



ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEITEI LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

Meitei language is an Indo-Aryan language. The Indo- Aryans came to Manipur and settled in the Manipur from the 4th century B.C. onwards. The noted historian and scholar R.K. Jhalajit Singh present his views on the topic to Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the great scholar and experts on language. He expressed as Meitei language may not belong to the Kuki- Chin sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman branch; but belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of language. All the language that belongs to the Tibeto-Burman, a sub-branch of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, is mono- syllabic. The Meiteis language is not a monosyllabic language; it is a polysyllabic language. In meiteis language, majority of words have more than one syllable. A language should be classified because of grammar. This is the universal principle accepted on all. A language cannot be classified according to vocabulary. If we begin to classify a language according to its vocabulary, the results will be incorrect. The first settlers of the Indo-Aryans in Manipur spoke Sanskrit. Later settlers spoke Prakrit. When Prakrit was removed as spoken language, they spoke Apabhransha.. The combination of Apabhransha and Mongoloid languages gave birth to the Manipuri language by about 1074 A.D.

In the olden days of the Meitei language, which was formed by the interaction of Apabhransha and Mongoloid languages, the most important words were taken from Sanskrit. During the formation of the Meitei language, Manipuri culture was greatly influence by Thai especially that of Pongs of upper Burma. Thai contributed a few words to Manipuri but it could not influence Manipuri grammar. The Manipuris interact with the Bengalis in the 12th century. Sanskrit helped in the development of Meiteilon from 15th century onwards. Bengali helped in the development of Meiteilon from the 18th century onwards.

In Manipur, some scholars rejected the classification of Meitei language as Tibeto-Burman. Those scholars who challenged this classification were Atombapu Vidyaratna; Lairenmayum Ibungohal Singh and Dwijamani Deva Sharma. Dwijamani Deva Sharma requested Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee to re-examine the classification of Meiteilon but Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee be in the late of his life. Re- examination of the classification of a language is not easy to be done. Classification of language sometimes goes wrong.

Origin and Growth of the Meitei language:

Sir George Grierson classifies the Meiteilon (Manipuri language) as a Tibeto-Burman language in Linguistic Survey of India. According to Sir George Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India, Sino- Tibetans family of languages has two different families of languages i.e. The Chinese-Siamese languages and The Thai languages. In upper Burma and Thailand Thai language is spoken. The indigenous people who speak Thai called themselves as Thais, but the Burmese calls them as Shan. According to Sir George Grierson, the Tibeto-Burman languages comprise of the Burmese, Tibetan, and Boro etc. This classification of Meitei language is very old. In the beginning of the 20th century, linguistic survey of India was published. The views of Sir George Grierson shown in linguistic survey of India had been controlling the field since then up to the end of the 20th century.

Since 1965, the scholars and experts in the Manipuri language have been questioning the rightness of the classification of Meitei language as a Tibeto-Burman language. The simple fact is that Meitei language is an Indo-Aryan language and is not a Tibeto-Burman language. R.K. Jhalajit Singh referred in his 'A History of Manipuri Literature, Volume I and II, the wrongness of Grierson's classification of Meitei language as a Tibeto-Burman language.

The noted historian and scholar R.K. Jhalajit Singh present his views on the topic to Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the great scholar an authority on language. His view is that Meitei language may not belong to the Kuki- Chin sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman branch; but belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of language. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee is a scholar and a lover of Manipuri literature. Meiteilon was possibly the only language that grew under a highly cultured royal patronage and that had a long written literature. Therefore, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji said, "Among the various Tibeto-Burman languages, the most important, and in literature certainly of much greater importance than Newari, is the Meitei or Manipuri language" (Ch. Manihar 'A History of Manipuri Literature, Page 8). After he became the president of Sahitya Akademi and because of his efforts and love of Manipuri literature that the Sahitya Akademi recognized Manipuri literature. Nevertheless, his classification of Meitei language as Sino- Tibetan family of languages is incorrect.

