



## EPIGRAPHY OF MANIPUR: ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT AND NATURE OF THE SCRIPT

**\*DR. S. JAYALAXMI DEVI**

*\*Assistant Professor Department of History NG College, Imphal, Manipur, India*

*Email: [sagolshemjayalaxmid@gmail.com](mailto:sagolshemjayalaxmid@gmail.com)*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The article is a humble attempt to look into the epigraphy of Manipur, origin, development and nature of the script. The materials of epigraphy provide valuable evidence regarding the political, cultural, linguistic and religious history of the region. It traces the evolution of the Meitei script and studies its structural and stylistic characteristics across different periods of history. By studying available sources, the article throws light the significance of script as a medium of identity and cultural continuity in Manipur. The study will contribute to a better understanding of the historical development of writing traditions and epigraphic heritage in Manipur.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Epigraphy, Meitei script, traditions, evolution*

### **Citation:**

Devi, S. J. (2026). *Epigraphy of Manipur: Origin, development and nature of the script. North Asian International Research Journal of Social Science & Humanities, 12(5), 24–33.* <https://doi.global.org/doi/10.2025/6a0ff635221d5>

### **INTROUDACTION**

Manipur, once an Asiatic kingdom is located at the extreme northeastern corner of India. The Manipur valley is a cradle of human civilization and it is surrounded by the hills in all sides. This geographic division is a determinant factor in the socio-economic and political historical development of the land. The valley inhabited by the Meiteis is one-tenth of the total area of the state, her dense population, highly fertile land, advanced technology and better socio-economic organizations led to the growth of kingdom. They speak linguistic sub-group of the Tibeto-

Burman family. The Meitei have their script and this script (Meitei Mayek) was included in the educational curriculum of Manipur. This paper is a humble attempt to look into the origin, growth and nature of script of the Meiteis of Manipur based on the available primary and secondary sources.

**Method:** The study has adopted interdisciplinary method particularly the application of knowledge of both history and anthropology. The necessary data are based on available primary and secondary sources.

## BACKGROUND OF THE SCRIPTS

The study deals with in a broader context to show the background of the evolution of different scripts in both regional and international perspectives. The earliest writing in the world is recorded in Sumer city of Mesopotamia ascribed to 5500 B.C.<sup>i</sup> in the form of picture writing on a limestone tablet. And the first baked clay tablet, which was dated as 3100 B.C.A.<sup>ii</sup> represented the inscribed symbols denoting various objects and parts of the body, and a sledge with other marks, probably counts. The ideogram represents more than the object drawn but related to it. Non-pictorial styles i.e. Cuneiform represents symbol drawn with single strokes by the wedge-ended pieces of reed. It is known as symbol writing.

Epigraphy does represent the transformation of the human actions and ideas in the form of writing mostly on stones and metals. The writing medium may be on the less perishable textures in the form of ideographic or alphabetic characters. The first and foremost alphabet was invented prior to 1000 B.C.<sup>iii</sup> a Semitic man in Asia Minor. It was known as Semitic or Phoenician alphabet. This is the origin of all the alphabetic scripts in the world. The ideographic writing survives till now in China and Japan. The alphabetic writing became more convenient than pictographic writing. Thus, people adopted the writing style and this style spread from near to far countries of the somatic people.

The Indus script was one of the earliest scripts found in India. John Marshall discovered it in 1922 A.D. at Harappa and Mohenjodaro now in Pakistan. As the Indus script is not yet deciphered properly by the people, A.H. Dani in his work had listed 537 symbols of different forms and figures, which is more pictographic in nature.<sup>iv</sup> A cursory examination of the Indus script shows that neither it is Sumerian nor any other known script. Some scholars are of the opinion that this script is ideographic while others pleaded as phonemes.

The Brahmi script is the first Indian alphabetic script. It is presumed that Brahmi is the origin of all the Indian scripts. So far, the Indian alphabetic script used as descended from Bharami with slight modification and derivations. India adopted the alphabetic script after the extinction of the Indus valley civilization. It is fact that Indian had employed alphabetic scripts prior to the refine of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, the great (268-232 B.C.).<sup>v</sup> But, the origin and evolution of the Brahmi, the conventional, popular, one for all alphabetic scripts are

sometimes to find a solution to this standard of academic status. However, A.H. Dani writes,<sup>vi</sup> "Its origin and growth are rooted in the civilization of the ancient world of which India was a member. The discovery of the Indus pictographs or ideographs or whatever the system of writing provides ample evidence of direct contact between India and the cultural centers of western Asia. The appearance of the Indo Aryans in history further strengthened this contact. It is in Western Asia also that the different stages in the evolution of alphabets are more or less clear. It is no wonder that the principle underlying alphabetic writing soon spread with trade and commerce and it may be suggested that as the Brahmins found this principle a great help in their Vedic recitals, the grammatical treatises." The Indians were maintaining the alphabetic system of writing until now with minor addition and omission from time to time since prior to the regime of emperor Ashoka down to the present day for 2000 years. Hence, A.H. Dani concludes that – "It is on the basis of these alphabets that we have to understand the origin and development of Brahmi."<sup>vii</sup>

