

Orthography for Foundational Literacy in Manipur's Tribal Languages: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex and evolving efforts toward orthographic development for tribal languages in Manipur's hill districts, where foundational literacy remains a critical concern. The majority of these languages are oral and belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, lacking standardized writing systems until the advent of Christian missionaries in the early 20th century. Drawing from textual analysis of 18 tribal languages, textbooks, community interactions, and a survey of 251 respondents across eight hill districts in Manipur, the study investigates current orthographic practices and community attitudes toward language standardization. It identifies key issues such as the lack of consensus on grapheme inventory, tone marking, spelling conventions, and word division. The paper also addresses the sociopolitical sensitivities tied to script choice and the implications of adopting either new or existing scripts. Practical steps toward developing a sustainable and community-approved orthography are proposed, including the importance of community consultation, grapheme selection, tone representation, and testing. The paper argues that while script invention may offer cultural symbolism, the adoption and careful adaptation of the Roman script present a more feasible path for most tribal communities. Ultimately, the study underscores the urgent need for linguistically informed, socially inclusive, and technically supported orthography development to strengthen foundational literacy and preserve indigenous languages in Manipur.

Keywords: orthography, tribal languages, mother tongue education, standardization

1. Introduction

Orthography plays a vital role in mother tongue education, preservation, and promotion of endangered languages. It serves as the foundation for creating literature, educational materials, and digital content. For languages with no indigenous script traditions, especially many oral languages, developing or adopting an effective orthography is often the first critical step in

ensuring long-term language vitality (Coulmas, 2003). This is particularly relevant in multilingual and tribal contexts, such as the hill districts of Manipur, where most indigenous languages historically lacked a writing system.

The tribal languages of Manipur, like many across Northeast India, are predominantly oral in tradition. Their transition to written forms began largely in the early 20th century, with the advent of Christian missionaries who introduced literacy to these communities through Bible translation, hymn composition, and catechism materials. The missionaries, often unfamiliar with native phonologies, developed practical writing systems based on the Roman script, sometimes borrowing orthographic conventions from neighboring languages like Bengali or even English. In some cases, Bengali or Devanagari scripts were initially used, but these were largely replaced by Roman letter due to its perceived simplicity and alignment with Christian evangelism (Nag, 2020).

At present, speakers of at least 34 tribal communities in Manipur, including the 18 state-recognized tribal languages, use writing systems primarily rooted in these early missionary efforts. This shift marked a major cultural transformation, but the orthographies were often inconsistent. Often, they were designed to serve immediate missionary purposes, religious instruction and scripture reading, rather than long-term educational or linguistic needs. As a result, inconsistencies, phonological mismatches, and ad hoc spellings became embedded in the orthographic conventions passed down through generations (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

When we speak of language saving, promotion, or use in formal education, orthography becomes a cornerstone. Without a clear and consistent writing system, it is exceedingly difficult to produce textbooks, grammars, dictionaries, children's books, or online content, all of which are essential to transmitting a language to future generations. For languages with no traditional script, the challenges are greater. A functional orthography must accurately represent the phonemic inventory of the language, be learnable and teachable, and gain social acceptance among native speakers. Moreover, it must navigate sociopolitical dynamics such as inter-dialectal variation, community preferences, denominational differences, and modern expectations of digital usability.

English and Meitei dominate schools, relegating tribal languages to informal use. Bible-based orthographies often lack phonemic accuracy or consistency, confusing young learners. Thus, when one attempts to teach a tribal language in school, the lack of a standardized, phonologically adequate orthography can lead to chaos. Different church groups, denominations, or community organizations may promote slightly different spellings. Some

orthographies represent tone; others do not. Some include unnecessary letters or ambiguous diacritics. Without consensus, even basic teaching materials such as alphabets, primers, or spelling conventions vary from one source to another. This lack of standardization hinders both language teaching and the production of pedagogical materials.

This paper explores the grassroots challenges faced by tribal communities in Manipur's hill districts in their efforts to develop a systematic and standardized writing system for their languages. While there is a growing interest in developing educational materials, progress is often slowed more by differing attitudes within communities than by external political pressures over orthographic choices. This stands in contrast to the case of the Bodo language in Assam, where the script debate was linked to broader efforts promoting national integration before Bodo was recognized as a scheduled language in 2003.

