

Revivalism and/as Resistance:
The Meetei Movement in the Twentieth Century

*A thesis submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Revivalism and/as Resistance: The Meitei Movement in the Twentieth Century**” submitted by **Thongam Bipin Singh**, Reg. No. **10HCPH01**, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature** is a bonafide work carried out by him under my supervision and guidance.

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DECLARATION

I, Thongam Bipin Singh (Regd. No. 10HCPH01), hereby declare that this thesis titled **“Revivalism and/as Resistance: The Meetei Movement in the Twentieth Century Manipur”** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. M. T. Ansari is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

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Introduction

The idea of nation and nationalism and its relation with revivalism (Khuraijam Singh, 2016; Joykumar Singh, 2012; Panikkar, 2003; Ling, 1992; Hobsbawm, 1983) as a socio-political movement is the centre of interest that my dissertation attempts to address. The nature of nation-form/ation in South Asia and in most non-Western countries prove that any call for revival of the past is deeply intermeshed with aspirations and issues of nation/alism. In most of the non-Western postcolonial countries, revivalism as a socio-political movement aims to realise an authentic nationhood, a move that reveals the desire to change the “present” by what is dubbed as authentic tradition. Such a desire is often animated by “our attachment to the past” and a “feeling that the present needs to be changed, that it is our task to change it” (Chatterjee, 1994:151). The normative presupposition in the East seems to be based on a modern political imagination that presumes the nation form as secured and accomplished in the past and hence the prevalent notion that the past should legitimately engineer our present politics, which, in contrary to the West, is an escape from present to a glorious past (ibid, 152).

Although my current work is on revivalism in the context of Meeteis of Manipur, my initial research had begun with the political question of Manipur and its (non) belongingness in the Indian nation-state. Twentieth-century Meetei movement and nationalism in particular, and Manipur in general, and its direct engagement with the Indian nation-state as a means to understand the former was the primary framework. The shift from such a framework to my current work which is largely confined within the geopolitical entity of present Manipur occurred mainly because of

my exposure to Naoria Phulo and the *Mayek* (script) movement, that necessitated a different framework and theoretical engagement. But the central question of my initial work is still subsumed in a different question raised by my present work on forms of Meetei movement and nationalism in the twentieth century. Engagement with India for the exploration of Meetei nationalism and movement has been addressed by revisiting varied socio-religious movements of Meeteis¹ that seek to overthrow Hindu dominance. In this dissertation, my attempt is to ascertain the evolution or the trajectory of Meetei community in relation to various movements in the twentieth century. So, how did the shift happen?

I knew of Laininghan Naoria Phulo (1888-1941), but only as a religious figure of *Meetei/Apokpa Marup*² cult from Cachar (present Silchar district of Assam, India), and my own understanding, perhaps, was possibly derived from the general knowledge of him as a mere mystified figure of the *Marup*. His work on Meetei-lon (the language of Meetei) and *Mayek* (script), his thoughts on education and history, economic exploitation of Meetei by Brahmins, and significantly, the rationale for his rejection of Hinduism were unknown to me like many other Meeteis. However, his contemporaries such as Lamabam Kamal, Khwairakpam Chaoba, Hijam Anganghal and Hijam Irabot, have been a significant part of Meetei consciousness. I also did not study Meetei *Mayek* in school because Manipuri as a language/subject was written in Bangla script until the latter was replaced by Meetei *Mayek* in the valley-schools in 2006.³ The fact that Meetei *Mayek* movement was almost a century old was unknown

¹ Meetei as a term is used to represent a Meetei person or the community while Meeteis is used to represent the Meetei in plural. And, Meetei and Meitei are valid terms that represent the same community, however, here I used Meetei to identify the same.

² *Apokpa Marup* is a religious group founded by Naoria Phulo in the 1930s in Cachar, while *Meetei Marup* is founded by Takhellambam Bokul, disciple of Phulo, and others in Manipur a decade later. Both *Apokpa* and *Meetei Marup* have similar beliefs and religious affiliations.

³ However, it is important to mention here that teaching of Manipuri in Meetei *Mayek* had begun much before its official introduction in the schools in 2006. Different groups and the government approved

to me.⁴ I was unaware of the expert committee meeting of 1978-79⁵ constituted by the government of Manipur for the selection of “correct and acceptable”⁶ Meetei *Mayek*. Meetings of the expert committee lasted for nearly a year. Recommendations of the expert committee and the movement before and after were central in the way in which Meetei identity gets constituted in the second half of the twentieth century.

Subordination of Phulo and the *Mayek* movement, I argue in the dissertation, was a response to the Meetei movement by the Hindu-Meetei public’s attempt to reaffirm “their” history, ideology, figures, etc. Yet the history of Naoria Phulo and the *Mayek* movement is insignificant for many a mainstream Meetei narrative. The instituted process and constituted politics of systematic elision of Phulo, the *Mayek* movement and such history, were thus the means whereby the dominant class and community achieved legitimacy and visibility and appropriated even the claim to history of a whole community. When I was reading about the socio-political movement of Manipur, I could sense that Naoria Phulo and the *Mayek* movement would hold a pivotal position in the making of a new Meetei identity in the twentieth century. However, I was amazed by the lack of academic work on Phulo and the movement, except those geared to discredit him and erode his existence and contribution. I also felt that these two strands of Meetei movements can be conjoined

twenty-seven letters for Meetei *Mayek* and the teaching method of the script. They also taught the script in the schools of the valley in their personal capacity.

<http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=26..120315.mar15>.

⁴ There is still an undeclared feeling against the script from different sections, which I would be discussing in chapter three. There is a general misconception amongst the people that the *Mayek* was unjustly imposed on them. This feeling is born from the lack of knowledge of *Mayek* movement and the general acceptance/assimilation of Bangla script.

⁵ The expert committee of Meetei *Mayek* was constituted to select a correct and acceptable Meetei *Mayek* by Yangmasho Sheiza led Manipur government in 1978. Recommendation of the expert committee is the script that was introduced in the valley schools in 2006. See, chapter three for more information.

⁶ As appeared in the Extraordinary gazette of Manipur government in 1978 for the selection of Meetei *Mayek*. See, chapter three for more discussion on the inclusion of such terms in the gazette.

to examine the political mobilisation that led to radical movements in the second part of the twentieth century.

The shift in my research work was encouraged by my interest in probing into the reasons and politics of the concerted de-historicisation of Naoria Phulo and the *Mayek* movement so much so that it is now unfamiliar/unknown to the general public. My present work seeks to reason out the mystification of Phulo, and enquire into whether this was/is a deliberate attempt to elide his contributions. The shift is also informed by my curiosity to establish a new trajectory of the Meetei movement. The present work is an attempt to examine the reasons for this lack of work and de-historicization while trying to generate a discussion on the notion of a good/normative Meetei and what constitutes a “good Meetei.” I attempt to argue that the notion of the hegemonic and normative/good Meetei is the reason behind the lack of any serious academic work on “mad” Phulo and the *Mayek*.

The whole discourse of Meetei revivalists as *angaoba*⁷ (mad) Meetei, as discussed in the dissertation, is thematically and structurally vital in the formation of a normative Meetei identity. *Angaoba* Meetei, outside pathology, is generally attributed to the Meetei who invest time and energy in the search for an “authentic” Meetei history, religion and identity. They are generally perceived as a group of Meetei who “lag” behind and have lost all contemporary relevance – to put it simply – s/he is somebody who represents the pre-modern Meetei who is unfit for the modern society

⁷ Although mad is an English equivalent of *angaoba*, in the context of Manipur and the cultural understanding of the term in Meetei society and language, *angaoba* is often used to denigrate a person for its irrelevance, insignificance, eccentricity, and so on. I argue that this capacity to dismiss a person on the basis of its ‘irrelevance’ is accumulated through social and religious capital of Hinduism.

(Ningthouja, 2011). In this discursive politics of pathologization of humans, Naoria Phulo and the likes are deemed and described as “mad.”

Who is an ideal Meetei or a “good Meetei?” The answer to this simple and yet complicated question lies in the socio-political backdrop of the Meetei community and its evolution in the twentieth century. Allegiance to Hinduism, as a result of the conversion of Meetei into Hinduism in the eighteenth century, is an important factor that determines a purported “good Meetei.” A “good Meetei” can be understood as a product of the interface between Meetei revivalism and the movement to defend Hinduism. This production of a notion of the “good Meetei” draws from the crisis generated in the wake of the construction of the *mad*, therefore, the *bad* Meetei is a recurring theme of this dissertation, even as it constantly grapples with the question of revivalism and nationalism. The shift in my research has been challenging not just because of the difficulty in the collection of materials but also because of the fact that I had to reorient my own perception about the “mad” Meetei as against the “good Meetei.”

This chapter as an introduction to the dissertation serves as a binding thread for the following chapters that focus on various aspects of the Meetei world beginning from the early twentieth century and moving towards till the end. This chapter is subdivided into three sections for convenience. The first section provides a brief biography of Naoria Phulo and an account of select history of Meetei: important events that are significant in the evolution of the Meetei community. It provides a historical glimpse to ascertain periodization of Meetei history and the working of revivalism. Therefore, this history may not necessarily start from 33 AD to contemporary times. Instead it narrates events and crucial interfaces in the history that will support and substantiate, and help delineate the main argument of the

dissertation. The second section gives an overview of the field – revivalism and nationalism. Significant aspects of nation and nationalism are laid out for discussion in the main chapters that follow this introductory chapter. This section also draws attention to the working of the private and public divide in the Meetei community as a means to understand revivalism of the community. The third section summarizes the chapters and provides a few disclaimers and elucidation for the use of certain terms in the dissertation.

1

Manipur is divided into two distinct geographical features: Hills and the Valley. In recent times, these geographical distinctions have become political categories (Suan: 2009). Meeteis are the dominant and the largest population occupying the central Imphal valley, and the two major tribal groups – Naga and Kuki are the dominant in the hills. Inhabitants of the valley include Pangal (Meetei Muslim), Marwaris, Bengalis, Nepalis, and different tribal groups. There are thirty three different recognized tribal communities (ibid) which fall into the larger category of Naga and Kuki. However, there are also smaller tribal groups like the Aimol, who refuse to join either of the larger groups. Tribals are largely Christian while the Meeteis are predominantly Vaishnavite-Hindu. Sanamahi Meetei, the indigenous religion, also has a significant increase in its followers in the last few decades. According to 2011 census, the population of Manipur is slightly more than 27 lakhs, out of which nearly 60 per cent lives in the valley which constitutes only one by ninth area of the state.

The history of Meetei (Manipur) community is generally divided into three periods: i) Meetei (pre-Hindu) ii) Hindu period (1724 till early twentieth century) iii)

Post-Hindu or the revival period (from early twentieth century). The last period can be further divided into pre and post “annexation” to Indian Union. Meetei period, as it is indicated, is generally considered as the authentic Meetei period which allows the post-Hindu Meetei revivalists to invoke its authenticity for political mobilization. There are different claims to the origin of Meetei kingdom and dynasty. A majority of the scholars accept *Cheitharol Kumpapa* as the authentic source for Meetei History and therefore agree 33 AD as the beginning of the Meetei dynasty with Pakhangba as the first king (Gangmumei, 1991; Ningthouja, 2011; Sanajaoba, 1988; J. Parrat, 2005). On the other hand, Wahengbam Ibohal Singh (2007) challenges this narrative by insisting that the 33 A. D. narrative was part of the process of Hinduisation. He claims that this history was a result of the distortion of Meetei history after Hinduism. He claims that the Meetei dynasty should ideally have begun from the seventh or eighth century A. D. The revivalist history of Kangjia Gopal (1978) and Chingtamlem (2012) however further pushes back the beginning, claiming the history of Kangleipak (Manipur) as the earliest civilization. However, Meetei as a term that is used to refer to the present Meetei community as a whole was meant to identify only the *Ningthouja* clan.⁸ This identification of Meetei with *Ningthouja* clan could be seen as a norm until the eighteenth century. The *Moirang* clan was outside the Meetei fold till the late nineteenth century. Gangmumei Kabui claims that consolidation of remaining six clans, i.e. *Angom*, *Chenglei* (*Sarang Leishangthem*), *Luwang*, *Khuman*, *Moirang* and *Khaba-Nganba* under the umbrella term Meetei began only during King Kyamba in the fifteenth century (Kabui, 1991: 194). Ningthouja or the Meetei clan was able to consolidate other clans through military invasion and marriage ties.

⁸ Meetei community is sub-divided into seven different clans which represented different principalities before the unification under the Ningthouja clan.

The Hindu period can be roughly marked from the early part of eighteenth century until the early period of twentieth century. Early eighteenth century, during the reign of King Pamheiba (1709-1748, Garibniwaz was his Hindu name), Vaishnavite-Hinduism became the state religion. He coerced his subjects to convert into Hinduism. However, it is important to remember that the migration of Brahmins to Manipur and the influence of Hinduism began from the sixteenth century. Pamheiba's predecessor Meidingu Charairongba (1697-1709) converted into Hinduism (Ramandi cult). But unlike Pamheiba, he did not force his new religion upon his subjects. The early part of twentieth century is generally marked as the end of Hindu period because of the emergence of Meetei revivalism in the figure of Naoria Phulo and his religious groups. However, with his arrival, Hinduism did not leave its superiority and it has been surviving in various forms until today. This periodization is for the convenience of understanding and the working of Meetei revivalism in the twentieth century and to mark the arrival of Meetei movement and Phulo. Within the span of two centuries, (forceful) conversion of Meetei into Hinduism was close to complete. The burning of *Puyas*,⁹ renaming and destruction of Meetei deities and temples, religious places, distortion and rewriting of history, translation of Sanskrit text into Meeteilon, and introduction of Sanskrit Rasa were important events of the period. During this period, Manipur lost its sovereignty to Burma (now Myanmar) for a period of seven years (1819-1826) which is also known as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* (Seven Years Devastation). Manipur regained its sovereignty after the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) between the British and the

⁹ *Puya* is broadly understood as manuscript written in Meetei *Mayek* on Meetei religion, belief, customs, law etc. After the arrival of Hinduism, as much as 124 different *Puyas* were burnt by the king under the instruction of his guru, Shanti Das in the eighteenth century. Meetei *maichous* (scholars) kept several *Puyas* in their personal possession, notwithstanding King's order to submit them in the palace for burning them.

Burmese. There was an attempt during this period to assimilate the history of Manipur into the Indo-Aryan tradition by claiming Pakhangba as the descendent of Arjuna of epic *Mahabharat*. It also claimed that the present Manipur was the Manipur of the same epic. This has been challenged and rejected by many, and historical records have shown that Manipur as a term appeared only during the Hindu period. Taxes levied from the people in order to become and remain Hindu, introduction of the notion of *mangba* and *sengba* (impure and pure) became an inevitable part of this period. In 1891, Manipur once again lost its sovereignty to British after the Battle of Khongjom.

The third period, the post Hindu/Meetei revivalism, begins from the early part of twentieth century with the arrival of Meetei assertion for legitimacy and sovereignty. Naoria Phulo is an inevitable part of this period. Resistance to Hinduism, as it were, did not begin with Phulo, but has its history even during the Hindu period. The formation of *Apokpa Marup* and *Meetei Marup*, and the rise of awareness about Meetei literature, language and history mark this period. The two *Nupi Lal* (Women's War) of 1904 and 1939 against the British and the Marwari trading community, a strong communist movement under the leadership of Hjam Irabot, are few other important events of the first part of the period. When the British left, Manipur regained its independence on 14 August 1947, and had an interim government elected through universal adult franchise. The government also had drafted its constitution. On 15 October 1949, Manipur was "annexed" by India. The second part of the period is marked by disillusionment with India and armed group movements with an agenda for self-determination. However, the history of Meetei revivalism in the second half has been suppressed to highlight a different narrative and trajectory of Meetei nationalism and history. My dissertation attempts to recover the history of the period

and present a different trajectory of the Meetei movement, thus, critiquing the dominant historiography.

Nilbir (1991), N. Parrat (1999), Joykumar Singh (2012), Khuraijam Bijoykumar Singh (2016) and others who have worked on the emergence of Meetei nationalism/Sanamahi revivalism exalt Naoria Phulo as the pioneer figure of *Sanamahi*/Meetei movement.¹⁰ In the dissertation, Naoria Phulo appears as a critical figure for critiquing and remapping the Meetei movement of the twentieth century. His political and cultural assertion seeks to re-conceptualise Meetei community as a means to overthrow Hinduism and its dominance in cultural and epistemological domain. I also use Phulo as a tool to critique dominant Meetei public of the twentieth century, which I term as Meetei-Hindu public.

Naoria Phulo was born into a Meetei family in Cachar (Silchar district of present Assam state) on 28 August 1888.¹¹ He was known to have been a good and an obedient student. According to Hodamba, owing to the “Seven years of Devastation” (1819-1826), his grandfather, Naorem Herando, fled to Cachar along with his family members (2012: 24). Naoria Phulo was the sixth child of his parents who bore ten children. Despite threats of social ostracism that was associated with English education, and poor family condition, he was admitted to Government Victoria Memorial High School at the age of 22 in 1910. He used to travel for miles to reach

¹⁰ I use Sanamahi and Meetei movement interchangeably at certain instances. However, it should be noted that Sanamahi as a term refers to Meetei religion Sanamahi, and when I use Sanamahi movement as a phrase I do not refer to the Sanamahi religion per se but to the larger movement of the Meetei. I do this because Meetei movement is prominently informed by Sanamahi. Sanamahi will only refer to the religion when it stands alone.

¹¹ Phulo’s birth year is inconsistent in the available record. Sairem Nilbir (1991) and N.D. Hodomba (2012) maintain 1888 as his year of birth but Naorem Joykumar (2012) gives 1887 as his year of birth. Sairem Nilbir and Hodomba also provide different names of his birth locality. Sairem accounts Jhariban Laishram Khul Mamang Leikai, but Hodomba maintains Jaribon Laishram Khun Mayai Leikai. Jhariban and Jaribon could be variations in spelling and articulation, but *mamang* and *mayai* are two different ideas of locality.

his school. Few years later, his father passed away. At the age of 24, when he was in Class IX, he married Sanarei (27). Before he finally left his last job as sub-inspector in 1931, after one year of service, Phulo worked as a teacher, and a clerk.

Though he was born in a Meetei family and locality, society at large was Hindu and dominated by Bengalis. In Cachar, during his time and in contemporary times as well, Meetei “lived in Bengali fashion” (Nilbir, 1991: 116). As a community settled within the dominant Bengali-Hindu community, any mark of difference from the Bengali way of life was an object of contempt and mockery. Any difference or deviation from their normative values were considered inferior and uncivilised. Therefore, there was a manifest desire and imitation of the dominant community as a means to be accepted under the fold of Bengali Hindu community. However, at the same time, acceptance (imitation) of such normative values of Bengaliness became a symbol of absence/lack for the Meetei. Humiliation of the Meetei on the basis of culture and language by the Bengalis of Cachar was part of their daily life. Through religious and Bengali hegemony, Meetei produced a self-hate discourse. Elsewhere in Imphal valley, the social and religious relation between people were also controlled and dominated by Hinduism. When in school, Naoria Phulo had faced a similar situation where he was taunted by his Bengali friends for his community’s lack of a script and god of their own (Nilbir: 1991). Such encounters led Phulo to the formation of a new religious group called *Apokpa Marup* later in his life. His message on the issue of social ostracisation, when he and his followers were socially ostracised, has

had a long impact on Meetei society. This particular incident could be read as the beginning of new Meetei identity,¹² Meetei as a political category.

