

# The Status of Meiteilon among the Tibeto-Burman Languages

Dr Irom Robindro Singh, Ph.D.

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## Abstract

Meiteilon, popularly known as Manipuri by the natives, is the most developed language among the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the Northeastern India. It has its own status, i.e., written as well as spoken. Various scholars including missionaries studied Meiteilon for many years. Still there are many aspects that need to be discussed. This article focuses on the development, status and relationships of Meiteilon with other Tibeto-Burman languages.

## 1. A Brief Study of Meiteilon

Missionaries and foreign scholars named Meiteilon / Manipuri as Meithei in their studies and records. Hence, outside the state, still it is called as Meithei by the non-native language researchers. It is the native tongue of the Meitei, is a member of the Kuki-Chin group of the Arakan-Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages (M. A. Pie & F. Gaynor, 1954). Tracing the trend of development of Meiteilon among the Tibeto-Burman languages is a challenging task today. We need a powerful theory which is scientifically proven. Though, there are many theories developed, still the internal or external relationship between lower levels of the TB language group is unclear.

Languages are classified based on the given points: 1. Typological characteristics, 2. Word order pattern, 3. Structural characteristics and 4. Genetic relationships. The internal and external relationships, i.e., morphological and syntactic patterns, of Tibeto-Burman languages are not so clear like the other Indian language families -- Indo-Aryan and Dravidian.

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In this article, I discuss the linguistic views and classifications of Shafer (1955), Benedict (1972), Burling (1983), Bradley (1997), and Scott Delancy (1987) and others to identify the position of Meiteilon among the TB languages.

Before tracing the development of Manipuri, we may trace the development of language groups under the Tibeto-Burman language family in India, especially on the fringes of Northeast India. This will help to find out a clue about Manipuri. Many scholars and researchers began to notice parallelism between Tibetan and Burmese in the earlier part of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Both Tibetan and Burmese had developed literary traditions. In the following years, Brian Houghton Hodgson started the study of the languages of the Himalayas and northeast India. In 1856, James Richardson Logan for the first time applied the name “Tibeto-Burman.” The third volume of the *Linguistic Survey of India* was devoted to the Tibeto-Burman languages of British India.



**Map 1. Language families of South Asia, with Tibeto-Burman in orange (source map: Wikipedia, Google)**

The border highlands of Nagaland, Manipur and western Burma are home to Ao, Angami–Pochuri, Tangkhul and Zeme groups of languages, as well as the Karbi language. Meitei, the main language of Manipur with 1.4 million speakers, is sometimes linked with the 50 or so Kukish or Kuki-Chin languages spoken in Mizoram and the Chin State of Burma. The Mru language is spoken by a small group in the Chittagong Hills between Bangladesh and Burma.

( source : Wikipedia, Google)