This study aims to shed light on the complexities involved in orthographic development and contribute meaningful insights toward the collective effort of establishing a sustainable and community-accepted writing system in the region.

2. Methodology

First, the study involved a close textual examination of tribal language textbooks and literature produced by 18 officially recognized tribal languages. These included materials used in both formal education settings (government and private schools) and religious domains (church-based literature such as hymnals and Bibles). The writing systems in these texts were analyzed to identify orthographic conventions, including script usage, grapheme inventory, tone marking practices, and word division strategies. Second, the study incorporated field-based interactions with speakers of 17 tribal languages. These interactions included face-to-face conversations, informal interviews, and consultations with current and former leaders of community Literature Societies. Particular attention was paid to their views on mother tongue education and the challenges of orthographic standardization. Third, a structured survey was conducted to assess the status of indigenous language education and orthographic practices in the region. A total of 251 respondents participated, representing diverse roles: Literature Society leaders, schoolteachers, parents, students, and community members with firsthand experience in local schooling. The survey contained both closed- and open-ended questions, focusing on language use at home and school, methods of instruction (monolingual vs. bilingual), availability of reading materials, and community attitudes toward orthography and policy involvement.

The sample was purposively drawn from eight hill districts of Manipur, ensuring linguistic and geographic representation. Field visits were made to five districts (Tamenglong,

Kangpokpi, Senapati, Ukhrul, and Noney), while data from Churhanpur, Chandel, and Tengnoupal were gathered with the assistance of local volunteers due to travel constraints at the time of data collection (2023-2024). The researcher and trained volunteers administered the questionnaires, offering clarification where necessary, and conducting short interviews in cases of low literacy or for open-ended questions. Particular attention was given to inconsistencies in orthographic practices, community preferences, and challenges related to script and language instruction.

3. Writing System in North East Indian Tribal languages

The evolution of writing systems among the tribal languages of Northeast India is largely attributable to the efforts of Christian missionaries during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially, some tribal communities adopted scripts such as Bengali or Devanagari for religious texts, particularly Bible translations and hymns. However, the majority eventually transitioned to the Roman script, a change significantly influenced by Western missionary activities and the spread of Christianity. This shift was not merely linguistic but also ideological, aligning literacy practices with religious identity (Sahi, 2001).

Community-led and missionary-driven initiatives have played a crucial role in the early phases of orthographic development (Nag, 2020). Among the tribal languages, Khasi and Mizo are notable for having developed well-established orthographies using the Roman script. Both languages now boast extensive literary traditions and are taught up to postgraduate levels in several universities (Sharma, 2016).

The Development of Orthography among the Tribal Languages

The Khasi writing tradition began with William Carey of the Serampore Baptist Mission. In 1831, his convert Krishna Chandra Pal translated the New Testament into the Shella dialect using the Bengali script, aided by Sylheti and Khasi speakers; the translation was completed in 1824 (CIIL, 2017). A significant shift occurred in 1841 when Welsh missionary Thomas Jones, after analyzing the Sohra dialect, developed a Roman script-based orthography. This provided better phonemic accuracy and gradually replaced Bengali in written Khasi (Dowman, 2008). Today, Khasi is widely written in Roman script, with newspapers like *Mawphor* sustaining literary expression.

Similarly, the Mizo language (also known as Lushai) of Mizoram adopted the Roman script through the intervention of British missionaries J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge, who arrived in the Lushai Hills in 1894. These missionaries devised a practical orthography based

on the phonological structure of Mizo and published primers and biblical texts, laying the foundation for a written tradition (Zawla, 1976). Today, Mizo has a strong literary presence, supported by publications like *Vanglaini*, and the language is taught formally from primary levels up to postgraduate studies.

