

Is Manipuri an Endangered Language?

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Introduction

Languages that are at risk of falling out of use as its speakers die out or transfer speaking another language are called endangered languages. If there are no native speakers, language loss occurs and becomes a dead language. If eventually no one speaks the language, it becomes an extinct language (Crystal, 2009). Many languages are currently disappearing fast owing to the processes of globalization and neo-colonialism, where the economically powerful languages dominate other languages (UNESCO's Atlas, 2009).

Endangered Status

A language is considered endangered when children of that language no longer learn it and finally they lose their language. However, there are nine criteria that decide the quantum of endangerment suggested by UNESCO. They are:

1. Absolute number of speakers
2. Intergenerational language transmission
3. Proportion of speakers within the total population
4. Community members' attitudes toward their own language
5. Availability of materials for language education and literacy
6. Shifts in domains of language use
7. Response to new domains and media
8. Type and quality of documentation
9. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and Use

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Degree of Endangerment

Language endangerment can be classified in terms of generations of users of the language.

'Safe if the language is spoken by all generations. The intergenerational transmission of the language is uninterrupted.

Stable yet threatened if the language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken transmission, although multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant languages has taken over certain contexts.

Vulnerable if most children or families of a particular community speak their parental language as a first language, even if only in the home.

Definitely endangered if the language is no longer learned as the mother tongue or taught in the home.

Severely endangered if the language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; the parental generation may still understand it but will not pass it on to their children.

Critically endangered if the youngest speakers are of the great-grandparents' generation, and the language is not used every day. These older people may only partially remember it and have no partners for communication.

Extinct if no one speaks or remembers the language.' (UNESCO's Atlas, 2009)

The degree of endangerment of Manipuri, which is named as 'Meithei language' is given as 'vulnerable' in the UNESCO's *Atlas on Endangered Languages*, 2009. But the facts about the language show that it cannot be considered as vulnerably endangered. The following sections deals with the facts about the position of Manipuri language.

Manipuri Language

Manipur is one of the seven states of north-east India, with the city of Imphal as its capital. The state is bounded by Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the south, Assam in the west, and by the borders of the country Myanmar in the east as well as in the south. The total area

covered by the state is 22,347 km². The capital lies in an oval-shaped valley of approximately 700 square miles (2,000 km²) surrounded by blue mountains and is at an elevation of 790 metres above the sea level.

The origin of the Manipuri language (Meiteilon is mentioned as Manipuri language as it is officially called.) can be traced to the Kuki-Chin group of the Sino-Tibetan languages. Manipuri belongs to the Kuki-Chin-Naga group of the Tibeto-Burman sub family of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. 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.

A schematic diagram of the Sino-Tibetan language family is given below:

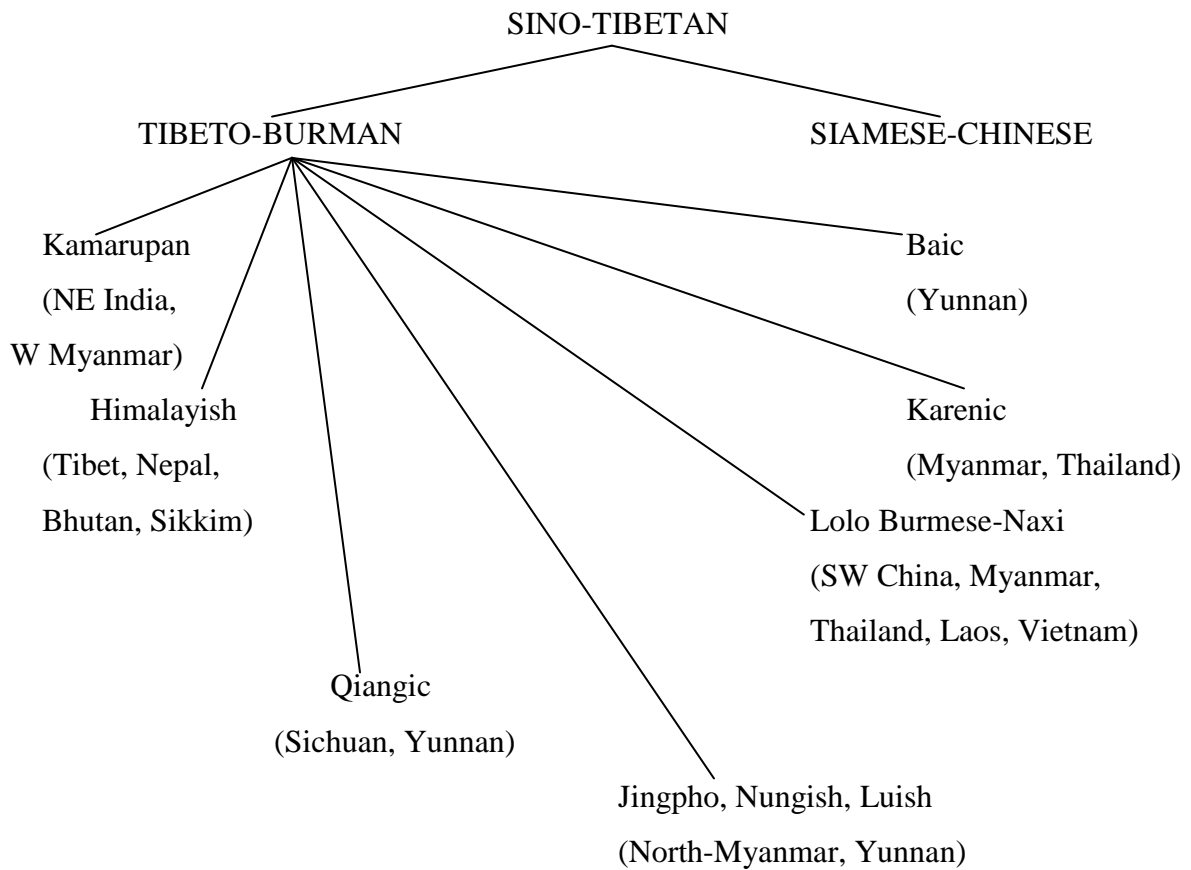


Figure 1: Schematic diagram of Sino-Tibetan

Manipuri (Meiteilon: Meitei- the Meitei community; lon- language) has been the state language of Manipur since 3rd century A.D. ‘The coins were struck; royal chronicles were recorded; edicts and copper plates were issued in this language. Ancient Meitei records were in Meitei-Mayek only’ (Sanajaoba, N. 2005). However, many of the rich heritages of Manipuri language were destroyed as a result of Hindunisation in 18th century.

Manipuri is the mother tongue of the major ethnic groups i.e., the Meitei, Meitei Pangals (Meitei Muslims) and the Bamons (Meitei Brahmins) mostly residing in the state of Manipur, primarily in the state's valley region. This language is also being spoken by some native Manipuri speakers in the neighbouring north-eastern states of India, viz., Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. There are some native Manipuri speakers in part of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Manipuri is the main common medium of communication among 33 different mother tongues of different tribes in Manipur and also among other people inhabiting in Manipur and hence, it is being used as the lingua-franca in the state of Manipur.

Manipuri language is the only Tibeto-Burman language in India which has its own script, the Meitei-Mayek script, which has been in existence from 1st century A.D. in coins of Wura Konthouba (568-658) (Kamei, G. 1991). The origin of this language and its script are a mystery as many historical documents were destroyed at the beginning of the 18th century during the reign of King Pamheiba (1709-1748) because of the instigation of the Bengali saint Shantidas Gosai. The current Manipuri script i.e., the Meitei Mayek script is a reconstruction of the ancient script and since the early 1980's this has been taught in schools along with the Bengali script in Manipur (Imocha Singh, 2002). A non-government organization called Meetei Erol Eyek Loinasillon Apunba Lup (MEELAL) has been struggling for a long time to popularize Meitei Mayek script and to replace the Bengali script textbooks in the schools. It has been taking strong steps to promote the script among the common people.