2

Revivalism as a notion has generated a range of diverse academic enquiries. It entangles with the nation form and the way in which culturalists seek to realise it. Revivalism as a term, therefore, cannot be understood without referring to politics, social and religious movements. Trevor O. Ling (1992) distinguishes “revivalism” from “revival”. For him, revivalism is a political movement against an oppressor: culturally, socially and politically, with a goal to bring an end to the oppression. Here, revivalism as a notion can be referred to as a political reconsolidation of a community, a claim to an authentic identity/tradition, and an anti-colonial discourse. Revival, on the other hand, is without a political end. However, both revivalism and revival as a process of social change, nonetheless, presupposes discontinuity or incoherence in the history of the community. B. J. Terweil (1996) defines revivalism as “a concerted attempt by a particular group of people to restore, to use, or to awaken interest in a set of old customs in order to counteract the influences of a dominant *alien* culture ...” (277; emphasis mine). Terweil indicates, significantly, that the presence of an alien and dominant culture is essential for revivalism to emerge. Terweil also indicates that revivalism as a political project is closely linked with the felt urgency for a reconstruction of the past by a section of society for a nation located in the future.

¹² In the year 1931, after he and his followers were socially ostracised, in a gathering he spoke on the importance of accepting such ostracisation as they can follow their religion without fear and hesitation. His speech was published in 1931. See, Naoria Phulo (2010).

The “Invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm, 1983) becomes a political exigency and a means through which a community holds continuity to its “historic past.” He illustrates how invention of tradition [revivalism] manifests contrasting characteristics as against the change as an imminent character of society. According to him, revivalism is the “... contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some part of social life within it as unchanging and invariant...” (2). Revivalism as a political movement in Manipur reflects such a notion of continuity of a particular historic past and attempts to realign the present as “unchanging and invariant.” The revivalists produce the idea of a historical discontinuity or incoherence in history by conjecturing a crisis in the present. The crisis of the present or the contemporary is established in relation to its past as the present is seen as changing and variant of the authentic historic past. The fall from the glorious and authentic past/tradition to an unrecognizable variant tradition of the present produces a sense of crisis and discontinuity. This discontinuity is generally attributed to an external force – religious or political, or both. It instills a sense of fear, incompleteness and the fear of loss of history and identity. And this sense of fear and loss become a political reason for the revival of a specific cultural past.

Naorem Joykumar (2012) concurs with Ling in differentiating revivalism from revival although he uses different terms – revitalization and revivalism. According to Joykumar, revivalism as a movement seeks to revive the old tradition from the position of a “crisis” and return to a “golden” era. It emphasises on institutions such as customs, value, tradition, history, religion, etc. Revitalization, on the other hand, strengthens and reactivates “historic past.” For him, revitalisation implicates anti-colonial movement and struggle against racial subjugation. Meetei revivalism of the

1930s, which is manifested in almost all social and literary fronts, was thus revitalisation movements as it augurs a movement against an external force.

My discomfort with such a formulation of 1930s movement as revitalisation movement, or to use Ling's revivalism, lies in the fact that contradicting traditions, which is reflected in the dissertation, of different historical and religious allegiances, can be invoked within a revivalist movement. Chapters one and two of the dissertation indicate such non-uniformity of revivalism. In the literature of the early twentieth century, a normative Meetei identity was produced. This category is defined by one's love, devotion to *Meetei Chanu*¹³ accompanied by their inability to reject Hinduism. On the other hand, in the figure of Naoria Phulo, through an act of formation of *Apokpa Marup*, a rejection of Hinduism was affirmed. His contributions to language, script and the community at large are significant. Phulo also reclaimed a different historical tradition for Meetei. I argue that collapsing of these traditions of Meetei into a singular movement forecloses the emergence of Phulo and *Mayek* movement.

Revivalism is also intrinsically mnemonic. Studies on memory have shown that (collective) memory is a living social process and it is selective and exclusive in nature. Whether this memory is actual or a construct is irrelevant for the revivalists as a certain memory of the past is essential for a reconfiguration of the present. D. R. Nagaraj says, "Nationalism is the construction of memories" (2012: 219). From the scattered memories of religion and language, "in varying frameworks, recesses, structures, are sutured into a definite system" (Nagaraj, 220) a nationalist memory gets constituted. Michael Kamman puts it succinctly, "Societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and (that) they do so with the needs of

¹³ Figure of a Meetei woman which represents Meetei community, literature, etc.

contemporary culture clearly in mind – manipulating the past in order to mould the present” (qtd. In Guite, 2011: 7) Here, what is apparent is that the reconstruction of past is mediated by a perceived crisis of the present which require a new realignment. In the East, religion, apart from language and history, is an important site through which “will to be a nation”¹⁴ was/is thought could be achieved. And it is the memories of religion and tradition where communities are mobilized and reconfigured.

In the reconstruction of memories as a means to recover an authentic identity “old stories are realigned with new meanings and aspirations,” and a, “conscious effort causes the birth of nationalism” (Nagaraj, 2012: 220). Further, Nagaraj says, “. . . all the cultural identities of modern societies are all nothing more than reconfiguration of memories Contemporary struggles require a personality and a self which are created from the memories of the past” (ibid). This imagination of community is in sharp contrast to M. S. S. Pandian’s (1998) reading of the Pondicherry Group. Pandian opines that this group of Dalit authors which goes by the name Pondicherry Group “chooses to step outside history” as they imagine a “faceless past” and future which allow them to reject “all forms of power.” Pandian sees the role and invocation of memory differently here. He notes: “[The] cult of heroes that informs the nationalist imagination belittles the ordinary¹⁵ and denies them any valid location in society. Their only role can be that of follower or deviant” (307). Such faceless imagination of past and future is a radical political imagination of freedom

¹⁴ Ernest Renan maintains that religion cannot be a primary ground through which a modern nation can be constituted. This probably is the contradiction of modernity in the East. My hypothesis is that this contradiction is a product of colonialism through which western modernity was presented to the non-western countries. We also need to maintain that western modernity itself is debatable, its secular credentials needs to be questioned.

¹⁵ In his essay, “Writing Ordinary Lives,” (2008) Pandian once again looks at how ordinary people negotiate with power and are represented in literary texts as against the literatures where protagonists are generally larger than life, of an extraordinary story.

and equality. For the group, according to Pandian, nation is a prison house. Therefore, a critique of Indian state does not necessarily critique the category of the nation itself (294). Pandian's reading of the Pondicherry Group is a sharp reminder and critique of the category of nation that the revivalist movement often tends to uncritically valorise. He says, "Can there be a nation without history and power (read state)? Indeed, it cannot be. Perhaps, it is fifty years of freedom within the nation which has taught the Pondicherry Group that freedom lies outside the construct of the nation" (309).

However, as we see, modern political imagination cannot be realized without memory, history and figure. Creation of a self from the memories of a "hoary past" (Aloysius, 2011: 154) is a complex negotiation, and "[t]he complex process of selection, rejection, modification and codification of a normative national culture from amorphous pre-modern traditions does not take place in a vacuum" (132). Instead of inferring nation and nationalism as a process of transition from one kind of society to another, it has to be understood as an ideological-cultural construct by situating within "one and the same socio-historical context and understood both as a continuity and a break in history" (132). In other words, nation and nationalism cannot be simply understood as a mere transition from pre-modern to the modern, but understood in relation with the larger politico-economic transitions (132). Revivalism was/is an ideological and cultural exigency of the East. To deal with this issue further, modern nationalisms are internal to their own specific forms of development (129) owing to variations in social set-up. "The form and idiom were certainly borrowed, but primarily to express and resolve the historical dialectic of each society" (ibid).

D. R. Nagaraj (2011) declares, “even the oppressed need a memory.”¹⁶ Sanal Mohan (2015) asserts that recovery of a fragile community, like the Dalits, requires engaging with history as an important tool and a certain mode of rendering of history. He says, “. . . the emergence of a community, even if fragile, takes place at the level of a practice in which history, and a specific way of rendering it, assumes significance” (384). Centrality of history and therefore writing history of Meetei by Meetei is a significant principle through which Naoria Phulo saw recovery of the Meetei community possible. Mohan also saw the centrality of “written words and written history for a possible salvation of exploited and oppressed Dalits” (358). Therefore, for Phulo, rejection of the Hindu narrative of Meetei and the re-writing of Meetei history by Meetei as a counter-narrative is a significant departure from Hindu dominance. This is a significant departure from James Scott’s (2009) Zomia,¹⁷ the politics of choice of habitation, orality and scriptlessness as a rationale choice made by Zomia in order to escape from the valley-state (formation). In his invention of Meetei script,¹⁸ and the assertion for a scripted history, Phulo seeks to participate in the production of community mediated by modernity – *scripted* community and history. Available in the writing of Phulo is also Phulo’s admiration for script (-ing) of community and history that emerges from his desire to differentiate Meetei from *unscripted* neighboring communities. Stuart Blackburn (2011) and Sowmya Dechamma (2014) see script as the basis through which modern political identities

¹⁶ Appears in Chinnaiah Jangam (2015: 68).

¹⁷ Zomia is term coined by Willem Van Schendel (2002) to identify communities who inhabits in the upland Southeast Asia that covers part of Northeast India, Bangladesh, Burma, China etc. See his article, “Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Later, James Scott (2009) uses the term and the idea to understand the working of society and state in the region in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*.

¹⁸Naoria Phulo’s script, Yelhou *Mayek*, gets rejected in the 1978-79 Meetei *Mayek* expert committee meeting his script was inspired by Devanagiri and it didn’t have a *Puya* as its source. This issue is discussed in chapter three.

and nationhood are mobilized and realized while rendering *unscripted* communities unfit for this political imaginary. I argue that logic of modernity is central in Phulo, his contemporaries and later revivalists, and this is indicated by their engagement with history, script, language, etc. Meetei identity became a political category to critique Hinduism in the first half of the twentieth century and India in the second half.

The ambivalent nature of modernity and realization of the nation form in the East has been elaborated by Partha Chatterjee (2012). The distinction that Chatterjee makes between nations in the East and the West lies in their different loyalties to past and present.¹⁹ He says, "... the founding moment of Western modernity, looks at the *present as the site of one's escape from the past*, for us it is precisely the *present from which we feel we must escape*. This makes the very modality of our coping with modernity radically different from the historically evolved modes of Western modernity" (Chatterjee, 2012:152; emphasis mine). While Western modernity's escape from their past to the present is seen as a natural progression from the primordial to the modern, modernity in the East is received by escaping to the past from the present. Present is in a state of crisis and often the solution for its crisis is available in the past. This escape is necessitated by the unequal power relations between the East and the West, whereby, in order to counter the dominance of the "present" and the "outer" the East has to resort to "tradition" and the "inner." Past is revived to create its own modernity²⁰ in the East. This particular distinction is crucial

¹⁹ However, one must concur with Chatterjee distinction for theoretical generalization but be cautious of the simplistic binary, east and the west, for a nuanced understanding of nation and community in the east, for example, Aloysius (2013), who later sees nation as negotiation with modernity and blurs the sharp distinction between modern and pre-modern binaries.

²⁰ Chatterjee also sees modernity of the east as national in character. However, he also says, "[...] the formation of hegemonic 'national culture was *necessarily* built upon a system of exclusions. Ideas of freedom, equality, and cultural refinement went hand in hand with a set of dichotomies which systematically excluded from the new life of the nation the vast masses of people whom the dominant elite would represent and lead, but who could never be culturally integrated with their leaders' (135), in

for Chatterjee and the modernity of the East as it allows the East to protect its indomitable *inner* self – tradition and spiritual²¹ – as opposed to the materiality of the West. However, in his critique of Benedict Anderson, Chatterjee agrees that “nationalism was entirely a product of the political history of Europe” (1991: 24) and (rhetorically) questions whether the East is a perpetual consumer of Western modernity and its modular forms. Drawing from the anticolonial/nationalist movement, he establishes a modernity of the East, not merely as a consumer of modernity produced elsewhere, but also as a producer of a modernity which is irreconcilable and different from the West. He says, “the most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalists’ imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference* with the “modular” forms of the national society propagated by the modern West” (ibid: 26).

‘Imagined community’ of the East, as argued by Anderson, is often a copy of the Western modular, which valorises horizontal homogeneity of time. Although, for Chatterjee and many South Asian scholars, “Empty homogenous time is the time of capital” which disregards any form of “resistance to its free movement.” When the capital time encounters with another time, it is “understood as coming out of humanity’s past, something people should have left behind but somehow haven’t” (2009: 5). Encounter with “another time” is an anomaly, an aberration, but not a social and political phenomenon. According to Chatterjee, the encounter of capital time with

“The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” in *Empire and Nation: Essential Writings* (2012).

²¹ Chatterjee’s formulation of eastern modernity in the domain of inner spirituality of the east does not suffice to understand the political mobilization of the minorities as the inner. Spiritual of the east is the domain of the dominant caste and class. It thus fails to capture communities and politics which fall outside of it. M.S.S. Pandian’s “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere,” (2002); Gopal Guru’s “Desi, Derivative and Beyond” (2011); G. Aloysius’ “The Brahminical Inscribed in Body Politics,” 2010, *Nationalism Without a Nation in India* (1997), are some useful texts to infer a different trajectory of political mobilization of the historically invisibilised communities from the indomitable spiritual domain of Chatterjee.

another time is usually considered as an encounter with pre-modern time which enables capital in securing “for capital and modernity their ultimate triumph, regardless of what some people may believe or hope, because after all, time does not stand still” (ibid). Therefore, revivalism or the nation form in the East, and the case of revivalism in Manipur as well, may be understood as an encounter with the capital time (Hindu time in the case of Meetei/Manipur). Chatterjee further argues in the form of a critique of Anderson that people can only imagine but do not live in empty homogenous time. He says,

Empty Homogenous time is the utopian time of capital. It linearly connects past, present, and future, creating possibility for all of those historical imaginings of identity, nationhood, progress, and so on that Anderson, along with many others, have made familiar to us. But empty homogenous time is not located anywhere in real space – it is utopian. The real space of modern life consists of heterotopias. (ibid: 6-7)

In the postcolonial countries, time appears dense and heterogeneous and this co-presence of several times, for Chatterjee, is “only to endorse the utopianism of Western modernity” because “other times are not mere survivors from a pre-modern past, they are new products of encounter with modernity” (ibid: 7). G. Aloysius (2013) also states that modernity is about restructuring of the primordial social and political relations instead of subsuming different societies/communities under the overarching capital time of the West.²² Therefore, he argues “That homogenization and heterogenization or unification and fragmentation of social worlds are not

²² See Aloysius “Conceptualising the Region,” 2013. Also, see his introduction of *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, 201 where he says that “Nationalism [modernity] instead of giving birth to one national society, seems to have delivered a whole litter of communities divided from one another in terms of language, religion, region or caste” (1).

contradictory but indeed complimentary ...” (2013: 3). Ernest Renan’s (2010) “the will” for a nation which is superior to language failed to establish in postcolonial/East primarily because of the predatory nature of capital time. Chatterjee says, “We must remember that in the world arena of modernity, we are outcaste, untouchables. Modernity for us is like a supermarket of foreign goods, displayed on the shelves: pay up and take away what you like. No one there believes that we could be producer of modernity. The bitter truth about our present is our subjection, our inability to be subjects in our own right. And, yet it is because we want to be modern that our desire to be independent is transposed on to our past” (151).²³ Because of this “want,” as I would like to argue, particularly in the case of Meetei revivalism, the creation of “those days” and “these days” become a necessity for the revivalist. “These days” are marked by “incompleteness and lack of fulfilment” while constructing a picture of “those days” when there was beauty, prosperity, and a healthy sociability: “... Those days for us are not a historical past; we construct only to mark the difference posed by the present” (ibid).

Partha Chatterjee (2009) and other post-colonial theorists have asserted a strong and an independent modernity for the East. The assertion of superiority/indomitability of the inner/spiritual domain of the East over West’s outer/material universalises often the very heterogeneity of the East that they seek to recover as a means to critique the capital time of the West. The nation form and revivalism of the East, whether an escape from the present to the past or otherwise, seems to suggest of a strong desire to strengthen certain homogeneity of time.

²³ It is important to note that Chatterjee’s unqualified usage of ‘us,’ ‘our’ and ‘we’ are problematic. As recent reading of history have shown that we, our, us, are mostly used to reinstate the ruling Brahmin – savarna caste. This issue of unqualified usage of us and we, will be dealt in the latter part of the chapter. It is relevant to instruct ourselves of the existent of critique of such formulation by the nationalists and subaltern scholars alike.

Anderson's (1983) "hypnotic confirmation of the solidity of a single community, embracing characters, authors and readers, moving onward through calendrical time" (27) can be seen working in the politics of presenting East's inner/spiritual domain as a universal phenomenon of the East. However, it is not so, and in this representation of inner as the universal phenomenon, Brahminical episteme gets foregrounded undermining other episteme and community (Pandian, 2002; Guru, 2002, 2011). This desire for solidity rings louder in the rise of the right-wing Hindu forces in recent times. The rise of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India is an example of the desire for a homogenous, horizontal Indian time. Imposition and hypnotisation of/by the regressive Hindu-Indian time get manifested itself in curbing dissents, differences of time. It is precisely in the encounter with such "hypnotism" of the regressive Hindu that Meetei revivalism becomes an inevitable product of modernity. It is on a similar desire for "hypnotism" and "solidity of a single community" that Meetei revivalism thrives.

Theoretical outlining of revivalism and nation/alism, co-presence and working of the two can be analysed by underlining the distinction and functioning of the public and private spaces as well. I use these two spaces largely to understand the political nature of Meetei revivalism. Not delving into the hegemony of the bourgeois in the making of public sphere, my attempt in the dissertation is to posit revivalism as a political category emerging as a result of social and political confrontation between the Meetei and the Hindu. Study of the confrontation of Meetei and Hindu in these two spaces, of what constitutes private and public spaces, and, study of how a particular idea or practice become part of private and public domain reveals the constant political tussle between these two spaces and the elements that inhabit these spaces. There is no inherent notion that private is an indomitable inner domain for

eternity. Therefore, the dichotomy of private and public is/was marked by power. Struggle for dominance in representations by contesting communities in public spaces is one of the significant ways in which revivalism as a political project can be understood in the Meetei society. Chatterjee's spiritual and material domains of the East and the West respectively would be useful for theoretical analysis. However, this strict demarcation of spiritual (inner) and material (outer) domain may not be a useful category/exercise concerning a minority community.

