does not mean dialects. The language described in the present research is spoken in Imphal, which is regarded as the standard one. There are various local differences in this languages spoken at different places like: Kakching, Thanga, Pheiyeng, Nongmaikhong, Ngaikhong, Khurkhul, Sekmai, Andro, Chairel etc.
1.4. **The Objective And Scope Of The Present Study**

By observing the few research works done in the past so far, it can be said that the descriptions of the sounds of Meiteilon available today are very preliminary, not adequate, not exhaustive nor detailed and mostly incomplete. There is disagreement among the researchers on many points, especially, on the question of tones and vowels description. By using the available works as reference material, a more detailed and exhaustive description of the sounds of the language under study can be pursued, which will then serve as the data-base for any other study at any other level of linguistic structure later on.

Later if possible the word list in the data will also be presented with glosses in English along with an audio cassette which could be used as reference materials for further linguistic analysis. This present study can be considered, an additional contribution to the descriptive studies of languages, and a necessary prerequisite to other descriptive studies (phonological, morphological and many other levels of language structure) of the language. This research will attempt to provide a detailed account of the speech sounds of Meiteilon which will include a detailed phonetic description, description of the phonemes of Meiteilon including a detailed account of tones that are phonemic in this language and their interaction with the vowel sounds.

Peter Ladefoged redefines the scope and domain of 'phonetics' in these words - "Phonetics is concerned with the speech sounds that occur in the languages of the world. We want to know what these sounds are, how they fall into patterns, and how they change in different circumstances. Most importantly, we want to know what aspect of the sound are necessary for conveying the meaning of what is being said. The
first job of a phonetician is therefore trying to find out what people are doing when they are talking and when they are listening to speech" (Ladefoged, 1975; p.1).

Speech is the most highly skilled muscular activity that human beings ever achieved, requiring the precise and rapid co-ordination of more than eighty different muscles, many of them paired (Laver, 1994, P.1). It is the prime means of communication for virtually every social group, and the structure of society itself would be substantially different if we had failed to develop communication through speech.

Since speech sounds are the product of human anatomy and physiology, it is not surprising to find similarities and dissimilarities across languages of the world. There are sounds which are extremely common in languages while other sounds are much more restricted in their distribution in the languages of the world. In order to explain why certain sounds are more frequent in their occurrence than others, one needs to turn to the field of phonetics, the study of the speech sounds. In this field, phonetics, three branches are generally recognized : 1. Articulatory phonetics, 2. Acoustics phonetics and, 3. Auditory phonetics.

An exhaustive, objective study and description of a speech sound must include the articulatory activities of speech organs producing the sound, its transmission through the medium of air as sound waves, as well as the auditory effect that these waves produce on a normal human auditory system. For a number of years phonetic descriptions were restricted to the first aspect only i.e. articulatory activities.

Since the invention of sound spectrograph, pattern playback and various other equipments, research in the area of acoustic phonetics also gained pace as a result of
which, today we are in a position to give a fairly detailed and precise description of the acoustic characteristics of speech also. The third aspect - the auditory effect - audition and perception of speech continues to remain the least understood area of phonetic research.

1.5. Some Basic Concepts In Phonetics

Before I wish to go to the particular language in question, Meiteilon (Manipuri) which I am going to analyze in the following chapters, I would like to present first some of the important general concepts which are related with the present topic such as syllable, tone and tone languages. I do hope that this presentation on these few concepts will be helpful to some extent in understanding the present study on Meiteilon.

1.5.1. Syllable

There are several theories in both phonetics and phonology which have tried to defined syllable.

From the phonetic viewpoint, attempts have been made to define the syllables of a language on the basis of the articulatory effort needed in order to produce them. The 'pulse' or 'motor' theory of syllable production proposed by the psychologist R.H. Stetson (1892-1950) argued that each syllable corresponds to an increase in air-pressure, air from the lungs being released as a series of chest pulses. An alternative phonetic approach attempts to define the syllable in auditory terms: the prominence theory argues that in a string of sounds, some are intrinsically more 'sonorous than others and that each 'peak' of sonority corresponds to the centre of a syllable. These peaks are best illustrated by vowels, which have the greater carrying-power. The less
sonorous sounds provide 'valleys' of prominence, and are best illustrated by the closures and narrowing which produce consonants. (David Crystal, 1985, 297-8). Pike (1967) has argued that it is a universal of syllable composition that a constituent structure break exists between a syllable nucleus and it's margins. The argument is based, in part, on distributional or phonotactic considerations (Elizabeth O. Selkirk). The syllable consists of three phonetic parts: (a) the onset, (b) the peak or nucleus, and (c) the coda. This analysis of the syllable (Pike and Pike, 1947), as presented below,

```
syllable
  /\  
 on-set /\  peak
   \  /  \ 
      /\  coda
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divides a CVC syllable into C-VC rather then CV-C or C-V-C. In so doing, we are able to capture the important distinction between open and closed syllables, as well as between heavy and light syllables. An open syllable ends in a vowel, while a closed syllable is "checked" or "arrested" by a consonant. A CV syllable thus has a core with a zero coda, while a CVC syllable has a core with a V peak and a C coda. The initial consonant onset is irrelevant in determining the phonological properties of a syllable. (Larry. M. Hyman, 1975, pp. 188-9)).

1.5.2. Tone And Tone Languages

"Pike (1948:5) draws a distinction between register tone languages and contour tone languages. In a pure register tone languages, tonal contrasts consist of different levels of steady-pitch heights, that is, perceptually, such tones neither rise nor fall in their production. A pure contour tone language consists of some tones which are not level in their production but rather rise, fall, or rise and fall in pitch. In general, African
Register Tone Languages And Contour Tone Languages

"The phrase register tone system can be taken to mean a system where the relevant feature of word-identifying pitch behaviour is the relative height of the syllabic pitches concerned within the speaker's pitch-span. In such register tone systems, syllables may show only level pitches, only changing pitches (rises or falls), or a mixture of both level and changing pitches. In the case of changing pitches, each of the end-points of the falls and rises are identified with one of the level pitches" (Laver, 1994, pp. 465-6).

"The phrase contour tone systems applies to the system of tones of a language where the relevant feature of word-identifying pitch behaviour is less the relative height of the syllabic pitch concerned, but more its shape as a trajectory, together with its general placement in the speaker's pitch-span. Finally, mixed register/contour tone systems are also found". (Laver, 1994, p. 466).

The languages of South-East Asia characteristically make use of contour tone systems. Examples of languages using such tone systems are Mandarin Chinese and Thai. In Thai, for instance, five tones are used to distinguish monosyllabic words of CV structure with long vowels, when produced in isolation (Larry M. Hyman). Indo-aryan language Punjabi too has three contour tones in contrast (Gill & Gleason). What we find in the language under study is an interesting combination of Register and Contour tones both.
1.6. References