Other tribal languages in the region that have adopted the Roman script and made notable progress in literacy development include Tenyidie and Ao in Nagaland, as well as Hmar, Thadou, Tangkhul, and Mao in Manipur. These languages have developed varying degrees of orthographic standardization and possess a growing body of written materials. In particular, mother tongue educational resources, such as primers, textbooks, and storybooks, are relatively widespread and are being used in community-based schools, church-run institutions, and multilingual education programs. While these efforts are often localized and uneven across communities, they represent important strides toward strengthening written traditions and promoting language maintenance through education. However, the lack of government-led linguistic planning and resource development has limited their full educational integration and literary growth (Singh, 2013). The neglect is especially pronounced in Manipur's hill districts, where numerous tribal languages remain under-documented or lack standardized orthographies

4. A Brief Linguistic Landscape of Manipur

Manipur, located in Northeast India, represents a linguistically diverse yet under-documented region. While the population is commonly grouped into three broad ethnolinguistic categories—Meitei, Kuki, and Naga—such classifications tend to obscure the actual complexity and richness of the region's language diversity. As Singh (2003, p. 78) observes, the bifurcation of Manipur's tribal communities into just Naga and Kuki is increasingly seen as inadequate and reductive.

According to official records, the Government of Manipur recognizes 34 tribes and has approved 18 tribal languages for early-grade education under the Multilingual Education (MLE) framework. However, the Council of Tribal Languages and Literature Studies, Manipur, identifies as many as 37 distinct languages (Gangmei, 2012, p. 9). Despite these recognitions, a significant number of speech communities remain unstudied, poorly documented, or excluded from formal education and governmental use. Most tribal languages in Manipur belong to the Tibeto-Burman family and exhibit considerable phonological, morphological, and syntactic diversity.

Further complicating the linguistic scenario are the legal and political classifications tied to administrative and constitutional categories. Under India's system of Scheduled Tribe recognition, mutually intelligible dialects are often classified as separate languages due to their tribal identities being treated as distinct administrative units. Conversely, mutually unintelligible varieties, such as those spoken across different Tangkhul villages, are sometimes grouped under a single language label due to shared ethnic affiliation (Haokip, 2011, p. 5). This disconnect between linguistic reality and bureaucratic classification has led to inconsistencies in both language documentation and policy implementation.

A notable example is the case of the Uipo language, whose speakers are advocating for the recognition of the Uipo (Khoibu) tribe, previously subsumed under the Maring category in official records. While this grouping may have had some basis in shared cultural or historical ties, it did not accurately reflect the linguistic and ethnic distinctions perceived by the communities themselves. Similar reclassifications include the official recognition of Poumai as distinct from Mao in 2003; Liangmai and Zeme as separate tribes from the broader Kacha-Naga group in 2011; and Rongmei and Inpui as distinct tribes from Kabui in the same year¹.

Meiteilon (Manipuri), a Tibeto-Burman language and the only scheduled language of the state, functions as the lingua franca across Manipur. It is widely used in government administration, mass media, and education beyond the primary level. Nonetheless, in rural and tribal regions, local languages remain the primary mode of communication, particularly within households and community settings. Devi (2019) similarly observed that tribal languages are predominantly employed for domestic, cultural, and interpersonal exchanges.

On one hand, the limited presence of tribal languages in education and governance threatens their long-term vitality. On the other hand, their strong usage within communities provides a solid foundation for grassroots-based language maintenance, provided that institutional support and orthographic development are aligned with the linguistic and sociocultural realities of the region.

5. Current situation

As mentioned in §3, several community-based orthography development efforts in Manipur have emerged in recent decades. Some are led by churches, while others involve state-sponsored mother tongue education programmes. A majority of the 251 respondents indicated

¹The gazette of India, Ministry of Law and Justice (2012) (<https://tribal.nic.in/DivisionsFiles/clm/25.pdf>).

that they follow the writing system used in their respective Bibles or hymnals (see Figure 1). However, they also reported that these systems lack consistency, leading to confusion when attempting to write in their mother tongues. A few tribes have developed primers, storybooks, and dictionaries with the support of academic institutions such as Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysuru. However, challenges remain. One of the main challenges is the lack of standardization in the present writing system of all tribal communities. Without a clear, accepted, and usable writing system, it is nearly impossible to introduce language in formal setting. Only through a participatory, linguistically informed, and culturally sensitive process can orthographies be standardized that truly serve the needs of language education and intergenerational transmission in the tribal communities of Manipur.