Manipuri language has been recognized by the Government of India as the state official language of Manipur along with English and it is one of the 22 scheduled languages of India. By the 71st amendment of the constitution in 1992, Manipuri is included in the list of scheduled languages in the 8th Schedule of Indian Constitution (Sarangi, A. 2009).

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The argument against the statement that ‘the degree of endangerment of Manipuri is vulnerable’ as stated by UNESCO, is as follows (The argument is based on the nine criteria given above).

1&3. Absolute Number of Speakers and Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

The total population of Manipur according to provisional Census 2011 is registered at 27,21,756, among that males have registered at 13,69,764 and females at 13,51,992 and the Literacy rate (%) is at 79.8%, where male is at 86.49% and female is at 73.17% . The increase in population can be seen from the figures given below.

As per the Census of India (1991), the population of Manipuri speakers is 12,70,216 out of which 11,10,134 speakers reside in Manipur.

According to *Ethnologue-Languages of the World* (2000), the population of Meiteis all over the World is 13,91,100 out of which 13,70,000 reside in India.

As per the Census of India (2001), the total population of Manipur is 23,88,634 out of which 15,28,725 (13,61,521 Meiteis and 1,67,204 Meitei Pangals) are Manipuri speakers.

The Table number 1 below gives the number of Manipuri speakers in the north-eastern states of India and also in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Sl. No.	State/Country	No. of Native Manipuri Speakers
1.	Manipur	12,12,225
2.	Assam	3,00,000 approximately
3.	Tripura	30,000 approximately
4.	Nagaland	Below 1000

5.	Arunachal Pradesh	Below 1000
6.	Meghalaya	Below 500
7.	Bangladesh	40,000 approximately
8.	Myanmar	5,000 approximately

Besides these, there are some native Manipuri speakers in West Bengal, Delhi, Mumbai, Tamilnadu, Karnataka and in some other states of India. Hence the absolute number of speakers of the language is constantly increasing which does not support endangerment.

2. Intergenerational Language Transmission

In Manipur, the education in the Government schools is provided in Manipuri medium till eighth standard and both English and Manipuri mediums are provided for ninth and tenth standard. Manipuri is offered as a subject for Modern Indian Languages (MIL) to be opted by the students in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth standard along with nine tribal languages, viz., Thadou-Kuki, Tangkhul, Paite, Hmar, Mao, Mizo, Zou, Kom, Vaiphei. Besides this, courses on Manipuri language and literature is also being taught as a subject up to the Post-Graduate level; M.Phil., Ph.D. and Post Doctoral courses in Manipuri subject are also available in Manipur University, Canchipur, Manipur and Assam University, Silchar, Assam.

Though the official medium of instruction in the classroom teaching is English in the higher secondary, undergraduate and post graduate levels, Manipuri language is also used for classroom explanation by most of the teachers besides English for the better understanding of the subjects.

Manipuri in Schools

According to the State Education Department of Manipur, the number of schools in the Middle and High/Higher Secondary categories increases from the year 1989 to 1999 and to 2002 except in the primary where there is a decrease in the number of schools as shown in Table number 2. However, one can see the increase in the number of enrolment of students from the

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year 1991 to 2001: Primary School- 264019 to 285580, Middle School- 77658 to 121200, High School- 46700 to 64680, Higher Secondary- 4474 to 15620. The total number of enrolment was recorded to be 392851 (1991) to 487080 (2001) with an increase of 94229 in ten years as shown in table number 3. The increase in the enrolment of students can also be seen in table number 4 (2006). This transmission of the knowledge and skills in Manipuri does not support that the Manipuri language falls under vulnerable endangerment.

The above statement can be compared with the following statement ‘In order to judge if a language is endangered, the number of speakers is less important than the age distribution; there are languages in Indonesia reported with as many as two million native speakers alive now, but all of advancing age, with little or no transmission to the young. On the other hand, while there are 30,000 Ladin speakers left, almost all children still learn it as their mother tongue, thus Ladin is not endangered in the 21st century.’ (UNESCO’s Atlas, 2009) which supports the view of the author.