The language, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman, a branch of the Sino- Tibetan family of languages, is mono- syllabic. For example, all the words of Burmese language, unless it is the borrowed word, will have only one syllable. The Meiteis language is not a monosyllabic language; it is a polysyllabic language. In meiteis language, most of the words have more than one syllable. Some words that were borrowed from Chinese are monosyllabic. Few examples are CHE (paper), MUK (ink), MING (name), SEL (bronze) etc. The words that were borrowed from Mizo language are mono – syllabic. Such as Mang (burial ground/ cremation ground), and the word Khong (a thorny shrub with a bad smell). This shows that most of the indigenous words in Meitei language are polysyllabic. Few examples of polysyllabic words are Atiyaa (sky), Thawanmichak (star), Ningthou turen (Milky Way), Khambee (fire), Laija (water), Cheklaa (bird), etc. The Meitei language is a polysyllabic language, it cannot be classified as a Tibeto-Burman, which is a monosyllabic languages.

A language should classify according to the grammar. This is the universal principle accepted by all. A language cannot be classified according to vocabulary. If we begin to classify a language based on vocabulary, we will get a incorrect result. Sir George Grierson classified Meitei language based on the vocabulary. When the linguistic survey of India was carried out, there was no grammar written in English. Manipur was an independent kingdom until the advent of British in April 1891. The British political agent sir James John Stone founded an English school with the permission of Maharajh Chandrakirti Singh. Nevertheless, the Manipuri Hindu believed that they would lose their caste if they knew English or the Roman script. Therefore, the question of writing a Manipuri grammar in English did not rise. In 1891, the British Empire conquered Manipur and became the masters of the Manipur kingdom. Under the forcefully change situation, the British re-opened the English school on 1st June 1892 which was founded by Sir Johnstone, both the textbooks and medium of instruction were in Bengali. Therefore, the writing of Manipuri grammar in English or Bengali was not necessary. In 1902, the British political agent introduced Manipuri in lower primary school known as pathshalas. An elementary Manipuri grammar came into existence written by Rev. Pettigrew. This book was written in Manipuri.

Sir George Grierson stayed all the time in London. He did not get the chance of hearing Meiteilon has spoken by native Meiteilon speaking people. Therefore, he did not get the chance to decide whether Meiteilon is a tonal language or not. A small number of Meiteilon vocabularies consist of words having two tones. Nevertheless, Meiteilon is not a tonal language, whereas Sino-Tibetan languages are tonal language. To keep a non-tonal language in the family of tonal languages is a false classification.

Origin of Meiteis Language (Meiteilon):

Meiteilon is an Indo-Aryan language. The Indo- Aryans came to Manipur and settled in the Manipur valley from the 4th century B.C. onwards. The expansion of the Indo-Aryans is a long story. The fore fathers of the Greeks, the Romans, the Germans, the English, Indo-Aryans etc. lived together in one place in ancient times. They scattered in different directions. The Indo-Aryans reached Afghanistan. They came up the course of the Kabul River and reached Pakistan and Punjab. Then they occupied the plain of the Punjab. They began to write the Rig Veda from about 1300 B.C. Afterwards, they reached the western bank of the Garg in present day Uttar Pradesh. From the Punjab, the Indo- Aryans dispersed towards the east and the south. Following the track of the River Ganga, they reached what is now called Bhagalpur (a city on the southern bank of the river Ganges in the Indian state of Bihar). From there, proceed towards the east, they reached the mouth of the Surma River. Following up the track of the Surma River, they reached Surmasa. We came to know all this information from Panini's Sanskrit grammar. Panini was not a geographer, he was illustrating the rules of Sanskrit grammar, and he mentions Surmasa in his grammar and says that the place served by the river Surnas i.e. the district called Sylhet, now in Bangladesh. Panini wrote his grammar by about 400 B.C. Therefore, by about 400 B.C the Indo-Aryans settled in Sylhet in Bangladesh. Following up the track of the Surma, they reached the river Barak valley. The Surma and the Barak is the same river. The Barak River originates in the Senapati district of Manipur. The Indo- Aryan reached Manipur and settled in it.

The first settlers of the Indo-Aryans in Manipur spoke Sanskrit. Later settlers spoke Prakrit. When Prakrit discontinued as a spoken language, they spoke Apabhransha. Apabhransha came into being in Manipur by about 6th century A.D. The combination of Apabhransha and Mongoloid languages gave birth to the Manipuri language by about 1074 A.D.