As proved by the minute and critical analysis and synthesis of the earliest examples of Indian writing, the writing known to India was preceded over the grammar, though it conceives of vowels and consonants, still does not have pure consonants.<sup>viii</sup> Each Indian consonant, where not followed by a vowel explicitly it cannot be pronounced or spoken out. Hence, Indian consonants mostly imply on an inherent vowel, popularly and especially vested only on one vowel i.e. "a" and no other.<sup>ix</sup> Corresponding to this nature A.H. Dani put forth as- this peculiar characteristic of the Indian system is traced by David Diringer "to the influence of the Mamo language, in which the final "aleple" predominated." But, the necessity of this inherence is also felt in the Sanskrit language, in which the consonants are required to be pronounced with some definite vowel unless they are explicitly characterized as vowel less. It is therefore, not necessary to look further field forth is feature. The peculiar character of the Indian alphabet is the contribution of the Indian grammarians.<sup>x</sup> David Diringer's note regarding the nature of Indian alphabet is neutralized here by A.H. Dani.

After the minute and detail studies of the origin and nature of Brahmi, the Indian first and foremost alphabetic script so far known to the history and analytic synthesis of the features of the forms and figures of letters in Brahmi alphabet, some, modern cryptologists withstand to defend the research decision of their opponents which wrote as "The forms of the Sanskrit letters show that they and the related Hindu alphabets are derivatives, though much altered over, from Phoenician or some kindred primitive northern Semitic writing. Exactly how this was carried form the Mediterranean to India has not been determined." But it appears as the Brahmi alphabet in the inscriptions of the famous Buddhist king Asoka around 250 B.C." In the critical study of the origin of Brahmi, A.H. Dani put forth many grounds, fundamental, bases to oppose the statements and comments of the renowned alphabetic researcher, David Diringer and some remarkable lines are as follows:<sup>xi</sup>

There has also been controversy over the question of the particular branch of the Semitic alphabet Brahmi is derived. Opinions have south Semitic to North Semitic or particularized to Phoenician or to Aramaic the similarity with the North Semitic letters is the closest written this broad division Diringer prefers the "Aramaic alphabet is the prototype of the Brahmi script" since Aramaic is known to have been used right up to the borders of India. But the choice need not be limited to Aramaic alone as the Brahmi letters were not derived from the Semitic as is commonly understood, but are based on them A.H. Dani, even when he writes so had not directly point to the parental evolution and the originating point of history of this alphabet. Hence, he furnishes neither his affidavit in the language of "Neither was the Brahmi the pure invention of the Indian grammarians nor was the above alphabet (the writing prior to Emperor Asoka, the great) developed out of Brahmi."<sup>xii</sup>

### ORIGIN AND NATURE OF MEITEI SCRIPT

In the light of the above background, the evolution of Manipuri script has been discussed in the following section. The Meitei even though small in population, has their own script to which they are literature and lingua-franca. The name of the actual and exact inventor of the Meitei script is still in obscurity. As some Meitei scriptures of old literature referred in this subject as to have been assembled the letters from the resourceful persons migrated from different places and native scholars. It is observed that the assemblage was held during the tenure of office of king Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.).<sup>xiii</sup> According to Prof. Kalidas Nag, "The Meitei script has existed long before the period of Ashoka".<sup>xiv</sup>

It is also mentioned that after the assembled of about 15 to 20 letters as an alphabet, the scholars of the succeeding Meitei kings, like Jai Singh, Gambhir Singh, etc, reviewed and rendered to additions and developed the Meitei script. Hence, Meitei script is to mean the alphabet, which was in use in Manipur prior to 1891 A.D. The state has been trying to revive the script and introduced in the schools since king Khagemba (1597-1652).<sup>xv</sup> Even though the archaic Manipur alphabet was recognized as the alphabet of the state by the Khagemba and Bodhachandra Singh (1941-48 A.D.); but it was recognized partially by the modern, democratic and people's government of Manipur in 1980.<sup>xvi</sup> This recognition was on the viewpoints of the forms and figures of the features and denotations or the round representative signs determining from among the fundamental basic signs of the archaic sound representative. These signs are altogether 35 in number with an additional symbol of prayer (Anji=2) for the beginning of writing. This symbol of prayer is affined as accustomed to the traditional trend and trait of writing or scribing on the Meitei alphabet since it was invented and introduced.<sup>xvii</sup> The customary alphabet is designed and designated as the alphabet of the school of 35 letters nowadays after revolutionary therapeutic alphabet of the school of 18 letters was put forth to comfort the customary alphabet of the school of 35 letter in 1958-62.