Table No. 2: Number of Schools in Manipur in different stages

District/State	Primary Schools			Middle Schools			High/Higher Secondary		
	1989	1999	2002	1989	1999	2002	1989	1999	2002
Senapati	380	377	395	67	90	91	27	51	61
Tamenglong	209	216	215	33	43	48	15	22	23
Churachandpur	412	266	270	76	78	102	48	78	79
Chandel	227	205	207	19	33	52	8	18	23
Imphal (U)	772	742	727	119	217	288	156	231	272
Bishnupur	236	215	211	32	52	63	38	50	54
Thoubal	326	327	326	59	72	88	63	92	105
Ukhrul	210	224	223	38	46	64	32	40	42
Manipur	2772	2572	2574	443	631	796	387	582	659

Sources: SAM 1992, p. 52 & 2001, p.70, (High/Higher Sec.) p.72-3 SAM & SAM 2004 p.106

Table No. 3: Enrolment of Students at Different Stages of Schooling

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Districts/ State	Primary		Middle (VI- VII)		High (IX-X)		Higher (XI- XII)		Total	
	1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001		
Senapati	26845	29057	6413	10230	3164	4513	73	716	36495	44516
Tamenlong	13714	18130	2560	3263	1103	1694	147	87	17524	23764
Churachandpur	25220	25610	6093	8918	3325	4897	0-	891	34638	40316
Chandel	12456	17714	2589	3107	1144	1895	0-	0-	16189	22716
Imphal (U)	102300	102932	35353	54590	22003	30604	2985	6201	162641	197327
Bishnupur	24916	27056	7720	12817	5332	6990	940	1796	38908	48659
Thoubal	44230	44736	13674	23440	9023	11435	316	1737	67243	81348
Ukhrul	14338	20345	3256	4835	1606	2652	13	602	19213	28434
Manipur	264019	285580	77658	121200	46700	64680	4474	15620	392851	487080

Source: Department of Education S, Government of Manipur

Table No. 4: Enrolment in Different Categories of Schools, 2006

District	Total		
	Boys	Girls	Total
Bishnupur	25845	24399	50244
Chandel	15414	13546	28960
Churachandpur	26951	24033	50984
Imphal East	35415	36449	71864

Imphal West	71119	66793	137912
Senapati	33805	29506	63311
Tamenglong	21681	18043	39724
Thoubal	40624	39002	79626
Ukhrul	21979	21264	43243
Manipur	292833	273035	565868

Source: Department of Education, Government of Manipur

(<http://www/manipurportal.mn.gov.in/portal/.../Department/Education>)

4. Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language

'Manipuri language is the State official language of Manipur and it was included in the list of scheduled languages of India on 20th August 1992 after a movement by the Meitei community in two Phases: the First Phase Movement (1953- 1987) and the Second Phase Movement (1987-1992)' (Singha, I.B. 1993 & Ningamba Singha, 2012).

The Hindi Boycott conducted by the insurgent group, the Revolutionary People's Front, established ripples of chauvinism through the state of Manipur. The result was the rise of the ethnicity and the growth of the state's local newspapers and the electronic media. This shows that the speakers of Manipuri language have the attitude to develop and protect their state language.

5. Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy

As mentioned earlier, Manipuri language has its own script and rich written literature. Its literature is very old with a rich and multicoloured history and traditions. The textbooks in Manipuri for high school level are produced by the Board of Secondary Education, Manipur. The textbooks for Manipuri language and literature courses for the undergraduate and postgraduate levels are produced by the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Sahitya Academy and by Manipur University also.

A lot of books on Manipuri literature, culture, grammar, dictionaries, etc. and also the materials for teaching Manipuri are being produced in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh by the Manipuri people settled in these places besides Manipur.

Further, under the Government of India, the National Translation Mission, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, has undertaken an initiative to translate Knowledge Texts (non-literary academic texts which are mostly prescribed in the syllabi of Indian Universities) into 22 Indian languages including Manipuri which are listed in the VIII schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Linguistics Data Consortium of Indian Languages, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, is preparing materials for online teaching of Manipuri language and will be released shortly. Hence, there is no dearth of materials in Manipuri.