I argue that the case of a minority community, here Meetei, is different in the way in which claim for a superior inner over Hindu is absent and made inconceivable. According to T. Singh (2011), the encounter of the Meetei and Hindu, especially from the eighteenth century, unlike the encounter of the East and the West, was the encounter of two pre-modern societies. The dominant and indomitable inner domain of India, the West of Manipur, denies any superior domain to the Meetei. Because of a perceived lack and the inability to claim a superior domain over such Hindu inner domain, Meetei religion, language, script and history, etc., were/are considered indecorous and inferior in the public domain and representation. This coerces Meetei elements to occupy/inhabit the private spaces of Meetei world. Attempt to overcome this structurally produced inferiority was the central theme of the early Meetei writers and I discuss this in the first chapter. I argue that the inner domain that Meetei language, religion and other elements of Meetei occupy is different from the inner, spiritual world of the East. It is because of the structural and unequal power dynamics, and the way in which India is imagined based on the "superior" domain of the Brahminical/Hindu inner that people from the "Northeast India" consume knowledge produced in this very inner domain which invalidates knowledge produced from its location. Therefore, the Northeast cannot write "Bangladesh is in the West of India"

in a formal structure and institutional manner when asked the location/direction of Bangladesh in relation to India. This is located in the manner of how cultural and political imagination of India empties the political and cultural existence of Northeast thus making this presupposition a void for Northeast. Hence, Bangladesh is always to the east of India. Similarly, a Meetei private space unlike the spiritual of the East is an objurgated, meaningless space where everything that is Meetei is thrown into. Making of Meetei episteme illegitimate as a mode of oppression, wherein it remains outside the pure and inner realm of the East is equivalent to *Velivada*²⁴ where a Dalit identity is condemned, restricted and made meaningless. It is the other of the Indian inner self. It is in their inner domain that the impure and inferior self of the Meetei can inhabit marking the domain impure and yielding self-hate. Therefore, what we see in the writing of Naoria Phulo and in the *Mayek* movement of the Meetei is to reclaim legitimacy of Meetei religion, language, script and history in the domain of public and reoccupy it. When such a movement from the private domain seeking legitimacy in the public domain emerges, a consistent tension between private (Meetei) and public (Hindu) is palpable and this defines contemporary Meetei society.

M. S. S. Pandian's (2002) critique of inner/spiritual domain of the East is significant and useful to elucidate the contradiction between many inners of the East.

²⁴ *Velivada* is a term that signifies a space outside of the village where Dalits, erstwhile untouchables, live. This is a space of impurity, ghettos for Dalits. The term has gained a significant currency in political vocabulary after the suicide of Rohith Vemula at University of Hyderabad in 2016 citing caste discrimination by the University administration. After an altercation with right wing student organisation Akhil Bharathiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), Rohith Vemula and his four other friends from Ambedkar Students' Association were expelled from their respective hostels. They were asked not to be seen in public places and barred from participation in students' election. They termed such steps of the administration as social boycott amounting to caste discrimination. When they were expelled from their hostels, with Ambedkar's portrait in their hands, mattresses and other essentials they started living in the Shopcom, a popular public space in the University of Hyderabad. They named their new place *Velivada* and the entry of *Velivada* in a public space signified Dalit assertion and reclamation of space which are denied to Dalits. Rohith committed suicide on January 17 2016. After his suicide there was a nationwide protest. *Velivada* at the University of Hyderabad with a bust of Rohith Vemula still exists despite attempts to remove it by the University administration.

He says that the material domain of public figure like P. S. Sivaswami of colonial India “was governed by what one may term as canons or protocols of western modernity” (1736), while his spiritual domain was governed by “Indian tradition”²⁵ (ibid). Pandian further says,

The seemingly effortless coexistence of Ruskin and *Bhagavata Purana* in the everyday world of Sivaswamy Aiyer in colonial Tamilnadu can, of course, be written as a straightforward story of resistance to colonialism. This is indeed the way elite Indian nationalism scripted the story by working through the binaries of spiritual/material, inner/outer and valorizing the inner or spiritual as the uncolonised site of national selfhood. But it had a less triumphant implication for the subaltern classes. (1736)

Inner or spiritual domain of the East is exclusive²⁶ of the twice-born Hindus, and it is this exclusive and superior inner domain of the Hindus that the Meetei encountered in the eighteenth century. The politics/project of recovery of both private domain and the elements of Meetei community from such condemnations was the agenda of “fanatic” and *angaoba* (mad) Meetei movement/revivalism. The consequence of such a movement was the notion of a “good Meetei” as against the *angaoba* Meetei. My claim in the dissertation is to suggest that the arrival of Meetei revivalists/revivalism in/from the early part of the twentieth century with an agenda to reoccupy the public space emerge/d from the domain of the Meetei private which was condemned as the repository of the condemned Meetei elements through the logic of Hinduism. The Hindu public was already conflated with spiritual elements/icons/images making its

²⁵ “Indian tradition” includes “notions of pollution, Sandhyavandhanam, Sradhas, *Srimad Bhagavata*, *Devi Bhagavata* and feeding of Brahmins. In short, what gets encoded here as Indian culture is what is culture to Brahmins/upper caste” (Pandian, 2002: 1736).

²⁶ See, Gopal Guru (2011); Aloysius, (1997) and (2010).

inroads into the inner domain of the Meetei to completely annihilate the Meetei private. Meetei private was further pushed into an even inner domain. Therefore, it was only natural that a person who emerged from such a condemned space be attributed *mad* by the Hindu public as it represents a different time as against the capital Hindu time.

The arrival of Phulo and revivalists is an effort to unsettle this boundary²⁷ of private and public so as to unsettle the notion of pure and impure demarcated along Meetei and Hindu elements.²⁸ Meetei revivalists' effort to unsettle the boundary of pure and impure, for example, is/was achieved by demanding and asserting that the impure Meeteilon should replace Sanskrit in ritual performances (Phulo, 1940).²⁹ However, the pronouncement of Meetei revivalists as *angaoba* needs to be read beyond the discourse of unsettling the pure and impure binary, but also as a means of curbing the rising legitimacy of the madness of the Meetei revivalist. We also saw a similar conviction in the latter part of the anti-colonial movement in India in the figures of Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Pandian states that the arrival of Periyar and Ambedkar needs to be understood as an effort to unsettle the dominant/Hindu nationalist mode to enforce the binary of spiritual and material domain (2002: 1737). The unsettling of this binary allows recovery of a new space and language for the "language of caste in the colonial India" (ibid) to emerge. Pandian points out that a critique of the dominant nationalist binary of inner and outer

²⁷ M. S. S. Pandian (2002).

²⁸ It is important to provide an important injunction here. Production of impure subjects after the arrival Hinduism was not just limited to Meetei community alone. It had also reached to the Hills/tribals and the Lois, who are classified as Scheduled Tribe and Caste under Indian Constitution. Therefore, there are layers of impure subjects here within Meetei. Anyone but Brahmins, Kings and his family, the Darbar members and other state machineries, could become an impure subject under the illogical pronouncement of *mangba* (impure). Meeteis had the means through which they could return to the pure fold of Hinduism through the payment of fine, but tribals are the other, permanent impure subject of Hinduism. This was also extended to *Lois* (Scheduled Caste) and the *Pangals* (Meetei Muslim).

²⁹ Although this book was written in 1940, I refer to Phulo's *complete works* (2010)

domain for making caste a legitimate political category, Periyar and Ambedkar are termed as “‘collaborators’ with the British” (ibid). For Pandian, unsettling of this binary is a creative contamination that refuses to belong and rejects such a belonging in either spaces for a different political assertion and vocabulary. Phulo and his ilk are not suspect, but *mad* in the context of dominant Meetei-Hindu society for its effort to unsettle the binary created along impure/Meetei/private and pure/Hindu/public space. In both the contexts, what we see is a challenge to the normative notion of pure and impure as a means to establish an independent political vocabulary. And, this quest for non-dependency, Guru’s (2011) “beyond” category for Dalits, in relation to the dominant notion of thinking, rewards political and social condemnation which pronounces them as *mad* or collaborators with the British. A “good Meetei” is/was defined, thus, as a person who is not from the condemned Meetei private space, but a Meetei who inhabits the Hindu-public and synthesises both Meetei and Hinduism. This is the distinction between the inner or spiritual domain of India and Meetei and it would be useful for us to understand this distinction as we set out to a making and unmaking of our neo-colonial experience.

To explicate the theoretical framework of space for understanding revivalism further, something that I have not elaborated in detail in the dissertation, is the politics of personal names³⁰ and the food habits. Personal names are not just a simple signifier of a person, but a signifier of a community’s history and identity, ontology and episteme. Chelliah (2005) asserts that the choice of the Meetei to give/have Meetei names in the last few decades over Hindu names is a rational choice to reject Hinduism for an informed assertion of Meetei identity and nationhood. The personal

³⁰ See, Sowmya Dechamma (2016); and, Shobhana L. Chelliah (2005). Personal names are just one indication of such marked distinction between private and public. One can also see in the realm of religion, food, language, history, behaviours, etc.

name of Naoria Phulo is an important insight into understanding the logic of choice of Meetei personal names. As discussed in the first chapter briefly, as a means to understand the process of proselytisation, apart from the apparent religious aspect, Meetei personal names began to symbolise one's allegiance to a particular faith. After the advent of Hinduism in the eighteenth century, Meetei kings were given and they adopted Hindu names. The first king to officially embrace Hinduism along with his subjects, *Meidingu* Pamheiba, changed his name from Pamheiba to Garibniwaz. Renaming as a practice was not restricted to personal names alone but spread to religious site, deities, places, etc. Manipur replaced Kangleipak and other names of the kingdom like Poireileipak, Meitrabak, etc., in the eighteenth century. It is part of the larger structural religious proselytization processes and revival that personal Meetei names are understood and analysed in the dissertation. For example, as mentioned earlier, Phulo's personal name originally was *Foondrei*, however, because of the inability to pronounce his name by his Bengali teacher and the illegitimacy of it in the formal structure of school and public, he was given the name Phulo, a derivative of the Hindi/Bangla word *Phul* meaning flower. Similarly, illegitimacy of the Meetei personal names in the Hindu public domain, acquiring a Hindu name was made compulsory until very recently. Because of such dichotomy of private and public spaces, and the illegitimacy of Meetei names in the formal/Hindu public domain, generally, Meetei have a tendency of having two personal names: one for home/private and other for outer/public/school. Personal names that are used at home are usually Meetei names and the Hindu names are for the public. I claim in the dissertation that this practice of Meetei personal names is a result of Hindu hegemony that pronounces everything Meetei as illegitimate for public consumption and exhibition. This led, I claim, in relation to the private and public domain, to a

condemnation of Meetei personal names in their private/home spaces. As discussed above, the consistent tension between Meetei private and public defines contemporary Meetei community and this tension is a result of the outward movement of the private that seeks to reoccupy what they claim as their own, Meetei public. In this regard, as a part of the larger discourse of revivalism, re-entering of Meetei names in the public domain is a challenge to Hinduism and the space it inhabits.³¹

Introduction of Meetei *Mayek* in the schools of Imphal valley (not in the Hills of Manipur) in 2006³² replacing Bangla script is a significant change to ascertain the revivalist movement and the reoccupation of the formal public by the Meetei element. History of *Mayek* revivalism, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, is the larger focus of the third chapter. As with other elements of Meetei, the general perception that dominates the causes for the termination of Meetei *Mayek* from public spaces is Hinduism. However, there are other factors that led to the withdrawal of *Mayek* into the private/domestic space of Meetei scholars, the role of Hinduism has been significant and conscientious. Therefore, a deliberate protection of *Mayek* in the form of *Puya* from the kings and the hegemonic Hindu public was strongly felt by Meetei scholars in the eighteenth century. As a result, *Puyas* were kept away from the king and the general public. It is significant that Meetei revivalists turn to *Puya*, which was condemned and made illegitimate after and by Hinduism, for *Mayek* revival. The movement to reoccupy the modern-secular spaces of education, newspapers and other aspects of modernity, by scripts recovered from the “profane” *Puya*, condemned in the private Meetei space, hidden inside the personal locker and

³¹ In a different domain, revival of names were/are also happening for example Bharat for India, Mumbai for Bombay, Kolkota for Culcutta. In the context of Manipur, Meetei revivalists have been asserting that Manipur should be replaced by Kangleipak.

³² <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=26..120315.mar15>.

wrapped in layers, sometimes buried, unsettles the hegemonic Hindu public space. The revival of the desecrated script and language in the educational institutions impurifies the purity of Meetei-Hindu public. I argue, thus, in the dissertation that the larger movement and effort to reoccupy Meetei public by impure and desecrated self of Meetei is the larger project of Meetei movement and revivalism.

3

The first chapter, “Early Modern Literature and the Normative Meetei,” revisits literatures of the early twentieth century literary figures and their works to trace the history and cultural environment for the production of normative Meetei identity. In the chapter, I argue that it was through the work of Lamabam Kamal, Khwairakpam Chaoba and Hijam Irabot, primary authors considered to trace and understand revivalism of Meetei language and literature, that a new Meetei was created and marked Meetei revivalist *angaoba* (mad) as a consequence. The revival of Meetei language and literature in their works are largely performed around the figure of female Meetei – *Meetei Chanu* or *Meetei ema*. She is represented as poverty stricken, unnoticed/unappreciated beauty and as an abandoned mother by her children. With a sense of urgency, these literary figures call upon the children of *Meetei Chanu/ema* to discover the beauty and history of Meetei literature and language. A nation/community was imagined from its scattered, “insufficient” Meetei language. This chapter argues that the vernacular Meetei modernity of the period was not a product of direct encounter with colonial modernity, drawing from T. Singh (2011), but an encounter between two traditional communities – Meetei and Bengali. The influence of colonial modernity in the encounter of these traditional societies is

acknowledged. However, my position is to argue that due to pedagogical structure/practices and the proximity between Meetei and Bengali in terms of culture and religion, Bengali influences were stronger than that of the West. Integration of love and loyalty for Meetei language and literature and their inability to reject Hinduism by the new Meetei identity was the trademark of their literature. I argue that this integration produced a good Meetei that finds Naorio Phulo and Meetei revivalist as its significant other.

As part of my re-reading of their literature, I attempt to understand the literary representation of Manipur. Physical reality of Manipur, hill and valley, and the literary representation, are my central focus for delineating the structure of political imagination of Manipur. As often, the valley constitutes the core of this imagination while the Hill and the tribal were dispensable categories who either are mere fence, guardsmen or just a mere consumers of literature produced in/by the valley/Meetei. While the chapter attempts to engage with the elements of revivalism and the inherent complications in social and political imaginary of Manipur, the chapter is also posited here to contrast and juxtapose with the next chapter on Naoria Phulo. This juxtaposition of Phulo with the canonized literary figures functions as a preliminary ground for the connection that I seek to establish between these two chapters and the last chapter.

The life of Naoria Phulo in relation with his social and religious imagination, and the struggle against Hinduism, complicated by his location provides a significant narrative of the desire for emancipation of Meetei. Emancipation for him was not an individual struggle but an initiation and creation of a movement awaken his community from the oppression of Hinduism and the Hindu mind. In the second chapter, “Naoria Phulo, Meetei and Revivalism,” the above issues are discussed to

ascertain the complexities of his life and the emancipatory struggle that he undertook for his community. Naoria Phulo was born and brought up in Cachar (present Silchar, Assam) in the late nineteenth century in a Meetei locality. He, regardless of his work for Meetei revivalism, is generally perceived as a religious, mystified figure of his cult, *Apokpa Marup* and Meetei *Marup*. The attempt in the chapter is also to recover Phulo as an intellectual and visionary. His work on the importance of education of Meetei students in Meeteilon is linked with his Meetei revivalism, history writing and script for Meetei. Education was also a central thrust for emancipation from the irrational and superstitious mindset of Meetei under Hinduism, according to Phulo.

Lambi semba (Lambi – road; samba – construction) is a recurring theme in his works which is considered, according to him, a desirable path towards emancipation for Meetei. *Lambi semba* is an idea that allows the flourishing of a new imagination of Meetei community and it can be achieved by re/construction (*semba*) of Meetei history, language and script. The history *semba* is important for him in the face of the larger attempt of Hindu scholars to force Meetei and its history in the Hindu-Aryan tradition. Perhaps, not strongly as in the first section of the last chapter, my attempt is to argue that the reduction of Phulo as a mystified figure of his cult is an attempt at making Meetei identity a carrier of Hinduism. This mainstream narrative of Phulo, I argue, is a social and political requirement for the production of good Meetei that perennially denies recognition that Phulo deserves for his contribution to the Meetei movement, thereby out casting him from both official and unofficial memory (Guite, 2011) of Meetei community.

In the third chapter, “Language, Script and Meetei Movement,” I trace the history of *Mayek* movement with particular emphasis on the report of the meeting of Meetei *Mayek* expert committee constituted by the government of Manipur in 1978.

The report of the meeting is important to understand different notions of Meetei identities which were secured in different *Mayek* claims. The history of *Mayek* revival can be traced back to Naorio Phulo, although, his script was rejected for its larger similarities with Bangla and Devanagiri script. In the meeting, it is found that to arrive at the present government approved twenty-seven letters Meetei *Mayek*, different scripts were expected to have affiliation with Meetei's past, religion and *Puya*. One of the unstated foundations, not just in the expert committee meeting but also in the script conferences held before the meeting, was that the proposed script ought to have a source in the *Puya*. Further, *Puya* as the source of the *Mayek* should be from the pre-Hindu period. Phulo's script was rejected in the meeting and conferences for such undeclared understanding. Therefore, I argue that this search for authentic identity is linked with a pre-Hindu history, religion and *Puya*. Question of *loms* or the additional nine letters, added to the foundational eighteen letters to meet the requirement of new sounds in Meeteilon figures in the chapter prominently. The issue of *Loms* in the expert committee and particularly for the script revivalists is significant for its political mobilisation, to establish an authentic Meetei identity. It is regarded that the *loms* are a later addition to the hitherto Meetei sounds after the eighteenth century, i.e., after the arrival of Hinduism. In this chapter as well, the idea of good Meetei emerges as an important issue for ascertaining the role of government and general public in delaying the implementation of approved script in the schools.

The fourth chapter, "Armed Resistance, Revivalism and Gender", attempts to seek connections between the armed movement of the 1960s and the previous chapters. The chapter has three sections – the first section gives a brief history of the armed struggle, while the second section seeks to draw a different political trajectory of armed struggle. In the third section, the intersection between gender and Meetei

revivalism is discussed. The second section, drawing arguments from figures appeared in chapter one and two, attempts to inaugurate and provide new perspectives into looking at the armed struggle of Manipur. It questions the processes and politics of making official and unofficial the memory in which Hjam Irabot is considered significant while Naoria Phulo is not. It attempts to answer the production of this memory and introduce the role and ideological prominence of Naorio Phulo in armed struggle. The larger attempt of the section is to provide a political debate between Irabot and Phulo.

The third section of the chapter on the intersection between gender and nation lays bare the intrinsic gender role in the political imagination of Meetei community. It attempts to draw a journey, ideationally and metaphorically, of *Meetei Chanu* through the twentieth century in the works of various authors. Since the dissertation is divided into two parts: pre and post merger (1949) into India, the figure of *Meetei Chanu* is also analysed. The section explores the shift in representation of *Meetei Chanu* from an unnoticed, unappreciated and abandoned figure of the first part to the abused, tortured, raped one of the second half.