Further a movement to have a conventional alphabet was run from every corner of intellectual, academic and middle classed peoples. Thus, a composite alphabet earring on the alphabet of the school of 18 letters lend earring some letters from the alphabet of each school of 35 letters, was formed to solve the problem of the people's demand in 1980 which was recognized in the same year by the government of Manipur. But appeals and acknowledgment of an alphabet, which can write all the language of the world, the care for affording a conventional and worth alphabet of Manipur and her people is in pending stage. P. Gunindro Singh<sup>xviii</sup> has stated that "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 controversies in the history of Manipur which requires further investigation through interdisciplinary approaches."

Manipur was the launching pad and, meeting harbour of the merchants and traders of the south and Southeast Asia and the market place of the Indians, Burmese Chinese etc. of the ancient and medieval historical ages. The merchants who so ever had their own indigenous or national script to write up in the transaction of buying and selling so to keep on account of gross profit. Hence even though those traders who calculated and accounted the amounts of sales and purchases in written ways and means. Manipur had the experience of writing character prior to the invention of her own script.

With the passing away of the ancient historical people of Manipur, inflows of immigrants of different nationalities from different directions took place; from the east and west began to come and encroach. In this way, the population of Manipur increased since the regime of Meitei king Kyamba (1467-1508).

The immigrants included the learned Brahmins who were habited in the Brahmi and Devanagari script, the Chinese, Thai and Shans who were accustomed to the Chinese pictographic writing and the Burmese, Thai, etc. were devoted to the Indian Pali script. But they were all writing in their own ways. The foreign diplomatic relation of Meitei king Kyamba and Pong king Khekhomba<sup>xix</sup> (Sao Ngan-Pha in his Shan Maine), points to the milestone introduction of recording king in Manipur even though the trends were cut short. It was done by Shan writer presented by Sao-Ngan-Pha<sup>xx</sup> in the Shan script. Manipur had also experienced the writing of Shan script for a short period. The Pong king offered a Mao Shan learned person named Loutareng as a gift to the Meitei king Kiyamba to set him in the allotment of work in the State Library and educational functions. So, the adoption of the Shan script as a measure of his literary recording and written record keeping conceived. Moreover, Captain Pemberton mentioned for his possession of Shan chronicle written in the Shan alphabet during the tenure of office as a physical instructor and Assistant commissioner of Manipur levy. Deputed by the then East India Company in 1825-30 A.D. as commented in his book, "The North Eastern Frontier of British India."

The main ground work and fundamental footing of the Meitei script as exhibited by its letters are on the basis of the Tibeto-Shan alphabetical foundation while the major plinth and substratum on the Brahmi Devanagari colloquial framework in grouping and pronunciations of the letter in the Meitei script. Hence, the Brahmi script is the progenitor and the Kharoshthi alphabet is the ancestress of the Meitei script as the latter alphabet was the influential informal originator of the chain of scripts from Tibet to Shan States. Therefore, the Meitei script has the motto, motive and motivation of hybrid naturalism and mannerism with its particularities and specialized of the localized alphabets of the sound system and symbolic scheme of the Mongoloid characteristics. These alphabetical letters did spread towards the east to Khofan passing through the hilly routes of the Pamir ranges.

Since the business of trade and commerce carried such culture frequently as the essential equipment of merchant business, the motto and motive of the writing encroached into the various places of the ancient and medieval Tibet. But as the Pali script, well-known alphabet of the Buddhist literature "Tripitaka" had dominated over the use of the Indo-Greek script of Kharosthi. Hence even though there were influences and defectiveness of Kharosthi script on the letters of the various local alphabets of Tibet, the fundamental rule and the grouping etc. the system of letters of the Brahmi had controlled and ruled the ground and frame works of the indigenous alphabet of Tibet. From Tibet a line of series of alphabets are adopting to the reach of the Shan state in Myanmar. The chain of local alphabets swaying over the different localities are portraying her under by gathering the alphabetical letters from the inscriptions standing in chain between Tibet and the Shan States of upper Myanmar.<sup>xxi</sup>

From facts and findings of the letters of the inscriptions of the (1) Kyayksa (2) Patimolaha, (3) Boromat (4) Dbuchan (5) Dbumed (6) Kani (7) Pasipa (8) Aliom and (9) Meitei and exhibited letters of Shan script it is brought to light that the hybrid script to the parentage of the Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts are scattering everywhere from the Tibetan region to the Shan States from where the radical roots of the Ahom and Meitei scripts were brought in their respective kingdoms in early times.