6. Response to New Domains and Media: Media in Manipur

The media in Manipur are the reflection of the social, economic and political relations of the state of Manipur. The media in Manipur plays an important part in projecting the sentiments of the people and their opinions and views. The tabloid and the electronic media of the state of Manipur have developed well. Presently, there are eighteen local newspapers and a single Imphal-based television media called the ISTV. Doordarshan Kendra, Imphal, in general, telecast programmes mainly in Manipuri language.

Television and satellite connectivity are available in almost each household of the state of Manipur. However, the insurgent group, the Revolutionary People's Front has prohibited some of the channels like MTV, FTV and Channel V from being telecast in the state. Hindi movies are also prohibited from being telecast in the Imphal Valley. These prohibitions paved the way for the development of Manipuri indirectly.

All India Radio, Imphal broadcasts various programmes mainly in Manipuri language. Programmes on six major dialects of the state viz., Hmar, Paite, Kabui, Mao, Thadou and Tangkhul are also being broadcasted from this radio station.

8. Type and Quality of Documentation

Many official documents of the Government of Manipur are made available in both English and Manipuri. The official documents in English are being translated into Manipuri by the translators of the Manipur Legislative Assembly. Other documents such as land records, revenue records, etc. are also maintained in Manipuri.

9. Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use

The attitude of the Government of India for the development of state languages is reflected in its Language Policy which is elucidated in the Constitution and is implemented through various executive orders that have been issued from time to time. It further helps the use of languages in administration, education, judiciary, legislature, mass communication, etc. Article 345 permits the States and Union Territories to have their own official language that could be used for all official purposes of the States (Gupta, 1995). This attitude of the government helps the development of Manipuri in this case.

The State Cabinet of Manipur Government passed a resolution in 1996 to set up a separate directorate for Manipuri language. Though it is a bit late, twenty years after its inclusion in the eight scheduled of the Indian Constitution, the State Government has decided to set up a Directorate of Language Planning and Implementation towards development of Manipuri language and other major tribal languages on 19th February 2013. The Directorate will not only develop the languages but translation works from other languages will also be done. The cabinet also took a resolution that all the text books of 9th and 10th Standards which are available in Bengali script would be replaced by Manipuri script, i.e., the Meitei Mayek script as the medium of writing the High School Leaving Certificate examination conducted by the Board of Secondary Education Manipur would also be in Meitei Mayek script from 2015 onwards.

On the other hand, the non-Government organization, MEELAL has been putting serious efforts for the promotion and development of Manipuri language and its script. The organization,

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furthermore, urged the concerned to help the students of Catholic schools in opting MIL instead of Alternative English and it has taken up a stand to organize training programmes for the candidates of Teacher Eligibility Test of Meitei Mayek.

Many other non-governmental organizations like the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU), Manipuri Language Demand Coordinating Committee(MLDCC), the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Imphal, the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Assam, the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Tripura, Pan Manipuri Youth League, Imphal, All Assam Manipuri Students' Union (AAMSU), Assam and various political parties are also working towards the development of Manipuri language (Ningamba Singha, 2012).

With the above facts described for eight factors out of nine (Criterion No. 7: Shifts in Domains of Language Use is left) which prove that the population of Manipuri speakers is increasing; intergenerational language transmission is positive; the attitude of the Manipuri community towards the development of Manipuri language is positive; there is no dearth of available materials in Manipuri for language education and literacy; the development of new domains in the media of Manipuri is reassuring; the quality of documentation in Manipuri is at a higher rate; and the governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, etc. are very much encouraging for the development and preservation of Manipuri language, it may be concluded that Manipuri language is not endangered and is 'safe'.

However, Manipuri has not developed much in the field of Computational Linguistics and Corpus Linguistics which are very much essential to compete with the other developed languages of India. Steps to revitalize (Tsunoda, 2005) and develop Manipuri as an e-language are vital to protect Manipuri from endangerment in future.

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Colophon:

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