In the dissertation, I have kept in mind the distinction between Meetei and Manipuri. I have used the term Meetei to refer to Meetei alone and not as an equivalent to the term Manipuri. However, in the case of citations and reporting of texts and authors, I have not altered the meanings of the term Meetei and its metonymic representation of Manipur. I have also used the term Meetei as a generic term to identify the native populations of the valley which includes the *Loi* or the Scheduled Caste Meetei. However, this does not mean to undermine their history, social structure and customs. I have only included them under the term Meetei in the dissertation because Meetei as a political category in the twentieth century has greater

allegiance with the *Loi*, and, the new Meetei as a product of their political mobilization cuts through varied social and political divisions.

Chapter One

Early Modern Literature and the Normative Meetei

At the turn of the twentieth century, Manipur witnessed a new literature¹ that not only paved way for a significant departure from the pre-existing forms of writing and expression, but also restructured Meetei's imagination – ways in which Manipur was imagined in the cultural and literary realms vis-à-vis the Meetei community.

However, this new political imaginary vis-à-vis literature reinforced once again the hitherto dominant structure of the time because of its inability to radically depart from Hinduism and its hegemony. This period can be simultaneously understood as a rupture in one sense and reinforcement on the other.

As western education² was made accessible to a limited but significant mass beginning from the late nineteenth century, a new political class — Meetei middle class (Kamei, 2012) – emerged with a different (read modern) set of ideas. After the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891, western education had become an established institution (J. Parrat, 2005: 26). When western education became an unavoidable entry into Manipur's complex social reality, the language to be used in the “primary schools became a matter of some debate” (ibid), and under the initiation of William Pettigrew, use of vernacular Tangkhul³ language in Roman script was encouraged at Ukhrul

¹ I use the term ‘New Literature’ here to mark a beginning in the tradition of writing in Manipur. The introduction of new western education system, and the exposure of students to the outside world, mostly to Bangla and English, brought a new tradition of writing to Manipur that not only deviated from the earlier century, but also began to form and imagine a new community deviating from the self-inferiorised Meetei community.

² Rajendra Kshetri (2006) demonstrates that it is “With the British conquest of Manipur in 1891, Meeteis were introduced to modern education.” (66)

³ Tangkhul is a dominant tribe of northern hill district of Manipur. Language that this community speaks is known by the same term.

district.⁴ However, in the valley, Bangla became the medium of instruction partly because of the recruitment of Bengalis and Meeteis from then Cachar who were fluent in Bangla as teachers. This introduction of Bangla as the medium of instruction in the newly opened schools also partly “led to the use of the Bengali script for writing Manipuri” (J. Parrat, 2005: 6). Parrat states that:

... it was largely due to western education that the Bangla script became the common medium for writing Manipuri, in which school texts, and later an extensive 20th century literature, were written. As a result of this, the substantial amount of earlier literature in *Meetei Mayek* became inaccessible to the western educated elites, and became virtually restricted to the *maichous* or traditional scribes. (2005: 26)

Although western education played a significant role in the shift of the script, it would be unwise to overlook the politico-religious angle. After Hinduism was accepted as the state religion of Manipur in the eighteenth century, translation of Sanskrit texts into Manipuri and rewriting of history of Manipur were largely conducted in Bangla script. Perhaps, the *Cheitharol Kumpapa*, the royal chronicle of Manipur which records events from 33 AD to 1955 AD, was the only document where Meetei *Mayek* was used for writing the language until 1955 despite the consequential paradigm shift in Meetei society because of Hinduism (Nalini Parrat, 2010).

⁴ It is also important to remember that the British had different policies with regards to Hills and Valley. In the Hills, tribals were significantly converted to Christianity, modern education and the spread of Christianity came together. They were also protected from the valley kingdom through various laws and measures. On the other hand, valley was left as a site for political fight between the King, Hinduism and the British. For more, see, Lal Dena (2008).

Extensive Meetei literature written in Bangla script produced after the western education had set in its influence on the community had impacted the literary and cultural taste of the Meetei. It also brought in new literary values and genres.

... Makar Singh's *Manipuri Primer* and Munal Singh's *Second Primer* in Bengali script [were] in 1910-11... Both the writers hailed from Cachar and were among the bunch of teachers invited and employed by the new administration. And for the nonce, the educated few quenched their thirst with Vaisnava Padavalis, Bankimchandra, Saratchandra, Kaliprasanna, Rabindranath Tagore etc. in Bengali, and Shakespeare, Romantic poets, Walter Scott, Tennyson, Macaulay etc. in English. All this re-oriented their outlook and forged a new sensibility thereby setting a seal on their break with the past. Occasionally and timely mincing of a Sanskrit and decent Bengali words during social gatherings or confabulations showed the watermark of one's status. (Singh, 1996: 218)

The prehistory of this transition, of course, is Hinduism and the “cultural bomb” (Thiong'o, 1994) of this religion which I will discuss in the second and third chapter in greater detail. The new education system, associated texts and ideas, exposure to other places of British India especially the Bengal province, served as a primary force through which the modern and normative Meetei identity gets constituted. I would like to argue that this new political mobilisation and imagination demanded a new form of expressions. We saw that novel, drama, poetry, prose, epic, etc., were new entrants into the Meetei literary scene during this time. As a consequence of this encounter with modernity and new literary values, the Meetei middle class were able to reinvent a new Manipuri identity vis-à-vis Meetei identity. Nation and questions of identity became prominent in newer ways signalling a departure from previous

century. However, at crucial stages, this new identity failed to achieve that sharp departure in bringing a rupture to Hindu hegemony. For example, Manipuri literatures produced in the Bangla script were influenced by Hinduism and Bangla literature; and, India figures in their literatures as a shadow in which they saw Meetei as a unit, which will eventually, in the light of the freedom movement, come out of British imperialism. I would like to suggest that because of the co-presence of modern ideas which initiated Meetei modernity and Hindu orthodoxy, the Meetei middle class manoeuvred between these two ends creating an impression of a rupture and reinforcing Hindu hegemony at the same time. This politics of manoeuvring brought, I argue, a hybridized, cosmopolitan Meetei identity, a good Meetei, which would eventually scorn off the Meetei movement. Naoria Phulo,⁵ for example, was an important negative character in the confines of this new and positive Meetei identity.

This chapter primarily looks at the politics of literary and cultural manoeuvring of the emerging Meetei middle class as a consequence of modernity. Manipur as a nation or as a geography was imagined creatively to feed into new ways of approaching a certain identity. The figure of *Meetei Chanu*⁶ became an important metaphor for this political manoeuvring in the writings of Lamabam Kamal, Khwairakpam Chaoba, etc. In this attempt, I situate the question of Hao⁷ (tribal) and

⁵ For a detailed discussion on Phulo, see chapter two.

⁶ It can be translated as unmarried Meetei woman. This figure also gets transformed into a mother figure in the poetry of Hijam Irabot. But, the figure of a Meetei female was a central metaphorical figure for this new Meetei identity.

⁷ In the present context, Hao as a term which identifies the Hill tribe associates a negative connotation, perceived as derogatory to many tribals. However, among Rongmei tribe, Hao is used to describe themselves like 'akai hao-mei nun' which can be loosely translated as 'we hao people.' Here, Hao is used positive in a positive sense. I have used the term verbatim to present the intricacy of the past. I thank Richard Kamei for his input here.

understand how Hao was already a community outside of the normative Manipuri identity constructed vis-à-vis Meetei.

1

Emergence of literatures and representation of a region or a nation with a fixed or certain idea of a territory occurs in various phases of history. This literary imagination has been mediated by its encounter with modernity in the last century or so. Such varied encounters of literatures with modernity have also led to the attribution of territory and nationhood to literatures and languages.⁸ Sudipta Kaviraj states that linguistic identity is not a primordially available category for communities as nationalists would tend to propagate. He says, “Political identities based on language are . . . modern though the languages on which they are based have a distinct historical existence from much earlier times” (2012: 148). Same can be said of literatures. Literatures representing a nation or a community are a recent phenomenon after its encounter with colonial modernity. He further illustrates the link between colonialism and the growth of linguistic identity in the Indian sub-continent. In the case of South Indian languages as well, linguistic identities are comparatively new; languages were not a political category and did not have a fixed territorial boundary. Correlation and assigning of language with boundary and an association of languages with individual and community identities happened at a particular historical juncture of (colonial) modernity in the sub-continent (Mitchel, 2009).

⁸ As late as 1956, India’s linguistic reorganization of Indian states of 1956 is an example.

Therefore, “affective relation” (Mitchel, 2009) with languages and the emergence of figures like *Tamilpattra* (Ramaswami, 1997) and *Meetei Chanu*⁹ occurred at decisive moments of rivalries and struggles. Pascale Casanova illustrates how language and literature provide the required political foundations for a nation, at least in its initial stage (2009: 330). “National literatures were, thus, emerged to distinguish themselves from each other to assert their differences through successive *rivalries* and *struggles*” (331; emphasis mine). She further says:

Their dominant traits can quite often be understood – as in the case of Germany and England, rising powers seeking to challenge French hegemony – in a deliberate contrast with the recognized characteristics of the predominant nation. Literatures are therefore not a pure emanation of national identity; they are constructed through literary rivalries, which are always denied, and struggles, which are always internationals. (331)

Literary histories and movements have informed us of ruptures — rivalries and struggles – as a creative process in the literary expression as a way forward to re-imagine one’s past and future. Itamar Even-Zohar (1990), writing about translation within a literary “polysystem,” says:

The dynamics within the literary polysystem create *turning points* This is all the more true when at a turning point no item in the indigenous stock is taken to be acceptable, as a result of which a literary ‘vacuum’ occurs. In such a vacuum, it is easy for foreign models to infiltrate... and may consequently assume a central position. (194)

⁹ It is a term which can be translated as Meetei Women which became a symbol for language and literature in the early part of twentieth century in the hands of Lamabam Kamal and Khwairakpam Chaoba.

Itamar's turning points in a literary and cultural polysystem occurs when a literary system/ tradition/nation is at three distinct stages: when a literary system is in its initial stage; when a literary system is in a crisis, and third, when a system is in a peripheral position (1990: 193-194). What was happening in the case of Meetei literary system in the early twentieth century was a crisis as a consequence of its encounter with Bengal and (colonial) modernity. This created a turning point, a vacuum and this was occupied by new modes of expressions, taste, outlooks and genres influenced by foreign models. Emergence of national literature, therefore, may not be strictly attributed to rivalry but also to a vacuum created in a literary system as a result of a turning point. In such cases, depending on the power position of the system inside the larger polysystem, national literature could emerge through translation/borrowing from other systems. Casanova's proposition rings for a potent rupture of/in the tradition that will find a strong echo in Raymond Williams' (1977) notion of "emergent culture." This capacity to create or bring rupture in the hegemonic social and epistemic practices is often derived from the hegemonic community that one wants to secede, contrary to the belief of the nativist. Talal Asad concurs "... social and cultural variety everywhere increasingly responds to, and is managed by, categories brought into play by modern forces" (1992: 333). This is a relevant case for the study of Manipuri literature.

It is within this larger ambit of argument that I attempt to situate my texts and the decades of its emergence and production as new writing. While doing so, my attempt is also to look critically at the rupture and "newness" that was produced in literature of the early twentieth century Manipur; and to enquire whether that was a rupture or not. To put in other words, did modern Manipuri literature challenge the dominant and hegemonic culture and literature of its time? For this study, I take into

account the writings of major Manipuri (read Meetei) authors of the time – Lamabam Kamal, Khwairakpam Chaoba and Hijam Irabot and Hijam Anganghal.¹⁰ Further, this chapter enquires into other aspects of literary representation where I attempt to look at the representation of physical and mental geography of Manipur in the works of these authors and others. In doing so, I attempt to unravel the doubled-edgedness of political imagination: consolidation and exclusion.

In the early part of eighteenth century, the Meetei king Meidingu Pamheiba (1709-48) left his traditional religion Sanamahi and embraced Vaishnavite Hinduism. It brought a sea change in his kingdom as he imposed an alien religion upon his subjects. It changed the course of history through his initiation into rewriting of Meetei history,¹¹ renaming the kingdom to Manipur; burning of Meetei manuscript¹² *Puya* so as to validate and bring Meetei into Aryan-Hindu history and tradition. Such coerced religious imposition and rewriting of history changed Meeteis' perception of themselves and their worldview. It also brought considerable change in Meeteis' meat-eating habits and their social and religious practices (Naorem Singh, 2012).

However, the turn of the twentieth century presented a new wave of consciousness in the realm of religion and literature. Meeteis, in their own limited

¹⁰ There are other authors like Hawaibam Nabadwipchandra Singh, Arambam Dorendrajit, etc., who would have been useful texts for this study. However, they have been excluded mainly because of the impact factor in terms of acceptance, themes and the way in which the Manipuri identity was imagined at the turn of the last century. Image and the idea of a Manipuri identity in general and Meetei in particular are effective and strong in the writings of those who are considered for the present study. Citations of Chaoba's and Kamal's are my translations from the Meeteilon original works.

¹¹ For both Hinduised history of Manipur written after the arrival of Hinduism and the contestation of this history, refer Naoria Phulo (1934). Gangmumei Kamei (1991), Saroj Nalini Parrat (2000), etc.

¹² According to Gangmumei Kabui, as many as 123 *puyas* were set on fire. The political nature of the burning is evident. However, it is important to reiterate the views expressed by Paditraj Atombapu Sharma, an apologist of Aryan Meetei tradition and a Brahmin scholar. He says, "the Guru (Shanta Das) burnt all the religious books of the Meiteis to destroy the Meitei religion. Then he said that just like the burning of the books, the Meiteis had to cremate the dead." This is quoted in Gangmumei Kamei's *History of Manipur: Volume One, Pre-colonial Period*. New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1991, pp. 254. In the same page, the author provides the names of Puyas which were burnt.

spaces and resources, began to challenge the dominant social and religious practices of Hinduism. Naorio Phulo, around the same decades, had rejected Hinduism and formed his *Apokpa Marup* religion in Silchar, Assam, and in a similar vein *Meetei Marup* was formed in Imphal valley by his followers. This restructuring of social and religious imagination was made possible by the new education system. The new literature of the early twentieth century gave Manipur a new lease of identity that, however, did not reinvent itself in a radical sense, but brought a sense of awakening and realization of Meetei identity.

Around the early decades (1920s) of the last century, Manipur saw not just the emergence of literature but a journalism which had substantial impact on the popular opinion (Parrat, 2005: 28) and literature. These decades were also implicitly accepted as the period of Renaissance. Encounter with the British brought about “a massive change in the collective experience and consciousness reflected in terms of cultural values being rendered more open, liberal, egalitarian and humanistic but also far reaching political changes vis-à-vis the swelling tide of decolonization that swept Asia, Africa and Latin America” (T. Singh, 2011: 144). *Meetei Chanu* (1922), as the first magazine published by Hijam Irabot, provided a ground breaking venture, though short lived. Parrat describes this period thus:

The renaissance of literature in Manipur was an integral part of a much wider concern for the rediscovery of Meetei identity. As with many other similar trends throughout the colonial world, the Meetei cultural movement had its *liberative dimension* (whether this was clearly perceived or not), and should be seen within the framework of the trend towards protest at feudal and colonial control. The rediscovery of the past, and the emergence of a *genuinely Meetei literary tradition* (even though it used a foreign script) *represented a counter-*

movement which had a role to play in awakening national and political consciousness in some of the elites. Eventually (as it happened in the case of the Nikhil Hindu Mahasabha) those concerned with the liberative aspect of the cultural movement broke ranks with those who wished to keep it within boundaries which did not threaten the colonial and feudal regimes. (my emphasis; John Parrat, 2005: 29)

This liberative capacity of the new “Manipuri literature” needs to be cautiously explained as it was mediated by its fluctuating/ambivalent relationship, one of emulation and contestation, with Bangla literature. Compiler of Khwairakpam Chaoba’s works, Thokchom Prafulla Singh, in his introduction to the compilation of the former’s works in 1996, contextualises a certain movement of writing that erupted against/from an oppressive religious structure. Chaoba had a major role to play in this eruption. He says that Manipuri literary tradition was weakened (and not fully annihilated) after Santidas Gosai¹³ and his followers, Bhagavan Das and Narayan Das appeared and settled in the Imphal valley and the subsequent religious conversion that led to the burning of *Puyas*¹⁴ in the eighteenth century. The period between Pamheiba and Bheigyachandra had witnessed a downfall in Meetei literary tradition. He also asserted that the non-implementation of Meetei script in the writing of Manipur has resulted in an inferiority complex amongst the community (I-III).¹⁵

Revival of Manipuri literature especially in the 1920s and 1930s was accompanied by an anxiety. This anxiety of the emerging Meetei community was

¹³ Vaishnavite Hindu religious preacher who converted Pamheiba into Hinduism and later under his instigation forced the subjects to convert into the new religion. It is believed that it was under his instigation that *Puyas* were set on fire by the king at his palace.

¹⁴ According to him, more than hundred and twenty *Puyas* were set in fire, however, he also concedes that according to new research, out of 4322 *Puyas*, 1886 *Puyas* were burnt.

¹⁵ See Sri Thokchom Prafulla Singh (1996), in his introduction to his compilation of Chaoba, *Kabi Khwairakpam Chaoba Amasung Mahakki Sahitya*.

produced by its awareness of being inferior to other communities and the desire to overcome it. Lamabam Kamal, in his introduction to his collection of poems *Lei Pareng* (1929), succinctly sums up the anxiety and hope of his time. I reproduce his words at some length here-

Translation of texts from other community to create Meitei literature is an easy means. However, it is like using somebody's property on a loan that will not be able to express Meitei's literary ideas, essence, tradition and customs. Therefore, in order to develop Meitei literature fully, Meitei literature written by Meiteis themselves is required.

Some people think that the movement for the development of Meitei literature is futile because the population of Meiteis in Meitei leipak [land] is about two lakhs only. But my point of view in this matter is that Meiteis are not just habitants of Manipur alone. They are in Dribugarh, Shivsagar, Srihatu, Silchar in Assam and there are also Meiteis who speak Meiteilon in places in Taka [Dhaka]. Also, people living in the hills of Manipur use the language as their second language. Because of all these reasons, it is not impossible to create a movement for the growth of Meitei literature.

Also, there is sharp growth of Meiteilon songs in the last two three years, all age groups, women, adults are beginning to like the songs. While watching dramas in the language of the Mayangs, they used to watch only the physical movements, now they love dramas more than before because they are performed in Meiteilon. (my translation; *Collected Works*, 1993: n. pag.)