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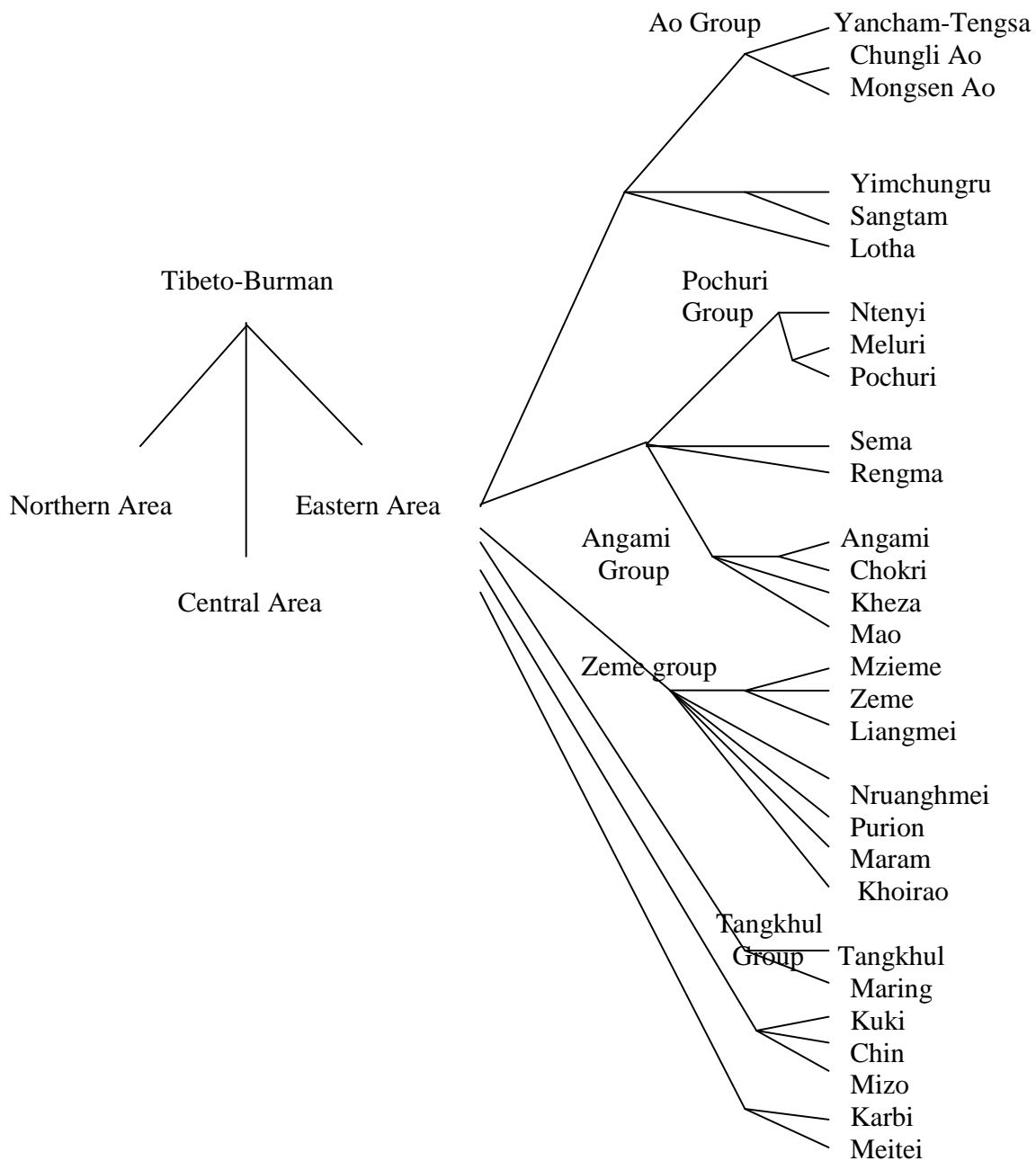
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**Map 2. Northeastern states of India (source map: Wikipedia, Google)**

Robbins Burling (1998) classifies Tibeto-Burman group as Northern Area, Central Area and Eastern Area. Eastern Area covers the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Nagaland, Manipur and parts of Assam. He further classifies Meitei (Manipuri) as an independent member of Eastern Area.



**Fig. 1. Robbins Burling's Classification of TB language family (1998).**

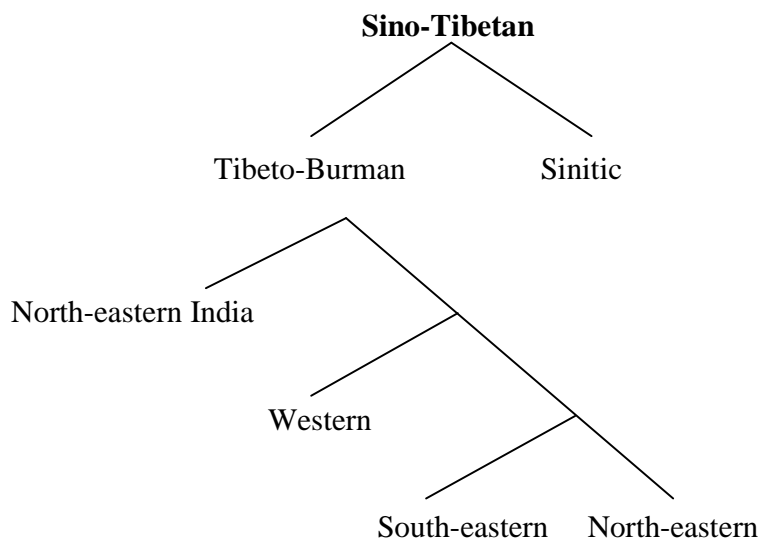
There are theories about the classifications of Tibeto-Burman languages. Shafer (1974) divides Tibeto-Burman languages into four main parts: Bodic, Baric, Burmic and Karenic but in