One of the major challenges confronting many tribal communities in their pursuit of literary development is the widespread belief that having an indigenous script is essential. This notion that a language lacks legitimacy or authenticity without its own unique script is a misconception. The vitality and value of a language are not determined by whether it has a distinct script. In practice, all 18 officially recognized tribal languages all hill's languages in Manipur use the Roman script, often adapted locally to reflect the phonological features of the language. These adaptations typically involve digraphs such as *ph*, *th*, and *ch*, as well as diacritical marks like *ī* and *ē* to capture specific vowel qualities, including the schwa (See Table 1). While the use of the Roman script has enabled a degree of literacy and mutual intelligibility across communities, the lack of a standardized orthography continues to pose a significant barrier to the consistent development of written materials, particularly for educational and literary use.

Table 1: A modified roman letter followed by different tribal communities in North

Language	Modified roman letters: number of letter	diagraph (ch, ts, ph)	diacritics (ū)	excluded symbol
Maram	26	yes	nil	nil
Liangmai	28	yes	nil	q v x
Kuki-Thadou	29	yes	no	q v f z
Rongmei	23	yes	no	f q v
Hmar	25	yes		q v
Mao	27	nil	yes	nil
Chang	23	nil	yes	x f r
Angami	23	nil	yes	x q
Dimasa	20	nil	nil	c f q x v z
Ao	23	nil		f q v x
Nocte	28	yes	nil	f q
Karbi	19	nil	nil	f q x z

East India (CHIL, 2014)

The need for standardization is pressing. A unified writing system is crucial for producing textbooks, children's literature, teaching resources, and other literacy materials. However, the process of developing a standard orthography is inherently complex and requires careful handling. As Malone (in Karan, 2014) rightly points out, writing systems are not created overnight they demand time, patience, open community dialogue, and often, compromise. In the case of Manipur's tribal languages, the haste to establish standardized orthographies often driven by political, educational, or social imperatives has at times undermined sustainable literary development. Rather than fostering cohesion, such premature efforts have occasionally sparked internal disagreements over orthographic choices, thereby impeding progress in mother tongue education.

All tribal languages in Manipur are tonal, and tone can play a crucial role in distinguishing word meanings. Yet, tone marking remains inconsistently applied or entirely absent in several orthographic proposals. The inclusion of tone marks adds complexity to reading and writing, and communities are often divided over whether such detail is necessary or practical for daily use. Some prefer a phonemic orthography without tone, arguing it

simplifies literacy instruction, while others advocate for tone marking to preserve linguistic accuracy and prevent ambiguity. This issue is ever present and also evolving.

What spelling style do you mostly follow when you write in your language?

251 responses

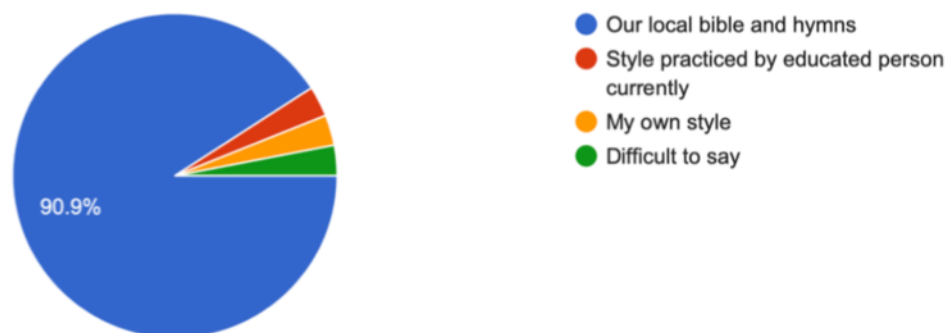


Figure 1: The current spelling system mostly followed by the respondents

6. Is invention of a new script essential?

When communities consider developing a writing system for their language, one of the fundamental questions they face is whether to invent a new script or adopt an existing one. Both approaches carry their own sets of advantages and limitations, particularly in the context of minority and endangered languages such as those spoken by tribal communities in Manipur.