The Brahmi-Devanagari alphabets, carried into Manipur by the western immigrants and Tibeto-Shan alphabets brought in Manipur by the eastern immigrants mainly from the Pong was flourishing side by side as the means of writing since the time of king Kyamba. But, the essentiality for having a conventional and common alphabet of Manipur was felt and desired by the academic and scholar peoples and scholars of letters during the regime of king Khagemba.<sup>xxii</sup> The king, being the fountain of almost all the archetypes of cultural models, mottos and motives of Manipur schemed and projected to own such alphabet. To fulfill this object of common interest and general necessity Khagemba, the state high command, initiating as a man of letters and pressuring the

academic scholastic and scholarly personnel in his court, convened meetings to solve the transitional drift of the burning question of the alphabetical measure. Truly speaking, it was a bone of contention between the ethos of the easterners and the westerners. But by the hard and forceful efforts of king Khagemba invented by creation composition or compilation and introduced the State sponsored Meitei alphabet in 1615 A.D. for general use in the field of literacy and literary education.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The alphabet which introduced during the reign Khagemba prevailed as in the same forms during the reign of his three succeeding kings is appeared to embrace and initiated the alphabetical traits and trends of the bond of the Brahmi family scripts and Brahmi-Kharoshthi family scripts. The bond is probable to form by admitting and admiring the treaties of mining, and combing the alphabets of both the families and their descended scripts in the "Brahmi-Kharoshthi from their respective chains of descendants. It is obvious that it brought out a common and general process of the Meitei script in the hybridized forms, physical structures order, grouping etc. of the two chains. The two chains are: The chain of Brahmi family scripts is old. The first chain was coming through the Indian mainland and other eastern regions of India while the second chain was coming just beyond the ranges and offshoots of Himalaya in Manipur.

The Brahmi-Kharosthi bond can be seen in the Meitei alphabet as its contains of only one pure-bart-vowel sound from which other vowels are derived and modified by addition of other sign representatives which represent the basic radical sounds of the medial vowels as in Kharoshthi script and 15 consonants which are evaluated, pronounced and valued with their inherent "a" as in Brahmi script. The consonants of its 6 and the semi vowels while one of them had modified or manifested into the contractile sound forms by writing in the same feature of the headline of the letter with the common headline as the top of the vertical for the up and down marking while proceeding through the two horizontal lines of the left to right writing in the motto, feature or scripture of the fundamental parental letter. There are also joint double vowels in the Meitei alphabet is more advanced than the Roman, Bhrahmi, Devanagri, Bangali etc. The Meitei script has the signs of short stop, full stop and paragraph etc. ending stop in the punctuation marks as double vertical lines and some other signs for indication of the prayer (Anji -?).<sup>xxiv</sup>

The Meitei script, after its introduction and continuation for about a century later began to enter into more vigorous process and progresses of development and improvement stage by stage the letters were transformed their features and structures as well as addition, of new letters and omissions of old figures the letter which had undergone through regimes of ensuing kings after king Khagemba until king Gambhir Singh (1825-34 A.D.).

The hybridized nature and manner are the basic and fundamental radicals of the Meitei script in the

ancestral line of Brahmi-Kharoshthi families. As the Meitei has the paternal society in Manipur, the Meitei alphabet also follows and adopts the nature of its paternal line of the Brahmi in the framework even when the forms, figures and structural features of letters and arrangement of sound system in formation of syllables, words etc., accentuations of such syllable and letter either vowel or consonant and formations, derivations and modifications of vowels from basic vowel are adopted to its maternal line of Kharoshthi and her descendants. The fundamental ground works of the order, grouping and writing direction are in the motives and motivation of the Brahmi. The Meitei alphabet has the mottoes, division of un-aspirated and specially aspirated letters, divisions of nasal, palatal, etc. letters and design of writing from left to right. The names and pronunciations of the letters with its permanent inherent vowel "a" if no other vowel is accentuated to the letter, are also not a part from the norms of the Brahmi family alphabets. But as a matter of hybridized with the Kharosthi family alphabet Meitei script has only one basic vowel, which is treated as consonant letters and put on the first place of the set of five letters, which are not pure or composite consonants of which the four letters are semi vowels. Even though there are some differences and variations between the alphabets of Schools of the 35(thirty-five) and 18 (eighteen) letters, they may have the same origin. The alphabets of school of 27 letters are no doubt to recommend it as the hybridized alphabets of the above two schools.<sup>xxv</sup>