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another classification he (Shafer, 1955) claims that there is neither autonomous Tibeto–Burman family nor a Sino-Thai family but a single Sino-Tibetan family branching into six sub divisions- 1. Karenic, 2.Baric, 3. Burmic, 4. Bodic, 5. Daic and 6. Sinitic (Robbins Burling, 1998). On the other hand, Benedict (1972) identifies seven subgroups: Tibetan-Kanauri, Bahing-Vayu, Abor-Miri-Dafla, Kachin, Burmese-Lolo, Bodo-Garo, and Kuki-Chin. Bradley (1997) summarizes the overall pattern of Tibeto-Burman, using Shafer and Benedict’s classification as shown below,



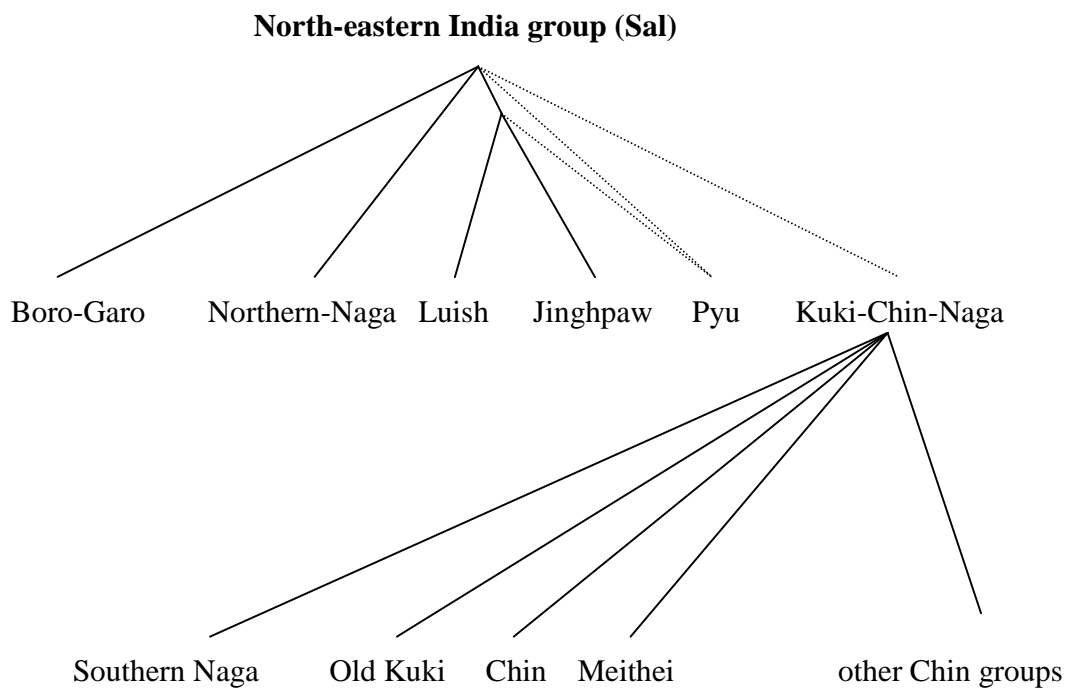
**Fig. 2.The Bradley’s classification of Tibeto-Burman language family (1997:2)**

Bradley (1997) classifies Kuki-Chin-Naga under the Northeastern India group based on substantial lexical and morpho-syntactic similarities. Shafer classifies it as a part of Burmic, and Benedict links it to Burmese-Lolo.

Within the Kuki-Chin-Naga group, Bradley proposes Southern Naga, Old Kuki, Meithei, Chin and other groups, (Khoi Lam Thang, 2001). Burling<sup>1</sup> (1983) terms his group of languages the ‘Sal’ group, based on their distinctive word for ‘sun’.

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Burling 1(1983).



**Fig. 3. Kuki-Chin-Naga of North-eastern India group (Bradley 1997)**

Again, Bradley (2002) puts Meithei under the heading of Sal group along the ascending order as shown here.