Merits and Demerits of Inventing a New Script

One of the strongest arguments in favor of inventing a new script is the ability to design symbols that directly reflect the phonemic structure of the language. This means that every distinctive sound (phoneme) in the language can be assigned a unique symbol, making the orthography highly accurate and linguistically efficient. A well-designed script tailored to a specific language can also become a strong marker of cultural identity and pride, uniting the community around a symbol system that is truly their own (Coulmas, 2003).

However, this ideal is not without challenges. Firstly, speech is a dynamic, expressive phenomenon. Human sounds involve not just phonemes but also intonation, tone, loudness, and emotion, elements that are difficult, if not impossible, to fully capture in written form. A writing system, no matter how finely tuned, is ultimately an abstraction of spoken language.

This gap between speech and writing is a universal limitation (Coulmas, 2003; Daniels & Bright, 1996).

Secondly, for a newly invented script to gain widespread acceptance and utility, it must be standardized and integrated into modern communication systems. This includes being encoded in The Unicode², which allows digital representation of text across devices and different platforms. Without Unicode support, the script cannot be typed, displayed, or exchanged reliably in digital environments, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and other digital programmes. However, Unicode inclusion is a highly technical and time-consuming process. It requires substantial documentation, including a detailed description of the script, evidence of its current usage in media (such as television, print, or online platforms), and preferably a published linguistic grammars or orthography guide³. The case of the Gurung language, spoken in parts of Sikkim and Nepal, illustrates the difficulty of this process. Despite efforts to develop a script, Gurung has not yet been successfully encoded in Unicode, largely due lack of daily usage in media or published works in Gurung. In contrast, scripts such as Lepcha script of Sikkim and Meitei Mayek of Manipur were encoded more swiftly, as they fulfilled the essential requirements for digital standardization. This process often takes years, sometimes decades.

In addition, the adoption of a new script is a long-term endeavor (Karan, 2014). Historically, it can take 20 to 30 years for a new script to be learned, accepted, and used across generations. For communities whose languages are endangered or experiencing rapid shift, this lengthy transition period poses a critical risk. These languages may not have the luxury of time to undergo such a gradual process of orthographic development and community adaptation (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

Merits and Demerits of Adopting an Existing Script

On the other hand, the adoption of an already existing script, such as Devanagari, Meitei Mayek, Roman, or Sambhota, is often the more practical and sustainable path, especially for minority language communities. Existing scripts are already institutionalized, widely taught, and digitally supported. They are included in Unicode, supported by standard fonts and keyboards, and integrated into school curricula and publishing systems.

² Unicode is a global standard developed by the Unicode Consortium that assigns unique codes to new scripts, enabling consistent digital use and display across devices, platforms, and applications.

³ I thank Ken Whistler, The Unicode, for sharing me detail process about the Unicode encoding process

A key advantage of adopting a familiar script is ease of learning and transferability. Children growing up in multilingual settings, especially in India, are already exposed to multiple scripts such as Roman (through English), Devanagari (through Hindi), or regional scripts like Meitei Mayek. If a tribal language adopts one of these scripts, it reduces the cognitive load on learners, who no longer have to acquire an entirely new symbol system in addition to national and state languages. This promotes literacy efficiency, especially at the foundational stage of education.

Moreover, using a common script enhances the language's visibility and integration into national and digital platforms. For example, the Roman script is widely used in online communication and social media, making it easier to generate and share digital content in indigenous languages. It also enables the use of standard publishing software, keyboards, and fonts — resources that may not exist for a newly invented script.

Nonetheless, adopting an existing script is not without its challenges. Often, these scripts were not originally designed to accommodate the specific phonological features of tribal languages. As a result, they may lack symbols for certain sounds, requiring the use of digraphs, diacritics, or other orthographic conventions to compensate. This can introduce inconsistency and ambiguity unless there is a standardized spelling system developed and agreed upon by the community and linguists (Simons & Fennig, 2018).