From the facts and finds, it is brought to light that all the letters and marks excepting emphatic sign of Lum, the peculiar signs of alphabetical school of 35 letters and the figures of the numerals of the alphabetic school of 18 letters are in differences. Therefore, the nature of the alphabet has not remarkable or notable variations from those of the alphabetical school of 35 letters. But as there are three basic vowels in the alphabetical school of 18 letters it has nearer relation.

The alphabetic school of 27 letters is the one, recognized by the Government of Manipur in 1980 as the Meitei alphabets (Mayek) vide. Order No.1/2/78-S/SE dated 24.4.1980 and approved to start to teach in academic institution from the ensuing academic session of 1983-84 sharply vide order of even no. dated 19.1.1983. This governmental approved Meitei alphabet, the hybrid of the older two alphabets, has the nature, character and manner of two parental alphabets as the children follow their parents. But this script, as it was gathered together assemble in consolidated composite trend granting top priority and inspiration to the alphabet of the school of 18 letters which is nothing but the mere abstraction and extraction from the alphabet of the school of 35 letters, and altered and re-designated the names without differing and altering the usual denotation of the signs marked as the representatives of the basic radical sounds.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the Meiteis, small in population, have their own script, which they use in literature and lingua-franca. It is still unknown about the name of the actual and exact inventor of the Meitei script. Old Meitei scriptures refer in this subject as to have been assembled the letters from the resourceful persons migrated from different places and native scholars. It may be noted that the need and importance of script was felt by king Khagemba and his successors. It was in 1980, the then Manipur government recognized the alphabetic school of 27 letters as the Meitei alphabet (Mayek) and approved to include in educational curriculum. The nature of Meitei alphabet, its hybridized character is adaptable to the languages of Tibeto-Burman family with the strong elements of the Tai and Chinese languages. This script has nice affinities and similarities with the Shan-Ahom script in their properties capacities, characteristics and qualities. It also shows its hybridized features in the forms and structures of the letters with the chain of the Brahmi-Kharosthi family scripts prevailing outside India extending from Tibet to the Upper Myanmar. Thus, it may be called one of appropriate and adequate alphabet of the Tibeto-Burman Language family

## REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> The last two million years Reader Digest, “History of Man London” pp. 302-3
- <sup>ii</sup> Ibid pp. 304-5.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ahamad Hasan Dani, Indian Palaeography. Oxford 1963 p.12
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid p. 24
- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid p. 23
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid p. 26
- <sup>viii</sup> Ibid p. 24
- <sup>ix</sup> Ibid p. 24
- <sup>x</sup> David Diringer “The Alphabet “London 1949 p. 336
- <sup>xi</sup> Ahamad Hasan Dani: Op. Cit. p. p28
- <sup>xii</sup> Op.cit
- <sup>xiii</sup> L. Ibungohal Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh. 1989. Cheitharol Kumbaba. Imphal. P. 36
- <sup>xiv</sup> Thambal Angou Singh. Meitei Mayak. 1947. Imphal. P. 2
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid
- <sup>xvi</sup> Manipur Government order No.1/2 78-S/SE dated 24.4.1980 and 16.6.1980
- <sup>xvii</sup> M. Imocha Singh. History of the evolution of Manipuri script Meitei Mayek. Unpublished PhD Thesis. p. 44.
- <sup>xviii</sup> P. Gunidro Singh. Origin and Development of Meetei Script—Seminar paper at Manipur University. 20<sup>th</sup> November 1988
- <sup>xix</sup> P. Gogoi. The Tau and Tai Kingdom. Guwahati. 1968. pp.37-40
- <sup>xx</sup> Cheitharol Kumbaba. Op.cit. pp. 19-20
- <sup>xxi</sup> S. Jayalaxmi Devi. Epigraphy of Manipur. Unpublished Thesis, Manipur University. 2002. p.18.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Gangmumei Kamei. History of Manipur Pre-colonial Period. 2015. Akansha Publishing House. New Delhi. pp. 262-263

<sup>xxiii</sup> S. Jayalaxmi Devi. op.cit. p. 20

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxv</sup> Ibid p.33