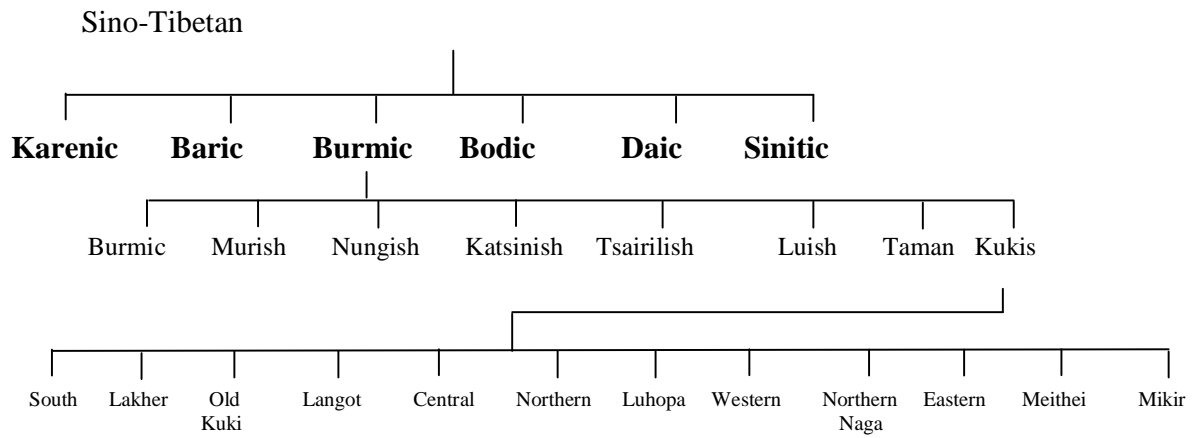
- A. Baric (Bodo–Garo–Northern Naga)
- B. Jinghpaw
- C. Luish (incl. Pyu)
- D. Kuki-Chin (incl. Meithei and Karbi)

Among the members/sub members of Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Northeastern India, Manipuri is the most developed language which has a long literary tradition. We may review some of the outstanding views. Tracing the sister languages up to the proto stages is not an easy task. The charts of TB language classification of different scholars may be helpful in the present study.

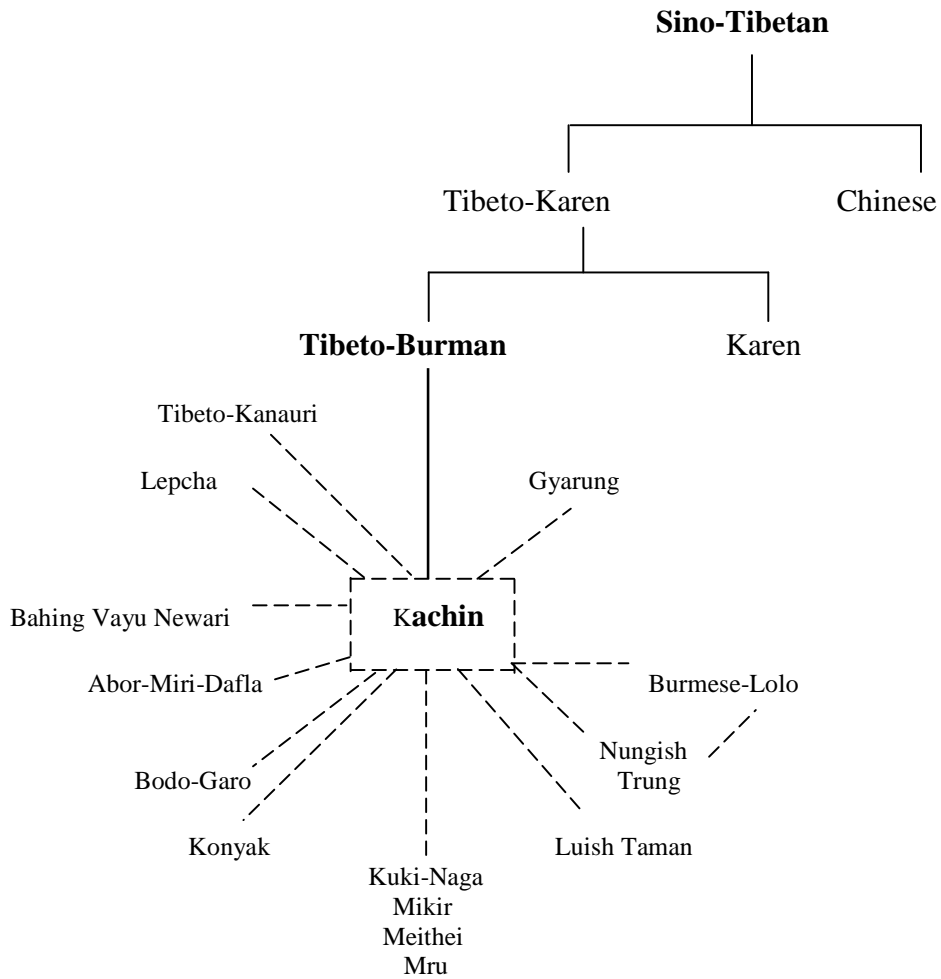
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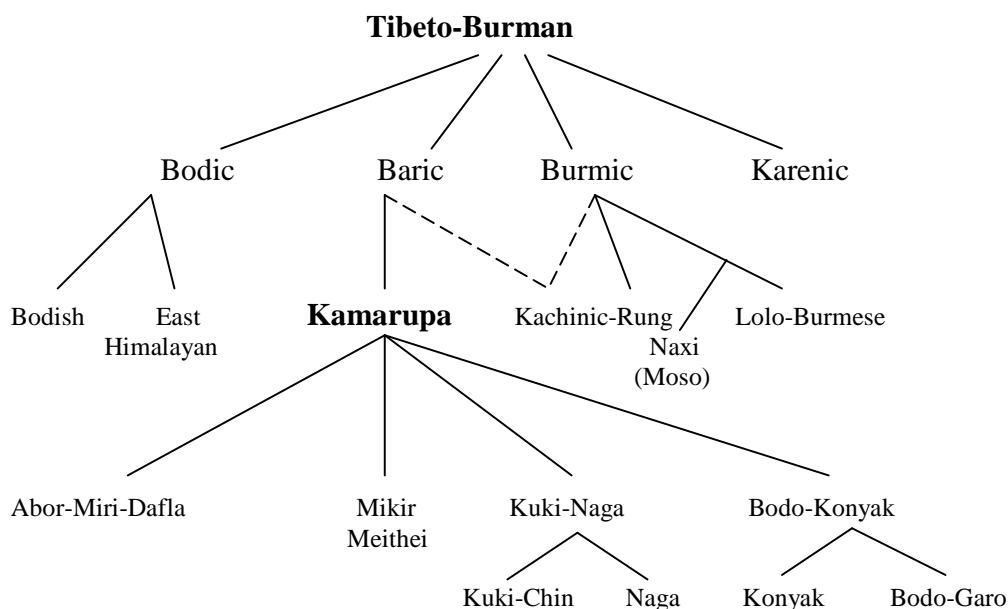