Anxiety and hopes of his time with regard to literature and identity are aptly expressed here by Kamal. His introduction to his own book served as a preface for a

new Meetei literature and identity. His attempt to define Meetei literature and the expansion of its readership beyond the Meetei of Imphal valley is crucial in making an identity for itself. If we look closely at his introduction, the Meetei identity that was sought in the early part of the last century was not a translation of some other identity. He refused to translate from “other literatures” to fill the “vacuum” (Zohar, 2000) of the “emerging literature” (Williams, 2010) but wanted literatures originally written by Meetei. This is similar to W. E. B. Du Bois’ (1926) idea of “Negro theatre” and B. Krishnappa’s “Dalit Literature” (2013). Du Bois envisages an independent negro theatre stage by, for and near Negro locality. Here, Meetei identity was not imagined as an imitation, but rather as “original.” We will also see the same assertion in Kamal’s poetry. This assertion was crucial in bringing a rupture and seeking a new beginning. These three paragraphs are indicative of the general belief of his time which considered Bangla and English literatures superior, and direct translation of them into Meeteilon could develop Meetei literature and language. His vision and suggestions create a pan Manipuri identity by including both Meetei and others who speak the language for the development of Manipuri literature. It also transcended the supposed territory associated with an emerging national literature, and instead imagined a new consumer of their literatures. Translation as a practice and as a knowledge sharing exercise can be both oppressive and emancipating, and Kamal was well aware of this fact. The power relationship between the source and target language determine the resultant effect of translation (Casanova, 2010). Itamar’s idea of a national literature and the role of translation functions within the unequal power relations between different literary systems. In such a system, translation usually happens from the superior to the inferior language/system and not vice versa. In the case of Meetei literature, translation as an exercise from other languages, which is

often from Bengali, English and Sanskrit, will suppress the identity of Meetei. Because of the possibility of a catastrophic impact, though it may be one of the easiest ways to develop a literature of a community, Kamal urges his people to create Meetei literature written by Meetei. For an “accurate” expression of culture and essence of a community, the community has to produce literature for themselves instead of translating from other literatures. The emphasis on Meetei literary tradition produced by Meetei is important to understand the recovery project of Meetei episteme from the clutches of the dominant Hindu tradition.

In both the introductory note to the compilation of Chaoba’s work and Kamal’s clear articulation of the future of Meetei literature in his introduction, there is a general agreement that literature of the Meetei was oppressed¹⁶ and thus needed a revival. While in the former, Hinduism was blamed for the deterioration of the literary tradition,¹⁷ Kamal seems to be fighting against the general inferiorised consciousness of the Meetei masses. In both the literary texts of Khwairakpam Chaoba and Lamabam Kamal, we witness an anxiety of the native who is recently acquainted with modernity. In two important essays written on the subject of Manipuri literature and language, Chaoba reflects on the important anxieties of his time. In the essays, he divides Meetei society into those who love literature of the significant “other,” and those who love literature of the land.¹⁸ Again, in the essay, “Manipuri Sahitya Maramda Karadang”(Some thoughts on Manipuri Literature)¹⁹ written in 1949, he says, Meeteis are divided into two groups: one is “Manipur Sahitya Virodi Dal”

¹⁶ Interestingly, in both Chaoba and Kamal, unlike Naoria Phulo, the oppressor is not named. In Phulo’s writing Sanskrit and Bangla are the language-oppressors. This inability to name the oppressor is indicative of their allegiance to these languages that shaped their religious and cultural outlook. This issue is discussed at the end of the chapter.

¹⁷ Khwairakpam Chaoba, in his writings, did not recognize this point.

¹⁸ In “Manipuri Sahityagi Maramda Kharadang” (Some thoughts on Manipuri Literature) written in 1937, included in P. Singh, 1996: 23.

¹⁹ See, P. Singh, 1996: 23-28.

(Manipur Literary Opposition Group), and the other, Manipur Sahitya Premik Dal (Manipur Literary Patriot Group).²⁰ Although the main concern of both the essays is similar in terms of attempting to re-instil a sense of pride in Manipuri literature and take responsibility for the growth of it, the latter looks at the condition of Manipuri literature in relation with India.

Chaoba summarizes the main objections of those who loved the literature of the other. According to Chaoba, they believe that the idea that Manipuri literature will grow is based on a false notion. Because, on the one hand, literary growth is impossible with few lakhs of Meeteis, and the low literacy rate on the other. Therefore, according to Chaoba, they believe that those who discuss Meetei Sahitya are insane. The only wise thing to do for the benefit of Meetei is to assimilate Manipuri literature with other literatures. Whereas, in Chaoba's argument, pro-Meetei literature believed in the reconstruction of Manipuri literature as it was neither possible to forget, nor was it possible to abandon it. Imitation of other's literature will not be accurate, and because of the virtue of being Meetei, forgetting would lead to being an object of mockery. These two important points of Chaoba concur with Kamal's urge for a change of mind and perception. In an emphatic urge, Chaoba says, *khallu*, meaning "to think" in English, and asks, how have Meeteis been able to assimilate/reach into its core of Bangla language and literature after learning them for more than three centuries? According to him, imitation of Bangla language and literature has not yielded anything but counter-productive – a sense of loss, rootlessness and a subject of mockery for others. Another important notion and fear of that time was also that without the knowledge of Bangla one cannot travel outside

²⁰ From "Swadhin Manipurda Manipuri Sahitya" (Manipuri Literature in Independent Manipur) in 1949, included in P. Singh, 1996: 58-59.

Manipur for purposes of business. The common belief was that when a Bengali scold a Meetei in the train, they would not be able to ascertain it. The larger belief of the integrationists was also that learning of language and literature would help grow/develop Manipuri literature faster. However, Chaoba disagrees and in turn, asserts the idea that growth has to be homegrown. If growth or development was achieved by assimilation and imitation of Bangla, it was a growth of “other” and not of Meetei. He says that the approach should be to bring a balance. One should learn Bengali, Hindi and English as well, but one should not abandon one’s own language (P. Singh, 1996: 24).

Chaoba answers to three questions of his time pertaining to language and literature: 1. Can our language and literature grow if we work for it? 2. What are the ingredients for its development? 3. What is the future of language and literature? Chaoba’s response for the first question is not different from Kamal or from Phulo. He says,

Lon pumnamak hotnaraga chaokhatkhiba ngaktani,

Meetei lon haiba asisu lon amani,

**Meetei lonsu hotnarabadi chaokhatkani*

(With hard work every language has developed

Meeteilon is also a language

Meeteilon will develop if we work for it) (my translation; P. Singh, 1996: 25)

Language cannot grow or develop on its own.²¹ With concerted effort and willingness to work for the development of language and literature, like Hindi from the Indian nationalist period, Meeteilon can also be developed. For the second question, he emphasised on the centrality and the organic relationship of both producer and consumer of Manipuri literature. Regarding the third question, Chaoba draws an example from other arts like drama, songs, etc. and says, Meeteilon was once only considered fit only for creating farcical dialogues/elements, but it has been used for songs and drama now. There was a considerable growth of the language in drama and songs after Meeteilon had replaced Bangla. The same can happen in literature as well (ibid: 27).

However, Chaoba suggests, contradictorily, that Meeteilon can borrow vocabularies from Sanskrit if it so lacks. He says, “For *us Hindu* we have our property Sanskrit. Integration of Sanskrit into Meeteilon is one of the best ways for Manipur to integrate with India” (my translation and emphasis; P. Singh, 1996: 28). Emulation of Sanskrit and Bangla was inseparably linked with their desire to reconstitute a new and stronger identity. Drawing/borrowing of vocabulary from Sanskrit, and the idea that Sanskrit as common property of all Hindus, was symptomatic of the hegemonic Brahminical Mahasabha’s²² preaching. The notion of common ancestry with Aryan race is found in his other writings as well. As a continuation of the essay, the second chapter is written after the British left Manipur and India, and before Manipur was “forcefully annexed” to new India. However, the sense that essay gives a sense that

²¹ This is proven right if we look at the history of Hindi as a language and its growth from the colonial to post-colonial India. For more, see, Christopher King, 1994.

²² Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha and later Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha was an organisation formed in the 1930s to look into the growth of Hinduism. Hjam Irabot was one of the founding members. With the king as its President, it constituted its members largely from Meetei Bamon (Meetei Brahmins) and Meetei Hindus.

Manipur was already a part of India. It reasserts what he had said ten years ago. Manipuri language and literature cannot be abandoned in the face of the nation and other dominant languages. The greater emphasis on the learning of English, Hindi and Bengali continued to dominate in the 1950s. Therefore, he says, “we are happy thinking that we have achieved independence, but no one wants the freedom of mind”.²³ This essay can also be read as a reflection of the larger belief of the middle class Meetei whose views were supported by Manipur State Congress Party. The plea for a common language for building a nation, and Hindi as the national language of India was supported by Chaoba. He concedes and takes example from European countries to prove that a common language, religion, etc., have helped them in the making of their nations. He also believes that India should also have no divided opinion on the issue of language. He says, “In a vast country like India, linguistic differences should not be allowed. It will benefit our general condition and in the making of nation. Hindi should be the national language, and this is right. However, having said that, our benefit/advantage (also for India) should not be overlooked, otherwise, it would not be good for India” (P. Singh: 59). His essay “Bilati Saraswatigi Majaiibungosingda” (To English Educated Meitei Gentlemen)²⁴ reflects over the problematic attitude of English educated Meitei males. His essay “Meitei Sahityada Vaishnav Dharma” (Influence of Vaishnavism in Meitei Literature 1942)²⁵ reflects on the inevitability of the influence of Vaishnavite-Hindu religion on the language, literature and thought of the Meetei. Slow intrusion of Sanskrit words in the language had started before Bheigyachandra but during and after his reign, Meiteilon had gradually began to fade away (P. Singh: 33). He says, acceptance/imposition of new

²³ Originally written in 1949, see, P. Singh, 1996: 58.

²⁴ Originally written in 1946, this essay is included in P. Singh, 1996: 35-37.

²⁵ Originally written in 1942, this essay is included in P. Singh, 1996: 33-34.

vocabulary led to the vanishing away of Meetei vocabularies. Vaishnav Dharma had a huge impact on the literature of Meetei and in his own words *coarse way of life* was transformed into *soft* vaishnavite approach (35).

Written in 1939, published for the first time in the school magazine of The Johnstone High School, the poem “Basanti Debating Club!” is amongst many of Chaoba’s poems that are not canonised. Like his other poems, this poem reflects on the deteriorating Meetei society. In the poem, different birds gathered for a debate on the topic, “Manipurda College Lingheide” (Manipur should not have College). As a first speaker, sparrow, which is fluent in English and Bangla, supported the move. Sparrow is a master in the art of argument. With *reason*, the bird delivered its lecture loudly:

“*Lingheide lingheide, Manipurda college lingheide.*

Matricmakki mafam leitri, ashida college palheide”

(College should not be established in Manipur

There is no place for matriculates, college will not have a place)

(Translation mine; P. Singh, 1996:4)

*Chonga*²⁶ *pundit*, speaking in Sanskrit, disagrees with sparrow’s *reason-ing*, opposes the move. In an interesting turn in the poem, the smaller birds in the debating club shout in a single voice demanding for the establishment of a college in Manipur. The Crow, disinterested, turns its face away and supports the topic and asks, “*Ko ko College lingkhatladuna kya matalab*” (“What is the use of establishing a college?”).

²⁶ A bird.

Smaller birds get angry, and the debate is marred with chaos. Birds opposing the move, i.e. birds which are in favour of the establishment of a college won the debate after a vote. A governing body of the birds was formed. In the meantime, a Laishram²⁷ boy throws a stone at the birds. At the end of the poem, in the form of a couplet, Chaoba says,

“Ha matam, uchekmaknasu thak ashi youkhraba!

Eikhoi Meiteidi keidoungie mimannarakkaba?”

(Birds have reached this level, oh time!

When will we Meiteis compete with others?) (Translation mine; ibid:4)

The poem can be understood at two levels. First, at the level of the content of the debate. Second, the analogy that is made between Meetei community and the birds. Both these levels of interpretations are intrinsically linked with Chaoba's contemporary times. At the first level of interpretation, three of the important and powerful languages, English, Bengali and Sanskrit, are represented by distinctly individuated birds while Manipuri or Meeteilon is nameless and invisibilized, making it the language of the insignificant birds – *chekla macha* (small birds). The debate is conducted solely in these powerful languages. The language of smaller birds is represented by cacophony. It is this nameless and invisibilised native language and aspirations of the smaller, insignificant birds that would eventually shift the debate into establishing the college. Significantly, these three languages are attributed not just political and cultural power, but the capacity to reason – to support and oppose the topic. Speakers of different languages are individuated while Manipuri speakers,

²⁷ Laishram is one of the family names of Meetei community.

or perhaps, just listeners, are mobs, representative of the uncivilized, cacophonous native, who nevertheless are made to carry a powerful agency

At the second level of interpretation, one is required to consider “debate” as an idea that prioritises reasoning, individuation and democracy (western enlightenment and modernity). It also aims at bringing an issue to the forefront, and finds a solution amicably through discussion and public opinion. The debating club is also an important space for dialogue that allows democratic participation of contesting opinions. It is representative of the (democratic) western public space/sphere. Western modernity or elements of it, in the form of a debating club, found its inroads in Manipur. Ironically though, this import of western rationality – a public space, according to Chaoba, has not arrived yet in Meetei society. Therefore, he laments the lack of such democratic spaces where public opinions can be formed when the lower species like birds have it already. Perhaps, this lack or the enthusiasm to embrace western mode of reasoning and debate and that Manipur did not have a college during his time must have been a pressing anxiety for him. However, in both the interpretations of the poem, western modernity is entrenched, which is to say that, in the first level, it is about reasoning, talking about college, higher education, in the line of western education. In the second level of interpretation, entry of “western public sphere” and dialogue were instructive. And, ironically, for Chaoba, rationality is manifested in dominant metropolitan languages while Manipuri stands for irrational native chaos. But, it is also significant that “political society” (Chatterjee, 2009) of small birds that are chaotic managed to win the debate against the “civilised” birds. This victory is indicative of the growing acceptance of western education and rationality by the Meetei mass as against the Hindu orthodoxy of his time. This hard

won debate saw college getting dismantled when a Meetei break the gathering of the bird.

The poem “Meitei Chanu” published in 1924 in the magazine *Meitei Chanu*, and republished again in 1929 in his collection of poems, *Lei Pareng*, Kamal attempts to reconfigure Meetei identity and community in conjunction with his introduction which I have discussed earlier. It is one of the most anthologised poems in school:

Matamkuinagitungda,

Lengshillakle ema Meitei Chanu,

Meitei-Sahitya-Mandir-Manungda;

Yendai Thanna Leihaptuna

Katlusi emagi khuyada.

(After a long gap

Mother Meitei Chanu has appeared

In the temple of Meitei Sahitya;

Fill the basket full with flowers

To offer on her feet) (my translation; *Collected Works*: 1993: 1)

Feminisation of language and literature, and therefore the land they inhabit, is clearly evident²⁸ (I discuss this important issue further in chapter four). This opening stanza

²⁸ I have not included the aspect feminisation in detail mainly because of my different focus here. However, it is important to mention that it requires a separate study to delve into gender and its relation with language and nation. I have attempted this in chapter four. For more, see, Sumathi_Ramaswamy (1997), Lisa Mitchel (2009).

is remarkable for its implication that the idea of a literary tradition is embodied in the form of a temple. This literary temple was lying vacant without a goddess for a long time. This metaphor becomes a historically significant transformation because of the factor that *ema* (mother) or *Meetei Chanu* now reoccupies the temple. Factors that made possible for her entry are attributed to western education, imitation and feminisation of language and literature.

Faithful to his introduction, the poem emphasizes on original and vernacular inspiration and poetic elements for the construction of a temple for *Meitei Chanu* as well as the materials for prayer. This conscious vernacularisation of material for literary production was a call to counter the belief that Meeteilon was insufficient for literary expressions. For Kamal, translation was not original as against the theory which propagates translation as new writing (Mukherjee, 2010). Therefore, one has to look deep inside their hearts to reconstitute Meetei literature. Not only did he want a temple made up with locally available material, he also envisaged a pan Meetei consciousness through the construction of the *Meetei Chanu* temple. It should be able to awaken the *Seerum-Naarumba*²⁹ Meetei. The call for unity amongst the Meetei of different parts was necessary for the successful reconstruction of the temple. According to him, Meetei from the far and near should consider themselves as the children of *Meetei Chanu* so the unity, or the *Lei Pareng*, that he keeps referring to in the poem, (and also the title of the book) which means a garland of flowers and the thread of the garland remains strong. The whole idea of far and near places is relational with the position of Kamal, in which, *anakpa* (near) becomes the central point of the Meetei world. Therefore, Imphal becomes the cosmic, holy place of the

²⁹ This can be roughly translated as a weak Meetei, who faces death at every point in time due to unhealthy, poor lives. Kamal uses the phrase in his poem. This reference to Meetei is often used to describe the condition of the community under oppressive regimes.

Meetei community. For Kamal, this temple of *Meetei Chanu* made up of flowers should only grow so that it spreads across the world and blooms in Indian Universities. He says,

Flowers from the Meitei valley

Let it grow beyond the seas

Let them bloom in Indian universities

It is possible if *lei pareng* is strong (my translation; *Collected Works*, 1993: 4)

Kamal's last stanza is a traumatic reminder of his idea of *Meetei Chanu* and the unity and strength which he wanted to weave around *lei pareng* for the Meetei to go beyond seas and bloom in Indian universities. His *lei pareng* is prophetic of the political arrangement of the present. In "Meitei Chanu" and his other poem "Chandranadi," Kamal calls for the reconstruction of temple for *Meitei Chanu* and the river Chandranadi which symbolically represents Manipur. Reconstruction as a theme is important for him and for the revivalist movement which believed in the existence of a tradition that needs to be reinvigorated. "Chandranadi" is also one of his important poems that is often canonised in school curriculum. The first stanza of the poem opens with an adoration of the scenic hills beyond the territory of river Chandranadi. This adoration of the hills is not necessarily an adoration of the Hills of Manipur/Tribal Hill, but to express the general human tendency to consider the grass on the other side greener. It is also indicative of the superior literature, language and culture of other communities. It is deceiving, he says,

Thapna uriba ching ashi onthokna fajeida!

Nouna pukning hoona ningthida,

Eengna lik lik lao-eeda!

Sangbannaba atiyamakpusu namhatlida

(Hill in the distance is utterly beautiful!

It is serene and stole my mind,

It is brimming over.

It defeats the blue sky!) (my translation; *Collected Works*, 1993: 9)

In this poem, Kamal's bigger game is not just to break the general perception that the distant land, here hill, is more beautiful than Chandranadi but also to bring out the beauty and hidden history of the river. He laments for Chandranadi for its dilapidating condition. This condition was created by, as Prafullo³⁰ puts it, the arrival of Hinduism which led to the neglect of the place and history of Chandranadi, history of Chandranadi that lies beneath the marshes and grasses need to be unearthed. Kamal says,

Awabani anakpa Chandranadigi drishyadi!

Torbansu naarak oikhare,

Manungsu naapina thankhare,

Tou-eegumsung etihaas ki echeldi chelli leinungdi.

(Chandranadi wears a sorry condition

Banks are occupied by the woods,

³⁰ Compiler of Chaoba's works, he writes the introduction to Chaoba's compilation of works. Reference here is to his introduction. (1996).