Furthermore, script choice can become politically and culturally sensitive, particularly when communities associate certain scripts with dominant ethnic or religious groups (Adams, 2014, Lupke, 2011). For instance, using Meitei Mayek may be seen by some tribal groups as symbolically aligning with the Meitei majority, while using Devanagari may evoke associations with mainland Indian languages and cultures. These perceptions must be navigated carefully in community consultations (Nag, 2020).

In the context of Manipur's tribal languages, many of which are endangered or have low literacy rates, I have an opinion that the adoption of an existing script emerges as the more feasible and pragmatic option. While the invention of a new script may offer cultural uniqueness and phonological precision, the realities of time, resource constraints, and digital integration make it a difficult path for most communities. A well-adapted and standardized use of an existing script, supported by experts and community consensus, can meet both educational and preservation goals. The choice of script should ultimately be guided by a combination of linguistic appropriateness, community acceptance, technical feasibility, and sociopolitical context. With proper planning, even adopted scripts can be modified to

accurately represent the sound system of a language, and standardized spellings can be agreed upon to facilitate teaching and publishing. In this way, the orthographic needs of tribal languages can be met without the long delays and technical obstacles associated with script invention.

7. Some practical suggestions

In recent years, there has been a surge of enthusiasm among tribal communities in Manipur to develop and standardize their orthographies. While this is a positive indication of rising language awareness and cultural pride, it is essential to recognize that orthography development is a nuanced and gradual process. It requires careful linguistic planning, time-bound community consultation, and coordination among stakeholders. Although inclusive community dialogue is vital, it must not become an open-ended process. Given that orthography touches deeply on identity, even individual members may raise objections based on personal or ideological grounds. Therefore, a structured and time-sensitive consultation strategy is needed.

Each tribe in Manipur has a state-recognized Literature Society and they must play a proactive role by working closely with trained linguists, educators, and relevant government agencies. Regular training and consultative workshops are essential to build local capacity. A balanced orthography must consider both linguistic precision and socio-political factors, including denominational differences, historical writing practices, and dialect variation. As noted by Cahill and Rice (2008), Pappuswamy (2017), and others, an effective orthography should ideally meet five core criteria: phonemic adequacy, simplicity, consistency, acceptability, and adaptability, ensuring it works across print and digital formats. Below are suggested steps for tribal language communities in Manipur as they move toward orthographic standardization for foundational literacy.

Step 1: Adoption of Roman Script

Making a choice of script is the first step. The adoption of the Roman script has become a de facto standard for most tribal languages in Manipur. This is a crucial first step, as it provides a shared and accessible base for literacy development. The Roman alphabet's adaptability allows for localized modifications to suit the phonological features of each language.

Step 2: Defining Grapheme Inventory

Once the Roman script is adopted, the next step is to determine how many and which graphemes (letters or letter combinations) will be used to represent the language's phonemes. Based on survey data and text analysis from various tribal language primers, it is evident that communities have already begun this adaptation informally. Some use digraphs like *ph*, *ch*, or *sh*, while others introduce diacritics to represent vowel qualities, such as the schwa. For instance, some communities use *a* for both low central and schwa vowels, while others distinguish them with diacritics (e.g., *ǎ* or *ə*). Additionally, some have removed letters like *v*, *q*, and *c*, considering them phonetically irrelevant.

This step should be led jointly by linguists and community representatives, ensuring there is neither overrepresentation (introducing unnecessary symbols) nor underrepresentation (failing to represent important sounds, especially vowels). Given the Roman script has only five base vowels, many languages face underrepresentation in their vowel systems.

Step 3: Minding the Conventional Usage

Orthography development must also take into account existing conventions. Many tribal communities in Manipur have been writing in their languages for decades especially in religious domains, such as hymnals and Bible translations. These conventions, although informal, influence public expectations and language use. Communities with less historical writing such as the Thangal in Manipur or the Tikhir in Nagaland may find it easier to establish new standards since they are not constrained by existing orthographic norms. For them, current decisions will become the new conventions.