Development of Meiteis Language:

Sanskrit grammar was very complex to be followed by the people, especially if they had to use this language as an everyday speech. Therefore, Pakrit removed Sanskrit as a spoken language. In Manipur Pakrit replaced Sanskrit in the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. Nevertheless, Pakrit grammar, a simplified of Sanskrit grammar was also found inconvenient by the people because of its complexity. Therefore, Aphabhransha removed Pakrit languages, as everyday speech. Again, in Manipur Apabhransha removed Pakrit during the time of Naophangba the king of Manipur. Apabhransha is the intermediate between Pakrit and modern Indo- Aryan languages. Apabhransha is considered as the language of the human beings and not as a language of the gods. Because the Royal Chronicle of Manipur, Cheitharol Kumbaba, says that Naophangba was the first human king of Manipur.

After 10th century A.D Apabhransha was dispelling for circulation as an everyday speech everywhere in India. In 1074 when Loiyamba ascended the throne of Manipur the Meitei language (meiteilon) came into existence.

The study and observations on Meitei language by western linguists and scholars have been done only in relation with comparatively modern Meitei language.

Compositions in ancient Meiteilon done as late as the latter half of the 19th century, not to speak of that old period, comprise of a wide range of words so different with those of the modern words. Therefore is the case in the subject of sentence structure or syntax. Therefore, what Grierson, Don and Hodson listed Meiteilon words against those of other Tibeto-Burman languages to prove similarity with other Tibeto-Burman languages are from modern vocabulary only.

The ancient Meitei language, which was formed by the interaction of Apabhraṃśa and Mongoloid languages, and the most important words were taken from Sanskrit. The word Chak (cooked rice) comes from Sanskrit word yavaga (rice-gruel). In eastern India, this word was pronounced as Jawaga, which the ancient Meiteis pronounced as Chawaka. The Manipuri word Chak is from Chawaka. The old Manipuri word for water is Laija, which comes from Sanskrit word Jala (water) by metathesis. The old Manipuri word for clothe is Charei. This word is from Sanskrit Chera (dress). Like Early Aryans in Punjab, the early Meiteis built their houses with wood, bamboo and thatch grass. Wood is known as Dru in Sanskrit. It is known as 'U' in Meiteilon. Bamboo is named as Wans in Sanskrit. It is named as Waa in Meiteilon. Thatch grass is known as ulika in Sanskrit. It is named as 'E' in Meiteilon. The names of most important vegetables like mustard leaf, gourd, pumkin, and Momordica cochinchinensis are from Sanskrit. The Manipuri called paddy as phou. This comes from Sanskrit word brahee.

During the formation of the Meitei language, Pongs (Thai) of upper Burma, had a great influence on Manipuri culture. Thai contributed a few words to Meitei language but it could not shape Meiteilon grammar.

The Meiteis interact with the Bengali Brahmins in the 12th century. Sanskrit helps in the development of Meiteilon from 15th century onwards. Bengali assists the development of Meiteilon from the 18th century onwards.

In modern days, English has added many words in Meiteilon; such as schools, college, university, radio, television, telegraph etc. Portuguese has gave Kobee (cabbage) and Chavi (key). The Portuguese word Couvee (cabbage) known as Kobee in Gujarat, Marathi and Manipuri, gobjee in Hindi and kopi in Bengali. Words such as half chhutee (half-holiday), head pundit (head master of a primary school) comes from Bengali. The majority of Meiteilon words are from Sanskrit.

Conclusion:

When Linguistic survey of India was published, the British were very powerful and dominate the Indians. India was under the rule of British and dependent on British. Therefore, it was under these conditions that most Indians accepted Linguistic survey of India with all its drawbacks without questioning it.

In Manipur, some scholars and historian rejected the classification of Manipuri language as Tibeto-Burman. Some of the scholars who challenged this classification were Atombapu Vidyaratna; Dwijamani Deva Sharma and Lairenmayum Ibungohal Singh. Dwijamani Deva Sharma had requested Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee to examine again the classification of Meiteilon but Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee be already in the late of his life. To examine again the classification of a language is not so easy. Categorization of language sometimes goes wrong. Albanian language was initially classified as a dialect of Greek. However, after the reexamination it is classified as a separate language. Armenian was initially classified as a dialect of Persian. After re-examination, it is now identified as a different language. Maratha language was classified as a Dravidian language. A French scholar re-examine it and classified as Indo-Aryan languages.

Dwijamani Deva Sharma, a student of Calcutta University in his M.A. classes, reads Grimm's Law. He thought that something might have gone wrong in the survey for the classification of Meitei language and so, he requested Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee to re-examine. If we do Re-examination of Vol.III part III of Linguistic Survey of India with a clear mind. We will find that Meitei language is an Indo- Aryan language.

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