CHAPTER I

GENERAL INTRODUCTION
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1.1 The Manipuri Society and Language

Manipur is a state situated in the north-east corner of India. Manipur is bounded by Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the south, Upper Myanmar in the east and Cachar district of Assam in the west. The present territorial area is 22,327 sq.km. It lies within 23.83 degree N to 25.68 degree N latitude and 93.03 degree E to 94.48 degree E longitude. A fertile alluvial valley extends north-south in the middle and it is surrounded on all sides by hill ranges forming a part of the eastern Himalayas. Though constituting only about 12 p.c. of the total geographical area, the valley is settled by more than 75 p.c. of the total population of 2.4 million (2001 Census) (Manorama Year Book 2005 : 572). Manipur is known as the “land of jewels”. Among the Manipuris, the Meiteis form the predominant ethnic group and they traditionally inhabit the valley. The surrounding hill ranges are settled by many tribes. They are broadly grouped together and known as the NAGA and the KUKI tribes. While the Meiteis thrive on wet cultivation, the tribal population subsist largely on the slash-and-burn technique of cultivation and depend heavily on the valley for their needs. In recent decades, however, the steady influx of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent into the hill areas and into parts of the valley and also the internal migration of tribes from the valley, have disturbed the traditional settlement patterns and demographic balance both in the hills and the valley of Manipur.

The tribal ethnic groups have their mutually distinct cultural heritage. The members of a tribe communicate among themselves in their mother tongue, but the Manipuri language is the lingua franca used for inter-tribal communication and by all Manipuris settled inside and outside Manipur. The tribal speech forms are in varying stage of development; they are all written in the Roman scripts. The Manipuri language had evolved from Meiteilon, the native language of the Meiteis. All the tribal speech forms as well as the Manipuri language belong to Tibeto-Burman sub-family,
just as all the indigenous ethnic groups in Manipur are of the southern Mongoloid stock racially. Manipuri is also called Meiteilon, Meiteiron, Meetei and Meithei. However, apart from Hindu Meiteis and the Meiteis follow the traditional religion of Sanamahi, the Meitei Pangals, i.e., Manipuri Muslims, also speak Manipuri as their mother tongue.

The Manipuri language is spoken by about 30 lakhs people who inhabitate primarily in the valley region of Manipur and the adjoining states of India such as Assam, Tripura, and the neighbouring countries of India such as Myanmar, Bangladesh. The language is locally known as Meiteilon as it is the mother tongue of Meitei, a Mongoloid race considered to be the most advanced section of Kuki-Chin people (Roy, 1973: 3). The term Meiteilon is a compound word made of two words Meitei and lon : Meiteilon = (Meitei + lon). The word lon has the gloss 'language' and so Meiteilon has the meaning of 'language of Meitei'. There are 30 other different mother tongues in Manipur. Manipuri language is the lingua franca and Official language of the state of Manipur. It is spoken by about 60% of the state population (38th Annual Report 2001 : 77). According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Book of the Year, 1993 (1994 : 628 - 662), there are 11,80,000 native speakers of Manipuri. The Manipuri language and literature joined the national mainstream in 1972 when the Sahitya Academy, the highest body of language and literature of India gave recognition to Manipuri (Manipur Sahitya Parisad 1986 : 82). Since August 20, 1992, the language has become one of the national languages of India it being included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India by 71st amendment. The language has rich literature and according to Chatterjee(1979), Manipuri is a "highly advanced language of Tibeto-Burman family in India" and it has "quite an advanced literature worthy for having a place in the same line with those of the advanced Aryan languages". Manipuri is taught as a subject upto the Post-graduate level in the Manipur University and the Assam University. Further, research in several aspects of the language is being carried out in the two Universities and many other Universities within and outside India. Manipuri is also a medium of instruction upto the undergraduate level in Manipur.
Manipuri language is a direct descendent of conglomerations of Tibeto-Burman speech forms of seven different principalities namely, Angom, Khaangaanba, Khuman, Luwaang, Mangaang, Moiraang, and Saraang Layshaang. It has been influenced and enriched by Indo-Aryan languages of Sanskrit origin and English.