Step 4: Spelling Standardization

Creating a consistent and accepted spelling system is crucial. Communities must develop core word lists, which can be drawn from existing literature, religious texts, or oral word lists. However, inconsistencies are common even within the same community. For example, in Liangmai, the word for 'animal' appears as *chakhou* in Genesis 1:20 but as *chakhao* in Psalms 125:35 in different parts of the same Bible. Such inconsistencies create confusion for readers and hinder literacy. Developing a community dictionary can be a long-term solution, although it requires significant time and linguistic input.

Step 5: Word Division Practices

A clear and standardized policy on word division must be developed. This includes how to treat grammatical elements like possessive markers, case markers (accusative, locative, etc.), plural markers, and classifiers. In many Tibeto-Burman languages of Manipur, body parts and kinship terms cannot stand alone, for instance, they require possessive prefixes (e.g., *a-pu* 'my father'). In some cases, these prefixes are phonologically bound to the root, while in others, they can be written separately (e.g., *naliu ki* 'your house'). The orthography committee, ideally including linguists, must determine whether to join or separate such forms to ensure clarity and consistency.

Step 6: Tone Marking

Tone plays a crucial role in distinguishing meanings in many of Manipur's tribal languages. Yet, tone marking remains minimal or inconsistently applied. For instance, in Liangmai, high tone is sometimes marked by doubling the final consonant (e.g., *khengg* 'ask'), mid tone is unmarked (*kheng* 'to place pot on fire'), and low tone is marked by an *h* (e.g., *khengh* 'endure'). Similar approaches are observed in Sumi (Nagaland) and Rongmei (Manipur), where redundant letters such as *h* or *c* are used to indicate tone (Teo, 2014; Ragongning Gangmei, p.c., 2023). Whether or not to mark tone must be a deliberate decision, one that balances linguistic accuracy with literacy practicality. It is advisable to employ tone marking only in contexts where the absence of such marking in Roman script is highly potential to cause confusion for readers.

Step 7: Punctuation Norms

A consistent punctuation system must also be established, especially for educational and formal writing. Decisions need to be made about sentence-final punctuation, quotation marks, paragraphing, and capitalization. These should align with broader literacy goals and existing practices in the Roman script environment.

Step 8: Testing and Promotion

Finally, the developed orthography must be tested and promoted. This includes both formal testing (in schools or workshops) and informal feedback (from fluent and non-fluent speakers). Community perceptions and usability must be monitored. An agency or language committee should take responsibility for awareness-building through workshops, community meetings, and digital media platforms such as YouTube or Facebook. Short videos or guides explaining

the writing system, word division, pronunciation, and spelling can be effective tools for outreach. A primer book as a foundational book is crucial for spelling symbol awareness among the community members.

8. Conclusion

The question of orthographic development for tribal languages in Manipur is not simply a linguistic concern but a deeply sociocultural and political one. While the widespread use of Roman script introduced by missionaries laid the foundation for literacy, these early systems were primarily designed for religious use and often lacked phonological accuracy and consistency. As a result, they are ill-suited for use in formal education without significant revision.

Although 18 tribal languages are officially recognized for early-grade education, foundational literacy in these languages remains weak due to the absence of standardized and widely accepted orthographies. The desire to create such systems is growing, yet progress is slowed by divergent community views, denominational differences, and misconceptions about the need for a unique script. While script invention may carry symbolic value, the practical challenges of digital integration, Unicode encoding, and long adoption timelines make existing scripts, particularly the Roman script, a more feasible and sustainable choice. This study emphasizes that effective orthographies must be phonemically adequate, simple, consistent, acceptable, and adaptable (Cahill & Rice, 2008; Pappuswamy, 2017). Achieving this requires inclusive, time-bound consultations involving tribal Literature Societies, linguists, educators, and policy bodies. These efforts must also include local capacity-building, regular testing, and public awareness campaigns.

In sum, orthographic standardization is essential for the success of mother tongue education in Manipur. It must be rooted in community involvement and guided by linguistic principles and technological realities. A well-developed writing system will not only support foundational literacy but also contribute meaningfully to the preservation and vitality of Manipur's rich linguistic heritage.

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Acknowledgements:

This study was fully funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) as part of the Post-Doctoral Fellowship awarded to the author. I acknowledge N. Pramodini Devi, Professor, Department of Linguistics, Manipur University for her kind supervision in this study.