River bed by the grass,

But a current of history is flowing beneath them) (my translation; *Collected Works*, 1993: 10)

Then, there is a sharp turn in the poem, a turn crucially constructed to narrate the past of Chandranadi that lies unnoticed beneath the woods and grass. This neglected history of Chandranadi needs to be unearthed to revive Chandranadi and bring its past glory back to the present. Invocation of its glorious history is significant to convince its *residents* which would act as a catalyst for revival. The poem glorifies its history and capability, *Matam amada mahakki akanba echenna, / torbanda houba upal wapal fuktatlammi* (It had a strong current earlier, / It used to uproot the trees from its bank) (*Collected Works*, 1993: 10). However, this strong current subsides and the poem narrates this condition of the river in a dejected tone. As it is mentioned elsewhere, revivalists employ such strong emotional narrative to describe the condition of a society. This is essential for revivalist projects to function in the direction in which revivalism is intended to. Kamal narrates the sorrowful condition of Chandranadi in his simple and evocative verse:

Houjikti Falgu Gangagumna,

Laija echel thadoktuna,

Pukningi athuppa mafamda, manungda-manungda,

Awabagi echel chelli lonna lonna.

Adegumba Echeldo kananasu ooba fangedo!

Kanchipurgi awaba paobu pukhiduna,

Ahing nungthil naidana,

Chenthari amamba samudra tamna.

(Now, like Falgu Ganga

has left the flow of water

in the deepest of its retreat

a sorrowful current flows alone.

No one can see its current.

With Kanchipur's ominous message

both day and night,

it flows towards the dark ocean) (my translation; *Collected Works*, 1993: 10)

The poet elaborates further (to gather empathy) and says, *Loktaklomda tamlammi, laiija echel chellingeidadi, / Mapal naidaba amamba samudra tamkhre houjikti* (When it was flowing, it fell in the Loktak Lake, / Now it flows into the dark ocean) (ibid, 10). Loktak lake is a historically, culturally and mythically important site for the evolution of Meetei culture and history. Though, *Moirang* clan and kingdom claims a separate principality, it has become an inseparable part of Meetei identity and culture. Hijam Anganghal has immortalised the lake with his poetic rendition of legend *Khamba and Thoibi*. Khwairakpam Chaoba, in his poem, "Loktak Mapanda" (On the

Bank of Loktak Lake) (403)³¹ describes the lake as an important part of Meetei identity. This poem will be discussed in the later part of the chapter.

The digging up of history signifies the cultural and symbolic significance of the lake. The relationship between Chandranadi and the Loktak Lake is vital for the growth of Meetei culture and civilization in the poem. Now, instead of flowing into the Loktak Lake, the river has gone into directionless path – into the dark ocean, into the unknown. Manipur does not have a coast and the nearest coast is only via Bengal. The organic relationship between Chandranadi river and Loktak which was central to the growth and civilization of Meetei was broken. This flow into the dark ocean is symbolic of the break and degeneration of Meetei civilization. Why does the river leave its current and go underground giving an impression of a history-less and insignificant site to the residents of this place? How did the woods and grass take over the river? All these questions are related to the urgency to revive the dormant river. Kamal tells us how to revive the river in the last stanza of the poem. He says,

Kanano sakhenba meegi torbanda leptuna,

Erujage thourangliba, khourangba mityengna yengduna?

Ereipaktasu turel lei, echel kangkhre khallibadu,

Touduna yengsi amukta, yengsi thorakpa laiijadu;

Looraba laiija fangani, erujarabadi eshingduda,

Eengani pukning hakchang, kaya nungaigaba pukningda.

³¹ This poem appears in Chaoba's collection of poems, *Thainagi Leirang* first Published in 1932, included in P. Singh, 1996.

Leisu thasi torbanda, yeisi hidenda chekki thak,

Ngamjarani ason ana pumnamak!

Poknafam lamdam thadoktuna haptuna thawai khubakta,

Lan taanba chatnei khudong thiraba mafamda.

Ereipakki manungdasu mingschat mamal yaamlaba,

Fumduna leiri leinungda, tallusine sakhenba.

(Who are you handsome, standing on someone else's river bank,

Preparing to take a bath, with hopeful anticipation in your eyes?

We too have river in our land, that you thought the stream has dried up!

For once, let us dig and see if water comes out.

We shall find clear water, and if we take bath with that water

Our mind and body shall be calmed, how delighted shall we be then.

Let us plant flowers on the river bank, and build brick steps at the port

The sick and diseased shall be able then

Leaving one's birthland, risking one's own life,

Fighting wars in perilous places

In our land as well, we have priceless fame

Sitting under the ground, let us seek them, handsome) (my translation;

Collected Works, 1993: 10-11)

This last stanza of this poem is symptomatic of a revivalist narrative/figure that aims to unearth the hidden/oppressed history and identity. It sets out to empower its reader to love their culture, land, instead of a foreign place. Revivalism therefore, can happen only if this project is seriously taken up. Therefore, Kamal says, one should see if there is a water current by digging the river. Kamal is certain that purer water is available underneath the marshy surface of Chandranadi. He asks, “Who are you handsome, standing on someone else’s river bank” hinting at the possibility of having a bank for Chandranadi river. However, digging up of the river is not enough, what is also needed is to plant flowers on the river bank and place bricks. Because of the ignorance of the history and potential of the river, people go far in search of wealth and fame. But Kamal reminds them and urges the Meeteis to participate in the construction of Chandranadi as this would bring them wealth and fame. Uncovering the history of Chandranadi is uncovering the history of Meetei. The pattern of poetic narrative is no different from the social and cultural movement that was attempted in the early part of the twentieth century.

The idea that Meeteilon is an impoverished language, insufficient for the production of literature was widespread among Meeteis.³² Overcoming of this widespread social and cultural misconception was largely Chaoba’s and Kamal’s project. Although, they have not made it explicit, the presence of Bengali and English as two important languages of power, and Sanskrit as the language of rituals, helped in the wider circulation of this misconception.

³² However, contemporary of Chaoba and Kamal, whom I have briefly mentioned above, Phulo completely rejects such notion and put for the idea of incompatibility between Meeteilon and the language of the *Mayang*.

In his introduction to *Thainagee Leirang* (1933), a collection of poems, Chaoba attempts a search for his roots. He writes:

When we write prose (poem) in Meeteilon following the written tradition of Bangla and English, it is not effective. Sometimes it is beautiful. However it does not yield satisfaction all the time. Having realised this, I have tried to search the tradition of Meitei poetry writing. All the poems included in this collection have followed the tradition of *Lairik Haiba*³³, *Pena*³⁴, *Khongjom Parba*³⁵ and *Thabal Chongba*³⁶; and if closely observed, one can clearly understand it. ... *Readers are requested to consider this as the authentic wealth of Meitei.* (translation and emphasis mine; P. Singh, 1996)

What is crucial is his declaration of an “authentic Meitei” form which is not an imitation of Bangla or English but inherited from Meitei performative tradition. As discussed above, Kamal did attempt at providing an authentic Meitei literary form and identity which is not imitative but self-produced. Here, Chaoba concurs with Kamal’s notion of authentic identity and expression by invoking the tradition of Meitei art forms. From the collection, the poems “Meitei Kabi,”³⁷ “Meitei Leibak”³⁸ and “Chingi Leirang Amada”³⁹ are important for the present study. In the poem “Meitei Kabi,” he says,

Lairaraba eronni

³³ It is a mode of storytelling performance delivered by two persons. One sings and the other translates it.

³⁴ Pena is an indigenous musical instrument used for different religious performances and song rendition.

³⁵ It is also folk song sung along with a drum performed mostly by women.

³⁶ It is a dance performance usually performed at night, during Yaosang, a spring festival.

³⁷ Can be translated as “Meitei Poet.”

³⁸ It can be translated as “Meitei country.”

³⁹ It can be translated as “To a Wild Flower” which is representative of Meitei language and literature.

Khangdabana haibani

Meitei Kabi Lakkhini

(They say it is because of Ignorance

That Meiteilon is an impoverished language

Meitei poet will come) (my translation; P. Singh, 1996: 376)

This can be understood as a direct response to those who perceived Meiteilon to be impoverished and insufficient for literary expressions. It is because of ignorance that some people say that Meiteilon is a poor language and because of it the language has not produced poets. He laments and reclaims the language and the land in these poems by addressing it as “wild flower” (377) which has not received its due attention.

Both the poets edified Meitei literature and language as female figure and elevated them to the level of goddess.⁴⁰ In his other poems like “Meitei Kokil” (26-27), “Thainagi Meitei Sahitya” (32-35) or “Houjikki Meitei Sahitya” (35), Kamal⁴¹ continues to reiterate the need for looking within and calls for affirmation and self-belief. In the second poem, Kamal urges his *ema* Meitei *Sahitya* to awake her children from their slumbers and nurture *Kokil* [poet] in her bosom like she did in the past. In the last poem, Meitei *Sahitya* is portrayed as impoverished when compared to other languages of India. Kamal, however, also implores his *ema* to witness the efforts of her children to raise her to the level of other languages and literatures.

It is also interesting to see how Manipur was conceived and compared, as a matter of fact, by Chaoba with a wild flower or a diamond in the deep ocean.

⁴⁰ Also see Sumathi Ramaswami (1997) and Lisa Mitchell (2009).

⁴¹ All the poems are from his *Collected Works*, 1993.

Problematically, he also conceived Manipur as surrounded by the hills and tribals. This issue will be discussed in the latter part of the chapter. Because Manipur is isolated, it shines and blooms with no one noticing it (in P. Singh: 376). The poem asserts that once we are able to see and notice the beauty of Manipur, “Meitei Kabi” (Meetei poet) is inevitable. Absence of Meetei poet is not because there was lack of inspiration and landscapes, but because of their inability to identify the beauty that their mother embodies. This inability to see the beauty of Manipur can be read alongside “Chandranadi.” The reconstruction of Meetei identity needs nurturing with an ability to observe and establish self-respect for one’s language, history and landscape. Again, in the poem, “Chingi Leirang Amada,” from his book, *Kannaba Wa*, (Important Words, 1931),⁴² Manipur and Meeteilon are compared with a wild flower available in the hills (P. Singh:288). The poet laments that the flower is not noticed by people. The purpose of its existence as a flower becomes meaningless as no one notices due to its location. However, unlike “Meitei Kabi,” the wild flower is given the chance to speak. The flower says,

Nungshiraba maruploi

Eina pomsatnabadi

Ubibasu kallakte,

Thagatpasu pamjade.

Mapugi khubam achikpa,

⁴² In P. Singh, 1996.

Apamba nangumba kanana,

Laktana yenge yengsanu

Leirang pukning pengani.

(Dear beloved friend

I bloom

Not for the want of recognition,

Not for the want of eulogy

Peaceful abode of the above,

May a person like yourself

Come and see

That will satisfy me) (my translation; P. Singh, 1996: 378)

The disinterestedness of the flower is used as a useful tool to provoke and produce more poets. The poet appears as the model for common people to love the flower, who can “see” the beauty of the “wild” flower.

However, Hijam Irabot presents an interesting and totally different relationship between Meetei *ema* and her children. This difference in approach to the relationship is nonetheless mediated by a certain desire of growth and fulfilment of her children. In the poem “Meetei Leima”⁴³ Irabot asks the Meetei mother to set free her children to face both good and evil of the world. He says, “*Chatkhisanu chatning*

⁴³ Written when he was in Syhlet jail from 1941-43 and published posthumously in 1987 in the collection of his poetry, *Imagi Puja* (2011)

chatningbada/Thirusanu ma mana pamba” (Let them go wherever they want to / In search of their destinies). Unlike the previous two poets, who ask the children of Meitei mother to recognize the beauty and history of the mother, to look within instead of outside, Irabat asks the mother to leave her children. However, the last four lines of the poem, exhibiting the crux of the poem, says,

Macha lakh mangagi mama,

Macha chanbi Meitei Leima!

Thambiranu nachasingbu Meitei oina

Mirak tilhanbiro thadoktuna.

(Mother of five lakh children,

You love your children!

Don't let them remain as Meitei

Leave them so that they can be amongst the best) (my translation; Irabot, 2011: 60)

This call is a sharp departure from Chaoba and Kamal who emphasised on the reawakening of Meitei and the strengthening of familial ties with Meitei *ema*. They implore this familial relationship which encourage and imbibe the ability to recognise the history and beauty of *ema*. Such invocation of familial relationship envisages a reciprocal exchange between *ema* and her children on the one hand, and an attempt to reconcile a relationship that was perceived broken/lost due to various factors, on the other. Irabot's departure is from this tied familial relationship to an exploration of the world, to compete with the world while keeping the relationship intact.

It is well known that like elsewhere, western education had brought various shifts in social and cultural front in the early part of the twentieth century Manipur. Literatures produced during this period had a new political imagination and a sense of responsibility and loyalty that was sought to be achieved/consolidated from among its readers. Revivalism as a movement expects/demands a strong sense of patriotism from its subjects. Through exposure to the outside world, to new literary texts, early Meetei poets were able to extract a relationship between literature and nation. Though Kamal was against the translation of literary texts from other literatures, and had the vision of an independent identity, translation in the broader sense of the term happened at many levels. In the works of Kamal, Chaoba and Irabot, translation in terms of ideas and genres (Ramakrishnan, 1997) from English and Bangla into Meeteilon was a fact. Kamal's *Madhavi*⁴⁴ (1930), the first novel in Manipuri literature, was influenced by a Bangla novel. For the first time, novel was translated as a literary genre into Manipuri literature. Hijam Anganghal's epic poem *Khamba Thoibi Seireng* (1986) narrated the legend of Khamba-Thoibi in verse form for the first time.⁴⁵ Such new ideas and genres became pedagogical tools for initiating a new Meetei nation, for reviving history, language, etc. There was a transfer of knowledge and ideas into Meeteilon from Bangla and English. This transfer of knowledge can be understood as happening in an unequal power relation. Meetei identity that was produced and thus envisaged was a product achieved through translation of new ideas and literary genres.⁴⁶ However, whether the literary and social movement of the time contains vernacular elements is an interesting question. The content of this movement

⁴⁴ See, for instance, "It is rightly felt that the first original Manipuri novel, *Madhavi*, has been influenced by *Durgesh Nandini* of BankimChandra. That is why some scholars are of the opinion that the genre of novel has come to Manpiur from West through Bengal", Singh, 2007: 34.

⁴⁵ Khamba-Thoibi Seireng by Anganghal draws criticism for its inclusion of Hindu myth and for Hinduising the legend.

⁴⁶ Partha Chatterjee's "Whose Imagined Communities" and "Anderson's Utopia."

was nonetheless vernacular and as we have seen in Chaoba and Kamal, the main driving forces, i.e., the idea of identifying culture, identity and history as significant tools were an impact of modernity.

It is also noted that during the 1920s there was a transformation in the education system that brought vernacular language into the education system. Entry of vernacular language in the modern social sphere marked an entry of vernacular identity which would challenge or replace the dominant language. This transformation in the education system demanded Meetei teachers as Bengali teachers were inefficient for the Meetei-vernacular and allowed elite Meetei to enter into this space created by new education policy. How the elite Meetei occupies this system is interesting. Transformation from Bangla to Manipuri demanded new texts. Efforts were made to translate Bengali texts into Manipuri or to write/produce new school textbooks in Manipuri. With this larger agenda, poets and writers submitted school textbooks to the government (Kunjamahon, 1996: 8-9).⁴⁷ These poets and writers were the newly educated elite Meetei men. Hijam Irabot's first collection of poem *Seidam Seireng* (Poems for Leaners) was solely written for school children. In 1929, Irabot's *Sindam Seireng* was selected by the government for class V and the copyright of the book was bought by the government for sixty rupees (10). Apart from this, Khwairakpam Chaoba's *Chhatra Macha* (1931)⁴⁸ (Students) and *Kannaba Wa* (1931)⁴⁹ (Important Words), Pukhrambam Parijat's *Meitei Wareng* (Meitei Prose) and *Meitei Sahitya* (Meitei Sahitya), Arambam Kamal Singh's *Sinfam* (Work) and Chingakham Mayurdhajja Singh's *Seireng Anouba* (New Poems) were the other

⁴⁷ Kunjamahon. "Manipuri Sahityada Irabatki Khudol" (Contribution of Irabat in Manipuri Literature) in *Seidam Seireng* republished in 2011 by progressive Literay House, Imphal. The essay was originally written in 1996 for the conference organized to commemorate Irabat centenary, 1- 21.

⁴⁸ Written and published for the first time in 1923 and republished by government in 1931.

⁴⁹ Written and published in 1924 and republished by government in 1931.

books for which copyright were bought by the government (Kunjamahon, 1996: 8-9). However, collection of the Chaobas's work also suggests that his other works – *Fidam* (1925) (Aim), *Wakhalgi Echel* (1930)⁵⁰ (Stream of Thoughts) and *Thainagi Leirang* (1932) (Ancient Flowers) were also approved by the government as texts for schools.

Entry of these new Meetei texts to occupy their rightful place in education came with an agenda to reconstruct Meetei identity through education. If we consider the title of each book that was approved by the government of Manipur, it indicates an investment on education in the first few decades for the rebuilding of Meetei society and identity. Irabot's book *Seidam Seireng* is instructive of the way in which Irabot's desire to introduce "poem" as a new literary genre to beginners and to the children. Students in Manipur were introduced to poetry in a language which was thus far considered insufficient for literary expression. Even when we look at the titles of other textbooks viz. Khwairakpam Chaoba's *Chhatra Macha* (Students), *Kannaba Wa* (Important Word), *Fidam* (Aim), *Thainagi Leirang* (Ancient Flower), etc., they reveal the purpose and urgency of these textbooks. Chaoba's *Chhatra Macha* as a case in point would inform that the range of instructive and pedagogic essays contained in this collection of essays was meant for the reproduction of a new generation of educated Meetei community which would not only be aware of their Meetei identity but also would be exposed to outside world and their literature. It has essays like, "Tamba" (Learning), "Chhatra" (Students), "Tougadaba Thabakta Mai Onsallu, Nommu Tanganu" (Pay attention to your work, work hard do not be lazy), "Meegi Mapaan Taangba Tamganu" (Do not Depend on Others), "Endri Khudum Chanba" (Control your Desire), "Paotak Khara Meitei Paorou" (Some instructions and Meitei

⁵⁰ First published in 1930 and republished in 1958 (Prafullo, 1996: 331).

proverbs) etc. which are all mainly written, to repeat, expose to outside world and yet remain rooted in Meetei identity.

The turn of the century and the growing western education system necessitated Khwairakpam Chaoba to write and publish a book for elementary English – *Elementary Lessons on English Translation and Composition* (1932).⁵¹ Khwairakpam Chaoba prepared this elementary text in English when he was already teaching in Johnstone High School. This book is a basic textbook for learning English as a second language. It provides word to word translation from Manipuri to English starting from simple words like parts of human body, relationships, food, students' requisites, etc. It also has "Branches of learning" like law, astronomy, history, prose, poem, etc., thus giving an inroad into Meetei society of these disciplines. It also has names of professions and basic introduction to English Grammar. After every section of word to word translation, there are exercises for translation from Manipuri to English. From word to word task, Chaoba moves to sentence to sentence translation.