1.2 Linguistic affinity

Manipuri belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. The Sino-Tibetan family branches out into the Siamese-Chinese and the Tibeto-Burman sub-families based on the word order — the Siamese-Chinese has SVO word order while the Tibeto-Burman has SOV pattern, where S stands for Subject, V stands for Verb, and O stands for Object.

A schematic diagram of the Sino-Tibetan language family (adapted from http://stedtberkeley.edu/html/STfamily.html) is given below:

![Sino-Tibetan Language Family Diagram]
Manipuri falls in the geographically determined group Kamarupan. Kamarupan is further sub grouped into Kuki-Chin-Naga, Abor-Miri-Dafla and Bodo-Garo subgroups. Although it has been generally acknowledged that Manipuri does not readily fit into any of these subgroups (along with Mikir and Mru), the traditional classifications put Manipuri in the Kuki-Chin-Naga subgroup. However, within Kuki-Chin-Naga, Manipuri is classified as a distinct group on its own (Grierson: 1903-28) under the heading Meithei, on the basis of the facts that it was already a major literary language of the Kuki-Chin-Naga group and that it had characteristics that differentiated it from both the Kuki-Chin languages proper as well as the Naga languages. There is still a need of collection of more data from other languages to determine the exact position of Manipuri within Kamarupan.

Although Manipuri native speakers mostly reside in the state of Manipur, there are native speakers in the neighbouring northeastern states of India, notably in Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, and West Bengal. In India, the total number of people who returned Manipuri as their mother tongue numbers 1,270,216 out of which 1, 110, 134 speakers reside in Manipur (census of India, 1991). There are Manipuri speakers in Bangladesh and Myanmar as well. The Manipuri population was 6,000 in Myanmar in 1931 and 92,800 in Bangladesh in 1982 as reported in http://www.ethnologue.com/.

It is generally accepted that the Manipuri language belongs to the Kuki-Chin sub-group of Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Sino-Tibetan family. The following linguists have already classified Manipuri language as under:

According to Grierson (Grierson 1904) the Manipuri language is a link language between the Kuki-Chin languages and the Kachin languages. Shafer (1974) included it under a separate branch called Meithei coming under the Kukish section of Burmic division of the Sino-Tibetan family. According to Benedict (Benedict 1972), the language belongs to the Kuki-Naga subgroup of the Kachin group of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Sino-Tibetan family and according to Burling (Burling 2003), the language itself is a distinct entity not to be treated as a member of the Kuki-Naga grouping but as a separate subgroup of the Kachin group of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family just as the Karbi language.
1.3 Manipuri writing system

Manipuri writing system may be included under Alphabetic Writing System (Gopendro 1998 : 1-28). Manipuri has two writing systems viz., (i) Old Writing system which is written with ancient and indigenous alphabets called ‘Meitei Mayek’ and (ii) Modern Writing system which is written with Bengali Alphabets. The ancient native Manipuri script, Meitei Mayek dates back to the 15th century A.D. (Bhatt 1995 : 2). All of the ancient Manipuri literatures (scriptures) written before the advent of Hinduism in Manipur in the 18th century A.D. were in Meitei Mayek. The Modern Writing System involving the Bengali alphabets is of recent origin and it was introduced in Manipur only after its adoption of Hinduism in the 18th century A.D. Presently the dominant writing system used in Manipuri is the Modern Writing system and most of the present publications in Manipuri including literature and newspapers employ this writing system. However, of late, there is a revivalist movement patronaged by the State Government for popularization of the Old Writing System i.e., in the native Manipuri script, Meitei Mayek. The alphabets used in the Modern Writing system are shown in Chart 1 and those used in the Old Writing System are shown in Chart 2.