**Fig. 4. Shafer's classification (1955).**



**Fig. 5. Paul K. Benedict's Classification of TB Language Family (1972)**





**Fig.6. Scott Delancy's Classification of TB Language Family (1987)**

In all these classifications, Meithei/Manipuri is found very close or very near to Kuki-Naga, Kuki-Chin, Kuki-Chin-Naga and Kukish languages. Sometimes, it goes parallel to the sister languages.

## 2. Development of Meiteilon (Proto Stage to Current Stage)

Sino Tibetan>Tibeto-Burman>Arakan Burmese>Kuki-Chin> Manipuri /Meithei /Meitei/Meiteilon.

W. Ibohal Singh (1986) also mentions the different stages of development of Meiteilon in the soil of Manipur. He opines that old Manipuri, which was developed in 900 A.D., was a product of Pre-historic Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman of 800 A.D. Medieval Manipuri, which

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was developed in 1200 A.D., was again a product of Indo-Aryan and Old Manipuri (1000 A.D). Modern Manipuri (1600 A.D. and onwards) is the offshoot of Kuki-Chin group of Tibeto-Burman and Medieval Manipuri.

In fact, it is assumed that Tibeto-Burman languages began to develop from about the early Christian era and became fully characterized from about 7th Century A.D. The Early Poireis (the early inhabitants of Manipur) were a group of people belonging to a bulk of new-Tibetans. However, it is believed that the founder of Poirei belonged to another Himalayan tribe called Chakkha (Sakiya/Sakya) who was the ruling clan of the Sakiya kingdom of Tagaung in the Upper Irrawady valley founded by Abhi Raja, the Sakiyan king in the second century B.C. Poireiton is believed to be a descendant of Abhi Raja. The dialect of Sakiyan tribes mixed with the Tai's, particularly with Tho and Do. Thus, the dialect of the early Poireis was basically a mixed dialect. The Sakiyan dialect seems to contain much Pali words or words that became Pali. Hence, there is a view that the Pali or the old Sanskrit word found in Old Manipuri was mainly from the Sakiyan dialect. The nucleus of Manipuri is therefore the dialect of the Poireis.

The birth date of Manipuri is estimated to be about 800-850 A.D. Prior to this, Manipuri was the dialect of some ancient tribes. It appears from Manipuri accounts that the mixed dialect of Chakha (Sakiya), Khu (Khu-nu), Lei (Lei-nu), Nga (Nga-nu) and Nung (Nung-ba) are the basic foundation of Manipuri. In a similar way, the dialects of different tribes like Marem, Mahui (Moirang), Nongyai, Khamba, Keirem Khunjal, Senbi Kabo, Shelloy-Langmai, etc., have been mentioned occasionally. By about 950 A.D., Shelloy-Langmai and Chenglei began to mix. It further expanded its intermixing with the dialects of Leihou, Mahou, who spoke a neo-Tibetan mixed with Bodo elements or Sub-Himalayan dialects. It also felt that the impact of the dialects of the tribes like Haokap, Chingsāng, Khunpham, and Ngāngcheng, etc. who spoke Tibeto-Burman of neo-Burman origin had also been mixed with early Meiteilon.