The elementary text for English also introduces students to letter writing in English. In the textbook, it is clearly stated on the basic difference between the English method of writing letters and the Meetei one. He explains, "In Meiteilon, the mode of writing letter is to write the addressee on top of the letter preceded by "Shrihari," "Shrihari Jaiti," "Shrigourabidhujaiti," etc."⁵² Chaoba's projection of a particular tradition of letter writing as Meetei tradition is indeed a copy of Sanskrit tradition and reflects his inability to depart from the tradition of *mayang*.⁵³ Bangla tradition was the model of development and modernity. What was given as Meetei

⁵¹ See P. Singh, 1996.

⁵² In P. Singh, 1996: 624.

⁵³ A Meetei term to identify non-Manipuris of non-mongoloid origin. It refers mostly to people of the Indo-Aryan stock.

tradition, as later revivalists would argue, was not Meetei but Hindu/Bangla tradition. Such is the area, as in the case of his uncritical acceptance of Sanskrit as the wealth of Manipuri, Chaoba and his contemporaries found themselves inclined towards Hindu religion and India. Whereas in the English style of letter-writing, according to Chaoba, writing of a name preceded by a god's name is uncommon. He says Meeteis write the date and address after the body of the letter. However, in the English style, the address of the writer is written on the top right of the letter, and the date is written at end of the letter. A clear distinction between English and Meetei style was made. And, this distinction was required to be taught in the schools. Traditional letter writing cannot be concocted with the *modern* letter writing tradition which is represented by English. What does the teaching of letter writing mean? The religious nature of Meetei letter writing cannot be mixed with the secular and modern way of writing a letter. This distinction in letter writing clearly indicates that Meeteis need to learn the dominant English mode of writing so as to be recruited and be assimilated into the western education/governmental system. As a part of this exercise, Chaoba includes letter writing for "Book order from Company," "Sick application" and general "Leave Application" from the school. All the three subjects of the application are related to education. Introduction to English letter writing tradition was a call for entry into modernity.

While modernity and pedagogy were important for the reconstruction of a Meetei identity, they were also deeply religious. Although, the authors believed in the revival and reconstruction of Meetei history and identity, they were devout Vaishnavites. What was Meetei was still within the fold of Hinduism. Their literary texts constantly refer to Hindu myths or mythology. Khwairakpam Chaoba even wrote essays like "Meitei Sahitya da Vaishnav Dharma" (Vaishnav Religion in Meitei

Literature),⁵⁴ “Bishmagi Washak” (Promise of Bishma),⁵⁵ “Arjun Amasung Babruvahangi Lanfam” (Battle of Arjun and Babruvahan).⁵⁶ Chaoba’s last essay mentioned here, “Battle of Arjun and Babruvahan” appeared at a time when there was a conscious effort to subsume Meetei history and community within Indo-Aryan tradition. Atombapu Sharma was a principle architect of this movement. In the Hindu narrative of Meetei, Meetei are recognised as descendants of Arjuna of *Mahabharat* and Manipur as Manipur of the same epic. In the Mahabharat, Arjuna was killed by his son Babruvahana in a battle in “Manipur” as both the father and the son could not recognise each other. In this narrative, Pakhangba, the first king of Manipur was made the son of Babruvahana. It was seen as an attempt by Hindus to distort and assimilate Meetei into Aryan tradition and it has been rejected by many scholars.⁵⁷ Phulo also has made his analysis to reject this claim. However, when such essays are introduced in school text books, it sets a politically dangerous precedence for the new Meetei students as this essay reinforces the dominant historiography of Meetei-Brahmin-Hindu.

All other writings of both Kamal and Chaoba, whether it is Kamal’s *Madhavi* (1930), or Chaoba’s prose discussed above, didactic writings, novel *Labangalata* (1942); or Hijam Anganghal’s novel *Jehera* and the epic poem *Khamba-Thoibi Seireng* (1940), all were written on the theme of recovering the self-esteem of Meeteis and enriched wealth of their language and literature. However, despite their main purpose of writing, it was heavily influenced by Hinduism, Bangla and Sanskrit. Even a cursory reading of their writings would inform the degree to which they were

⁵⁴ Written in 1942, appeared in P. Singh, 1996: 33-34.

⁵⁵ Written in 1942, appeared in P. Singh, 1996: 235.

⁵⁶ Written in 1926, appeared in P. Singh, 1996: 296-297.

⁵⁷ See my “Introduction” of the dissertation.

influenced. Ch. Maniphar in his *History of Manipuri Literature* (1996) concurs. He says, “As dipped in Bengali language and literature, [they] had a penchant for using attractive Bengali words for the titles of [their] poem” (221). Their literary style and theme were highly influenced by English and Bengali literature. E. Dinamani’s description of Anganghal’s work and his philosophy of life succinctly elaborates this era:

Love is Anganghal’s favourite theme in all his genres. Due to his universalised love Anganghal is regarded as an idealist. In personal life also he was interested in ideal love and love marriage. According to Anganghal physical union is not the goal. Separation is not the pang but a mental and internal *tapasya* (penance) which leads the lover to humanism. Actually he was influenced and motivated by Gandhi and he never believed in violence. His Gandhian humanism can be experienced in *Jahera*.

... He was a good and noted player of Kang, an indoor game of Manipuri origin. This game finds a place in the construction of plot in his long poems. The unique Manipuri ways of social rituals like marriage, etc, have been vividly portrayed. At the same time Indian mainstream has not been left untouched, unexplored or unidentified. *Both the streams – Indian and Manipuri- flow hand in hand towards a wider India.* (emphasis mine; E. Singh, 2007: 18-19)

Here, the question that needs to be engaged is the larger question of manoeuvring between modernity and Hinduism, between the Meetei assertion and Hinduism and being Hindu. In *Madhavi* (1930) and also in his other poems like “Kanagumba

Swadesh Bhakta Amada” (Homage to a Patriot),⁵⁸ Kamal’s use of Meeteilon to write a novel inspired his people and elevated Meeteilon as a literary language.

Simultaneously, we also see strong Hindu imageries in the novel. For example, sacrifice of worldly pleasure and retreating to the jungle, wearing of saffron clothes, sitting in the posture of a Hindu saint, appearance of Madhavi, the protagonist, in an uncannily similar image of a Hindu Goddess disturbs his political assertion of Meetei. The above poem is often read as a homage to Mahatma Gandhi. Irabot’s poems, “Bharatbasigi” (For Bharatvasi; 2011: 31), “Amar Rabindranath” (Eternal Rabindranath; 2011: 19;) are a strong injunction to his later political and armed movement. In the former poem he expresses a unity of Bharat, not India, beyond Hindu and Muslim. At one instance, Chaoba declared Sanskrit as the wealth of Meeteilon and said that Meeteilon could borrow from Sanskrit if it lacks in vocabulary. Kamal posited himself and the literature he produced as part of the larger Indian literature.

As is evident, new Manipuri language and literature were not conceived and written to establish “rivalry” (Casanova, 2009) although they did struggle against the hegemonic languages. Their struggles did not translate into a struggle for rejection as in the case of Naoria Phulo, but finding a niche in the “grea” Indian literary and linguistic tradition. Meetei consciousness⁵⁹ “was steeped in Vaishnavite Hinduism and its art forms that evolved in Manipur. The majority largely intoxicated by the rhapsody of *Sankirtan* and *Raslila*, there was a lull in creative and critical efforts in the field of writing altogether as dance and music enthralled and captivated the collective consciousness and mindset” (T. Singh, 2011: 150). It is this tradition of

⁵⁸ See, *Collected Works*, 1993: 30-31.

⁵⁹ Echoes of this argument can also be seen in the past, especially in the writings of Phulo in 1940s.

writing, social and political consciousness that would champion the cause for integration of Manipur in the newly independent India. It is also for the same reason that the state and other literary institutions propagate these authors as the founding fathers of modern Manipuri literature while Naoria Phulo's writing on language, Meetei consciousness and anti-Hindu religious assertions are side-lined through religious ostracism and are termed mad. The political manoeuvrings of Chaoba, Kamal, Irabot, etc., can be read as symptomatic of the pulls between an emerging Meetei identity on the one hand, and their allegiance to Hinduism on the other. Chaoba, apart from an ambiguous reference to Meetei script, has not touched upon this subject. However, his interest on language and literature is widely known. Chaoba's and Kamal's alleged *rupture* failed to galvanise and this failure can be attributed to their conflictual relationship with the dominant language on the one hand, and the overarching conscript of modernity (Asad, 1992), on the other.

The formation of a normative new Meetei figure in the twentieth century began with the writing and consciousness of authors like Chaoba and Kamal while Phulo and others like him fell outside of it. These two different trajectories are best explained by a combination of both emulative and implicit contestation of the dominant. Former's "liberative" literature and "rivalry" get shadowed by their unbreakable allegiance with Hinduism and the emerging India in the first half of the twentieth century. The emerging⁶⁰ trajectory of a new literature, in the process, failed to create a rupture in the dominant culture and episteme. If we extend this argument in the realm of identity, Chaoba and Kamal became the model of a good Meetei, an identity which emerged in its encounter with colonial modernity and pre-modern

⁶⁰ I use Raymond Williams (2010) notion of the 'emergent' as the one which is un-appropriable by the dominant culture because of the nature of rupture that the emergent culture or literature brings.

Bengali sensibility (T. Singh, 2011). It is in this interface that a normative Meetei identity gets constituted. A normative Meetei, thus produced through their literatures, is a Meetei who is defined outside the realm of native Meetei religion (Sanamahi), a Meetei who represents the community and not the religion, who loved its language, history and politics mediated by Hinduism. As discussed in the introduction, by-product of this normative Meetei was the *angaoba* (mad) Meetei, a Meetei who fell outside the discursive construction of Meetei identity.

It is evident from the above that Hills and the tribal are originally absent from or are insignificant in the imagination of the new literature. Manipuri literature vis-à-vis Meetei engages with the idea of “Manipuri” from the vantage point of being a dominant community. The capacity and the onus to define what constitutes Manipuri literature were in the hands of Meetei and the elite Meetei in particular of the early twentieth century. In both the poems, “Meetei Kabi” (1932), and “Meetei Chanu” (1924), invocation of Meetei as a metonymic figure establishes the problematic equation of Meetei as equal to Manipur. In the introduction to his *Lei Pareng*, Kamal seems to have reduced the hill dwellers as mere consumers of literature produced in the valley. One could argue that Kamal did not explicitly assign the Hao as mere consumer. However, the point of the matter in the introduction is the neglect and rejection of the languages spoken by the Hao, but the emphasis of the introduction is on the status of Meeteilon as the second language of the Hao. This further indicates that the second language status of Meeteilon among the tribal was the primary concern of Kamal than their languages. Participation of *Hao* in the making of a new Manipuri identity was through the second language that they spoke.

Khawairakpam Chaoba’s essay on the influence of Vaishnavism on Manipuri/Meetei literature propounded the inevitability of the impact of Vaishnavism

on Meetei literature for more than three centuries overlooks the presence of Christianity in the hills. Though Vaishnavism was accepted as an inevitable component of Meetei/Manipuri literature, the total lack of concern for Christianity reflects his externalising orientation. In all the three poets discussed so far, Meetei and Manipur are used interchangeably at will to mean the same meaning. The last poem in Irabot's *Seidam Seireng*, "Meiteigi Eshei" (Song of Meitei),⁶¹ the word Meetei is used as an exclusive category to mean the valley dwellers emphasising on the Vaishnavite cult. Apart from its obvious inability to leave Hinduism while invoking patriotism and the language of revivalism, the book that was selected for teaching in the schools excluded the *Hao* (Tribal/Hill dweller). It is a small poem and it reads:

On the feet of Lord Sri Govindajee,

Meetei pray.

With his subject the merciful King

Live a long life

Meetei beg from the Lord (my translation; 2011: 77)

In this poem, we see three important tropes that are intimately connected which allow Meetei identity of a certain inclination represent Manipur/i. "Lord Sri Govindajee," Meetei and the King are assembled in an intricate continuum of social imagination which excludes the non-Hindu Meetei and the Meetei-Pangal (Meetei Muslim), and the Hill dwellers while recreating a religion and a kingdom which could be familiarly

⁶¹ Originally written in 1929, republished 2011.

linked with a strong kingdom of Meetei. This pattern of construction of Meetei/Manipur identity is similarly found in other poets as well.

In the poem “Thainagi Meitei Sahitya” (1929), Kamal writes,

Nangi asaoba khonjel taabada,

Samudragi eraokhol nemkhiba,

Haona chingda chenkhiba,

Meeriebakki laithung changamda,

Adugumba akiba khngelna,

Amuktadi warakpikho nachasingbu.

(When you [Meetei mother] get angry

The ocean was calm

Hao ran up to the Hills

Diseases from outside could not enter,

Once again, please come back) (my translation; *Collected Works*, 1993: 34)

Addressing the Meetei *ema*, and urging her to return and revive herself to her earlier self, the poem carelessly puts the Hao alongside those that need to be tamed or controlled or chased out. Hao becomes an external figure that defined the Meetei identity.

Problematically, the *ema* figure that was created during this time was not a mother figure of Hao but one which the Haos were supposed to run away from. Let

us also look at the following lines which inadvertently defined Manipur's geographical distribution and attributed a fixed identity to people living in these two different spaces. Whether or not, this distinction, between the Hill and valley, was a product of colonial intervention (Jilanganmba, 2015), these lines have naturalised and immortalised the distinct geographies. Immortalization and romanticisation of these two different geographies of hill and valley which has become an inseparable part of Manipur as an idea is inherited by later poets. Let us read the following lines:

Chingna Koina Paansaba

Chingmina Koina Pangankpa

Manipur Sana Leipak ni

(Surrounded by hills

Guarded by hill people

This land is the golden land Manipur) (my translation; P. Singh, 1996: 376)

Such description and the practice have left a deep impact on the population particularly the Meetei. Instead of looking at the problematic aspect of this exercise, it has been simply taken as a mere description of the geography, and thus attributing poetic and literary values to it. Therefore, this normalization of certain description as literary production can be understood as symptomatic of a dominant community which have the power and authority to define. From a certain position of power and privilege, the relationship between the actual physical landscape and literary representation of it was problematically represented often at the cost of the other community.

Such descriptions came not as a surprise in the face of the available descriptive narrative of the place to the newly educated community. The classification of hill and valley as distinct categories of identity came into being, probably for the first time in the literary narrative. Yenkhom Jillangamba (2015), in his critique of James Scott's (2009) significant yet controversial book, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, states that the genealogy of such descriptions like hill and valley in Manipur while describing the present geographical boundary of Manipur can be traced "back to the British colonial archive beginning in the nineteenth century" (276), and, "... there are historical instances that suggest that until the last decade of the nineteenth century, the category called Meetei was more flexible than it is now, with the possibility of becoming and/or exiting from the category of being a Meetei. Other ethnic categories have had a similar complex part" (279). Interestingly, he also suggests that the classification of hill and valley through the prism of religion was started by the newly emerging intellectual of Bengal (283). Such categorisation of hill and valley as concrete realities that would have a direct impact on the identification of the people living on these two geographies, as Yenkhom suggests, could be a colonial intervention.

These lines, when representing the physical landscape of the state reduces the hill people/hao in the periphery of such modern imagination. In Kamal's preface to his *Lei Pareng*, he had made the Hao a mere consumer of literature produced by the Meetei without providing them a possibility of participating in the production of literature. What can be inferred from the poem is the reduction of the hill as the natural fence and the people of the hill as guards of this place called Manipur. In such an imagination of Manipuri nation, Manipur is contained to Imphal Valley thereby pushing and marginalizing the hill people to the periphery and pushing them away

from socio-geographical imagination. They are the *fences* and the *guardsmen*. These lines are later on used by poets as uncritically as their earlier proponents.

Further, in another poem “Loktak Mapanda”⁶² by Khwairakpam Chaoba, Loktak Lake is described as belonging to the Meetei. He writes:

Meiteigi eepakna, maangda nganbadu

Eemitna ooba fangjare.

Meiteigi eepakni maangda ngalliba

Eilhoigi Loktak haibase

(The ocean of Meitei, shining in front of me

I am blessed to see it with my eyes

It is the ocean of Meitei that shines in front of me

Our own Loktak it is) (my translation; P. Singh, 1996: 303)

The dominant Meetei community claiming ownership of the Loktak Lake and alienating the tribals is central here. The demographic distribution and other socio-cultural contexts inform that there are tribals living around this lake since “time immemorial.” The lake has been made a symbol of Meetei civilisation. The rewriting of *Khamba Thoibi* sagas in the epic form by Hijam Anganghal, another leading poet of the same period strengthen the idea of “*eikhoigi*” (our) claims and dominance over this lake by Meetei. Non-participation of the tribals in the claim for *eikhoi* i.e. Manipur was a result of the hitherto identity mobilisation of Meetei which in its

⁶² Published in 1932, included in P. Singh, 1996.

encounter with colonial modernity of the Bengal kind, assumed a self-sufficient valley civilisation (Scott, 2009). Marginalization of Hao can be factored from two different positions: one is the Scottian notion of valley-centrism of the Southeast Asian Countries, and Hinduism. Without ignoring Yangkhom's (2011) critique of Scott, modernity in Manipur was in the hands of valley/Meetei elite who redefined modernity as inseparable from their religion. Valley-centrism of Scott and Hao as impure subject of Hinduism, are combined to push Hao in the periphery of this modern Meetei imagination of Manipur.

New literature of the early twentieth century Manipur, thus, is defined by both emulation and rejection of the dominant cultures and literatures. In the work of Lamabam Kamal, Khwairakpam Chaoba and Hijam Irabot, one is served with the taste of both rejection and acceptance of Meetei identity, rejection of Meetei native religion and an acceptance of new loyalty to language and literatures. In this chapter, I have tried to show that their inability to reject Hinduism and India garnished with their love for Meetei language and literature was a consequence of the new education system which came via Bengal model. This Bengal intervention in Meetei modernity in the early twentieth century was central in the production of good Meetei as a means through which Hinduism could persist and suppress Sanamahi. In the next chapter, I attempt to further strengthen the dialogue of what is "good" and "mad" Meetei. Naoria Phulo as an important character for the next chapter is posited against Kamal, Chaoba, Anganghal, Irabot at various instances to understand revivalism of a certain kind and simultaneously the structural elision of Phulo's assertion and contribution in the making of Meetei movement and identity.

Chapter Two

Naorio Phulo, Meetei and Revivalism

Revivalism as a conceptual category is pertinent to understand a figure like Naoria Phulo. For Phulo, revivalism of Meetei history, language, script and the formation of *Apokpa Marup* was a tool of resistance against Hinduism and its hegemony. Khuraijam Bijoykumar Singh (2016) declares that Phulo's movement was one of the biggest challenges against Brahminism and termed it as Sanamahi movement (86). Phulo's focus on religion, language, history and education as a means to empower and emancipation of his community, mediated by revivalism,¹ has had its persistent relevance and influence over his community. One of the stark differences between Phulo and his contemporary Meetei of the Imphal valley, as discussed in the first chapter, lies in his ability to reconfigure a community outside of the dominant Hindu tradition. One significant move of Phulo in his Meetei assertion is the inseparability of the multiple aspects that constitute Meetei revivalism. This inter-relatedness is discussed at some length in this chapter.