Chart 1: Alphabets of Modern Writing System

INITIAL VOWEL SYMBOLS

अ आ इ ई उ ऊ ए ऐ
० ा ि उ ऊ ए ऐ
◌ ओ ऒ अं अः
◌ ऊ एः
### CONSONANT SYMBOLS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meetei Mayek</th>
<th>Pali</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>क</td>
<td>k</td>
<td>gh</td>
</tr>
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<td>ख</td>
<td>kh</td>
<td>g</td>
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<td>th</td>
<td>d</td>
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<td>ठ</td>
<td>t后备</td>
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<td>t</td>
<td>dh</td>
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<td>ks</td>
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<tr>
<td>रू</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>रू</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chart 2: Alphabets of Old Writing System**

Interestingly, the letters in Meetei Mayek are named after parts of the human body. Meanings of these names are indicated with the letters below. Sounds which the letters denote are indicated within brackets.

**Eyek Eepee**

(Original Letters)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meetei Mayek</th>
<th>Pali</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>नेल (nak)</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>नेल (nak)</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>नेल (nak)</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*kok (ka)* head  
*sam (sa)* hair  
*hai (la)* forehead  
*mit (ma)* eye  
*pa (pa)* eyelash  
*na (na)* ear  
*chil (cha)*  
*khou (kha)*  
*thou (tha)*  
*wa (wa)*
Lom Eevak
(Additional Letters)

gok (ga)
jham (jha)
rai (ra)
ba (ba)
jal (ja)
dil (da)
ghou (gha)
dhou (dha)
bham (bha)

Lonsum Eevak
(Letters with short ending)

kok (k)
la (l)
mit (m)
pa (p)
na (n)
til (i)
ngou (ng)
ce (ee)

Cheitap Eevak
(Vowel Signs)

atap (aa)
inap (i)
unap (u)
sounap (ou)
yetnap (e)
otnap (o)
cheinap (ei)
nung (ng)
Manipuri alphabet utilizes consonant letters, independent vowels, dependent vowel signs, punctuation, numerals and ancient sign. Manipuri makes use of 15 consonant and 6 vowel phonetic sounds. Later development is the inclusion of r as allophone of lateral l and voiced consonants b, d, j and g are derived from the voiceless counterparts of p, t, c and k making the number of consonants to 20. Due to the influence of neighboring languages another 4 sounds (bʰ, dʰ, jʰ and gʰ) were developed. It is written using Manipuri script. Manipuri is written from left to right and top to bottom, in the same manner as in English. All the consonants cannot combine with one another. There are three independent vowels only, and remaining vowels are dependent upon a consonant.

Each consonant letter represents a single consonant sound with inherent vowel, the vowel /a/. Letters are arranged in rows of three letters. There are seven non-syllabic (final) consonant letters. They represent only the consonant sounds and do not include the inherent vowel. To indicate a vowel sound other than the implicit one a vowel sign (Matra) is attached to the consonant. Explicit appearance of a matra in syllable overrides the inherent vowel. Three matras, out of seven used in Manipuri can exist above, one below and the remaining three to the right of the consonant to which it is applied. Consonant conjuncts in Manipuri are the combination of two consonants.
1.4 Issue of Bishnupriya

There is a need to distinguish Manipuri (Meithei/Meitei/Meiteilon) from Bishnupriya - a language spoken in Assam and parts of Bangladesh, which has a dominant Indo-Aryan character, especially since the speakers of this language claim that they are the erstwhile aborigines of Manipur. This claim seems far-fetched since for one reason, none of the neighbouring tribes of the Meitei have a reference to the Bishnupriyas in their folklore, whereas the Tangkhul, and the Kabui, among others, mention the Meitei in their folklore. Moreover, both the Tangkhul and Meitei folklore mention that the Tangkhul and the Meitei are of the same descent.

Moreover, the Bishnupriyas claim their descent from the legendary Mahabharata character Babruvahana, the son of the Pandava Arjuna. It may be worth recalling that the mother of Babruvahana was supposedly a princess of Manipur in the epic. However, there is neither Archaeological nor historical proof that the Manipur of the Mahabharata is the same as the present state of Manipur. Also, the official name of the state became Manipur only after it had been incorporated as part of the British Empire, and the Meitei called their kingdom Meitrobak or Kangleipak before the current name of Manipur came into use. So, the Bishnupriya intelligentsia need to re-check their facts before making such a far-fetched claim of lineage and descent.