In the later stages, foreigners like G. A. Grierson (1967, reprint) considered it to be a link between Kuki-Chin languages and Kachin languages. Shafer (1966) included it under a separate branch called Meithei, which comes under Kukish section of the Burmic division. Geographically, Manipuri is the connecting link between the two important members, i.e.,

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Tibetan and Burmese. The Himalayan, Assam (Indic language) and Naga groups of the Tibeto-Burman Sub-family separate Manipuri in the North and North-East from the Tibetan. In the South and Southeast, there are Kuki-Chin and Kachin groups of the sub-family between the two sister languages, i.e., Manipuri and Burmese. Grierson, G.A. 1967 (LSI, part-III, Vol. III) mentions that it sometimes agrees more closely with Burmese, and even with Tibetan, than with the Kuki-Chin languages proper.

### 3.Status

According to 1951 Census, Manipuri was spoken in Manipur and Assam by 485,787 persons (Y. M. Mulay, 1964.) Another reference of mother tongue speakers - Manipuri is the mother tongue of 67 percent of the total population of Manipur and the number of speakers of Manipuri was over 10,00,000 as per 1981 Census Report of India. Manipuri speakers in Assam and Tripura are 97,000 and 40,000 respectively. And the number of Manipuri speakers in the two neighbouring countries Burma (Myanmar) and East Pakistan (Bangladesh) were 240,000 and 50,000 respectively (Nandalal,1987). According to the report of Manipuri Sahitya Parishad (1970), Manipuri speakers number more than a million, with the state of Manipur having about seven hundred thousand speakers, Burma having about four hundred thousand, the state of Assam having about one hundred thousand speakers, and Bangladesh and Tripura having fifty and thirty thousand respectively (D.N.S. Bhat and M.S.Ningomba,1995.) In another reference, *Encyclopedia Britanica Book of the Year 1993* (1994:780), there are 11,80,000 native speakers of Meithei, although the number of actual speakers is higher since Meithei is used as lingua franca in the state (Shobhana, 1997). There are reports of Manipuri speakers in other states like Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. In Burma, it is spoken in areas such as Mandalay, Bhamo, Rangoon, Mytkiana, Kalemyo, Tamu, Samjok, Kalewa, Haijang, Mangun, Mingin, Tuangji, Moklai, Tenanyung, Hemzada, Homelin, Maniwa, Sagain, etc. In Bangladesh, in the areas, viz., Dacca and Sylhet districts, the number of speaker is around seventy thousand (70,000). Manipuri is found struck on the old coins and copper plates, recorded in royal chronicles. So far the copper plate of Manipuri king Khongtekcha dated Saka 721 (799 A.D.) represents the earliest specimen of royal edict (Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, 1970).

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Manipuri is not only used as the state language, it is also used as lingua franca among the various non-Manipuri groups and different tribal communities in the hills and the valley. Manipuri is spoken and understood by almost all the speakers of other languages in the state such as Tangkhul, Paite, Mizo, Hmar and Kuki (Bhat, M.S.Ningomba, 1995). Other speakers of smaller tribes in Manipur communicate among themselves through Manipuri.

#### 4. Conclusion

Manipuri is the only language among the Tibeto-Burman languages of India, which has well established and profound literature and cultural heritage, which is more than two thousand years old. It is accepted that writing Manipuri began by the middle of 7th to 8th century A.D.; this argument has been supported by the copper plate inscription of king Khongtekcha (Report on Archeological studies in Manipur, Bulletin I. 1935) and by the bronze coin inscribing in Manipuri script of King Ura Konthouba's period (560-658 A.D.). (Jhaljit Singh, R.K.1965). Therefore, Manipuri may be claimed as the most developed languages among the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Northeastern India.

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Dr. Irom Robindro Singh, Ph.D.  
Academic Resource Person  
Department of Manipuri  
Northeastern Regional Language Centre  
Beltola College Road  
Guwahati-781 028  
Assam,India.  
[drrbindro@sify.com](mailto:drrbindro@sify.com)

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