Sanamahi² or the traditional religion (Joykumar Singh, 2012) of the Meetei as a socio religious movement is generally traced back to Naoria Phulo (Nilbir, 1991: 116). During his time, Phulo had challenged many orthodox Hindu practices for which he was socially ostracised along with his followers. He is often considered as a religious, mystified figure of *Apokpa Marup*. However, a few know that he was an

¹ It should be clear that revivalism as a conceptual category is not used here to signify opposition to modernity. As stated in introduction, revivalism is not something from/of the past but a political engagement with Modernity.

² Though Phulo is seen as the pioneer figure in this religious movement, his religious philosophy is very different from Sanamahi. Phulo believes in *Apokpa* as the supreme god, and Sanamahi as the supreme god of Meetei is absent in his tradition. Saroj Nalini (2010) reads Sanamahism as a neo-traditionalist religious movement that challenges Hinduism.

important figure who initiated the questions of modernity, language, script, education and history. Questions that this chapter seeks to interrogate and discuss are: can a rigorous intellectual who was committed to modernity be simultaneously found with a strong desire to have a separate religious faith? If the conglomeration of the (seemingly) contradictory positions has come about, how does one begin to understand the logic and historicity of this union? His views on religion and his modernist dispositions are inseparable entities in his larger vision for the Meetei community. It is in this light that a figure like Phulo will be analysed in this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is also to reinstate Phulo as an intellectual, as a visionary, alongside his popular image as a religious figure. The popular image of Phulo as a religious figure of *Apokpa Marup* restricts and suppresses his social and political contribution; and this, I argue, could be because of the larger and influential hegemonic Hindu public sphere.

Naoria Phulo was born into a Meetei family³ in Cachar (Silchar) district of present Assam state on August 28, 1888.⁴ He was known to have been a good and an obedient student. According to Hodamba, during “Seven years of Devastation” (1819-1826), his grandfather Naorem Herando fled to Cachar along with his family members (2012: 24). It is a historical fact that many Meetei including Meetei Pangal (Meetei Muslims) spread across the regions of Northeast India, Bangladesh and Myanmar as a result of the Burmese invasion of 1819. The degree of devastation of the invasion can be measured by the percentage of population depletion in the Imphal valley. It is

³ Sairem Nilbir (1991) and Hodamba (2012) provide different names of his birth place. Sairem accounts Jhariban Laishram Khul Mamang Leikai, but Hodamba maintains it as Jaribon Laishram Khun Mayai Leikai. Jhariban and Jaribon could be variations in spelling and articulation, but *mamang* (front) and *mayai* (middle) are two different ideas of locality.

⁴ Phulo’s birth year is inconsistent in the available record. Sairem Nilbir and N.D. Hodomba maintain 1888 as year of birth but Naorem Joykumar Singh (2012) suggests 1887.

estimated that more than half of the hitherto existing population were either killed, taken as war prisoners or had fled the valley.

Naoria Phulo was the sixth among the ten children of his parents. Despite the threat of social taboo attached to English education and poor family conditions, he was admitted to Government Victoria Memorial High School in 1910 at the age of 22. His father died a few years later. At the age of 24, when he was in Class IX, he married Sanarei (Hodamba, 27). Before he left his last job as sub-inspector in 1931, after one year of service, he worked as a teacher and a clerk.

Though he was born in a Meetei family and locality, his society at large was dominated by Hindu and Bengali culture. In Cachar, during his time, and in contemporary times as well, Meetei “lived in Bengali fashion” (Nilbir, 1991: 116). As a community settled within the dominant Bengali-Hindu community, any mark of difference from the Bengali way of life was an object of contempt and mockery. Any difference from their normative values were considered “uncivilised.” Therefore, there was a manifest desire and imitation of the dominant community in order to be accepted. However, acceptance (imitation) of such normative values of *Bengaliness* became a symbol of absence/lack in Meetei. Humiliation of Meetei on the basis of culture and language by the Bengalis of Cachar was part of their daily life. Through religious and Bengali hegemony, Meetei produced a self-hate discourse. Elsewhere in Imphal valley, the social and religious relation between people and the dominant Hindu mind was not any different. When in school, Naoria Phulo had faced a similar situation where he was taunted by his Bengali friends for his community’s lack of script and god. He was asked “What is your language? Don’t you have your own script? Don’t you have your own religion, gods and goddesses” (Nilbir, 1991:116). Such questions from his Bengali friends made Phulo pursued history, language and

script for his community. Later, he formed his new religious group called *Apokpa Marup*. Sairem Nilbir (1991), Saroj Nalini Parath (1999), Naorem Joykumar Singh (2012), Khuraijam Bijoykumar (2016), Kshetri (2006) and others who have worked on the emergence of Meetei nationalism/Sanamahi exalt Phulo as the pioneer figure of the Sanamahi movement. However, *Apokpa Marup* and *Sanamahi* religion stand not in conjunction, but share different narratives of Meetei religious identity. There is definitely a sense of proximity between Phulo and Sanamahi narrative in terms of reviving a Meetei identity in the twentieth century, but that reasoning does not suffice in situating them within the same religious tradition.

After he left his sub-inspector post, he devoted his life to the critical examination of religious practices and belief systems and envisaging a new Meetei community. He dismantled the orthodox social and religious structure of his time and society. He wrote extensively on Meetei history, culture and on the discriminatory practices of Hinduism. His major arguments that generated the revivalist movement are: the need for reconstruction of history, replacement of Sanskrit with Meeteilon in rituals/religious rites (issue of language at large), scripts, education, economy, etc. He died in June, 1941.

It is important to note that Naoria Phulo's original name as it was given to him by his grandfather was Foondrei.⁵ When he was taken to school for admission, his Bengali teachers, unable to pronounce his name, suggested Phulo instead. "Phulo" is derived from the Bengali word *phul* which means flower (Hodamba, 2012:25). Such a naming practice was prevalent, as it were, from the beginning of eighteenth century

⁵ when Phulo's grandfather Naorem Herando saw Phulo for the first time, he appeared to be a perfectly shaped child, neat and lovable. His grandfather gave him Foondrei which is an instrument used for polishing articles. (Hodamba, 2012: 25).

when the King of Manipur accepted Vaishnavite-Hindu tradition and imposed it upon his subjects. As I mentioned in the introduction, Vaishnavite-Hinduism was formally accepted as state religion during *Meidingu*⁶ Pamheiba in the early part of the eighteenth century. King Pamheiba did not just become a devout Vaishnavite through the act of conversion and purification, he was required to testify his loyalty to the new religion by another act of acculturation: naming.⁷ He changed his name to Garibniwaz. After king Garibniwaz, as we see the list of kings in the *Cheitharol Kumpapa* (The Royal Chronicle of Manipur) transformation in naming practice is evident.⁸ Beginning from Garibniwaz and extending up to Buddhachandra, according to Sairem Nilbir, was the period of Hinduisation (115). Nilbir says, “The name Manipur was coined during his time” (114); further quoting from *Puya*, he says,

In 1729, during the reign of King Garib Niwaz, on the 5th day of Wakching (Dec.-Jan.), Meetei has been forced to adopt Hinduism, He ordered them to dive in the water of Lilong (a confluence of 2 important rivers of Manipur, about 8 km. to the south of Imphal) with branches of *Nongkhrang* in hand. It was a serious kind of oath taking not to renounce Hinduism. In the reign of Bhagyachandra (1759-98), another second oath taking of the above nature was also carried out, not to renounce Hindu Gouriya Vaishnavism. (1991: 123-24)

During this period, Meetei kings from the first (Pakhangba) to Charairongba (1697-1709) were given Sanskrit names in lieu of their Meetei names in a deliberate attempt to rewrite a different history that adhered to Hindu/Aryan lineage. It also began to

⁶ *Meidingu* is a Meetei word equivalent to King.

⁷ I argue in fourth chapter that such naming practice was reversed in the armed groups as a practice. When a person joins an armed group, he/she is always given a Meetei name. This reversal is connected to *Nokhrang Hanba*, a practice to de-dehinduise himself/herself.

⁸ I discuss this issue in chapter four very briefly to highlight the reversal of naming practice to mark rejection of Hinduism.

identify Meetei deities with Hindu Gods (115). Later it became a practice for the masses to be “possessed” by a Hindu name to testify their allegiance with the (new) religion.

Naming of a person involves varied belief systems, and it is reflective of one’s religious affiliation as well. It also represents a community (Dechamma, 2016; Chelliah, 2005). The fact that the Meetei name Foondrei was repudiated in favour of the Hindu name Phulo by his Bengali teacher points to the deeper relationship between Meetei and their self-representation in public. Meetei names were considered inappropriate for school and for public life as a result of which Meetei names were domesticated and Hindu names were given a formal status that was acceptable in the public sphere for reasons that served to further enhance the inferior status of Meetei, leading to the acculturation and adherence of Meetei into Hinduism. “Naming and conferring identity is a form of control and exercise of power over people” (Jangam, 2015: 64). This outward manifestation (Shakespeare, 1913) of Hinduness by the Meetei is a result of the power and control of the dominant Hindu.

Nothing much is known about Phulo, a person who envisaged a movement that would create a wide range of conflict and change in Meetei community. His relation with other communities in Cachar and Manipur are vague except for his debate with Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha (NHMM) and his influence on *Apokpa Marup*. However, Hodamba (2012) and Nilbir (1991) mention that he had visited Manipur in search of his religious and cultural roots. After his visit, he realised that Meeteis had been depending on the religion of others and vowed to protect and revive Meetei identity (Hodamba, 2012: 30). It is also said that during his sub-inspectorship at Rangia, he encountered an old Manipuri (Meetei) man. Phulo was so hugely influenced by his deep knowledge on Meetei religion and history that it strengthened

his determination to work for the recreation of Meetei identity, history, language, etc. Significantly, he was born at a time when Hinduism was maintaining its control over the Meetei society unchallenged. As an insider himself, Phulo was a critical observer of the discriminatory structure/practice of Hindu religion over Meetei community. Though structure of religious dominance was overwhelmingly powerful, he was not subdued by it. His message on the issue of social ostracisation in 1931, when he and his followers were socially ostracised, has had a strong impact on Meetei society. They accepted the ostracisation and it became the beginning of a movement that would reorient Meetei community in the twentieth century. Phulo says,

I want to say few things to you gentlemen – now that we are clearly marked off from our community, I think time has come for everyone to completely dedicate yourself to our god. We have stood for our god, but it was unknown to our society. We can submit to our god completely today (my translation, 2010: 275).

Meetei of Cachar, during Phulo's time, as well as earlier and later, was closely interwoven with the social and political structure that was prevalent in the Imphal valley. As stated earlier, Meeteis of Cachar were largely migrants due to war, royal feuds, marriage ties, etc. when they migrated most of them were accompanied by servants. Hence, Kings and his kins continued to dominate the social functioning of the Meetei. Formation of Hindu *Brahmasabha*, the highest authority on religious affairs, and the compilation of the book *Wayen Lairik* that provides rules and regulations to be observed (Nilbir, 1991: 114) during the reign of Bhagyachandra (1759-1798) paved way for the tightening of Hindu religious dominance. The early part of twentieth century was inhabited by both orthodox Hinduism and the Meetei movement. In Imphal valley, during this time, there was no visible alternative

religious movement that questioned the sovereignty of Hinduism and Brahmins, though there were voices raised against the unjust orthodoxy of it. The Meetei-Hindu collective, Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha (NHMM) formed in 1933, dropped the term Hindu from its name to provide a pan Manipur reach in 1934 (Parrat, 2005: 29). However, the question of inclusivity of the organisation remained doubtful for its functionaries were mostly Meetei Hindus and Brahmins.

Significantly, the increasing orthodoxy of Hinduism during this period was a pre-emptive measure to throttle any religious dissent, particularly the re-emergence of Meetei religion. Until this period such pre-emptive measures favoured the King who was beginning to lose control and power over his subjects due to the British intervention in his polity and economy (Khuraijam Singh, 2016; Dena, 2008). It seemed that religion (Hindu) and its principle functionaries Brahmins and durbar members were used as an apparatus to safeguard the interest of the king. For example, King Churachand (1891-1941) did not denounce the practice of social ostracisation in the name of *mangba-sengba*⁹ but found it useful as a proactive measure to safeguard his interests. *Mangba-sengba* was not only used as a means to empower Hindu religion but also used as a tool to exploit the common people economically for his governance. Parrat says,

By the 1920s the new brahmins had consolidated their ascendancy. Besides becoming the dominating force in the Brahma Sabha and the Court, they appointed brahmins of their own party in each community, village and family.

⁹ A practice of social ostracisation that was prevalent during that time on the basis of pure and impure concept. Brahmins and Durbar members can declare a person *mangba* (impure) for reasons that were convenient for them. In order for a subject once again become a *sengba* (pure) subject, she or he needed to pay a particular amount of fine depending upon who declared it and the kind of “crime” attributed to them. Sometimes, the man in power can declare an entire community or a village *mangba*.

Temples and *mandaps* mushroomed in the streets and lanes. Their service became mandatory for all aspects of social life. No rites of passage or other ceremony or social event could be conducted without their ministrations. For all of these functions they demanded payment, and those who attempted to stand up to their demands were declared *mangba* (impure) and ostracised from the community. . . ., and the threat of outcasting became a common excuse for coercion and extraction of bribes. . . . Those declared *mangba* could only be restored (made *sengba*, clean) by payment. In this policy the Brahma Sabha worked hand in glove with the Maharajah, and used the *rattans*, lower grades clerks, to extract payment. All shared in the proceeds. Fees varied: The Maharajah's share was Rs. 500, the Brahma Sabha Rs. 80, and the rattans upto Rs. 50. This system soon got out of hand as freelance brahmins and even the rattans took it upon themselves to declare people *mangba* and pocket the fees. . . . In addition, the brahmins demanded fees for minor religious rituals. Even the *Chandan Senkhai*, for the impression of the *tilak* mark, cost Rs. 5, and those who refuse to pay were outcasted. (2005: 19-20)

Naorem Joykumar Singh (2012) elaborates on this social fact that those in power to declare *mangba-sengba* were exempted from taxes and were given land at will. Both religious and economic aspect were against the welfare of the common people, whereas, the privileged groups benefited from it. Saroj Nalini Parratt (2010) points out that during his time, the influence of Brahmins had increased remarkably. But, this marked increase in influence was determined by other external factors like the presence of British colonialism and unpopularity of the king among his own people. The apparent increase in the influence of Brahmins and orthodoxy of Hinduism in the governance of the state was a veil to ensure and protect his governance and

sovereignty (2010: 104). According to Nalini, King Churachand saw in Hinduism [and its orthodoxy] an alternative social detour that could restore his sovereignty. Such social and religious injustice meted out by the King and his followers was “a precursor of the ‘freedom’ movement in Manipur of the present day” (ibid).

Both *Maiba* and *Maibi*,¹⁰ and Brahmins were used by the successive kings of Manipur (Lokendro Singh, 1998), apart from other means to strengthen their sovereignty. Lokendro Singh says that when Vaishnavite –Hindu was officially accepted by Pamheiba¹¹ there were strong oppositions from traditional Meetei religion and from the rival Vaishnavite sects like Nimandi and Ramandi (1998: 4). He states further, “The *Maibas* and *Maibis* (Priests and Priestesses) of the traditional religion, who formerly enjoyed royal patronage, were much antagonized because the Brahmins who were newly patronized by the King started challenging their authority and powers” (ibid). According to Naorem Joykumar, particularly during the reign of King Churachand (1891-1941) Hinduism was imposed upon his subjects for legitimacy of his sovereignty via strict adherence to religion (2010: 5). In the process people became a “religious subject” so as to exercise king’s power over the people (ibid: 14). Louis Althusser (2012) has shown that religious institution like the Church was an important state apparatus in Europe to govern the subjects. Similarly, state mechanisms were used by the Meetei Kings to subdue their subjects. An overwhelming control and domination of the subjects was achieved through religious dictates and laws. The ideological, in Althusserian sense, interpellation of the subjects gave rise to a new height in religious orthodoxy in the Imphal valley. There was a complex interweaving of economy, religion and governance during this time.

¹⁰ Maiba and Maibi are traditional Meetei priests who perform religious rites?.

¹¹ The Vaishnavite sect that Pamheiba accepted as his religion was Chaitanya Vaishnavism.

Khuraijam agrees with Nalini's argument that colonialism was one of the major factors that reproduced Hindu orthodoxy. Therefore, this analysis implies that the emergence of nativist consciousness was not, in principle, just only a reaction against Hinduism but also a reaction against colonialism (Khuraijam Singh, 2008: 12). Reproduction of Hindu orthodoxy and religion in general "was a method of controlling masses as well as the means to resist secular power of British colonizers by the native rulers" (14).

It is in this context of colonialism and religious orthodoxy that Naoria Phulo needs to be located. His social and religious visions were further complicated by his location: Cachar. His movement was unprecedented and produced shock waves in the community. The rise of religious orthodoxy in the Imphal valley cannot be attributed to colonialism and the diminishing power held by the king. Althusserian understanding of religion does not give religion a working space of its own, but renders it as just a mere apparatus of the state. However, in the context of Manipur, we see contradiction in the way in which state apparatus functioned. During King Churachand rule, there were integrationist (to India) literatures¹² similar to the works of Atombapu Sharma and other Brahmins who propagated that Meetei were descendants of Aryan (J. Parrat, 2005; S. Parrat & Parrat 2010). This integrationist approach of the early twentieth century was inherited from the nineteenth century Hindu proselytising narratives. In the first chapter, Lamabam Kamal, Khwairakpam Chaoba and Hijam Irabot had shown their unwavering allegiance to Hinduism and India even in the face of Meetei movement. In such production of integrationist narratives, particularly by the Brahmins, one finds the origin of the birth of Manipur

¹² See, first chapter of this dissertation.

State Congress and the desire to be a part of the emerging Hindu India.¹³ The argument here is that such integrationist narratives of the Brahmins did not serve the interest of the King, and the role of religion cannot be reduced to a mere state apparatus. The larger question here is how an apparatus can overpower the state in order to meet its larger goals of dominance and expansionism.¹⁴ Religion was one of the major factors that played a catalytic role in forming allegiance with India and the eventual integration. Religion, therefore, in the context of Manipur, held equal power in status, if not more, with the state. Though in the internal politics, religion seemed as an apparatus to avoid the greater alienation of the king and control over his subjects, in the larger framework, religion was beginning to overpower the king and enabled the integration of Manipur to India.

For Khuraijam Singh (2016), *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* (1819-1826) was vital in importing religious orthodoxy and communalism which were absent in the valley. Meitei Hindus and new Brahmins when they returned from other parts like Cachar, Tripura and Bangladesh after the devastating war with Burma, exhibited a “purer” form of Hinduism as hitherto Hinduism of the Bengali Hindu was considered authentic¹⁵ (78). It is important here to comment on the range of devastation that the Burmese occupation produced. According to Sir James Johnstone, the population of the valley suffered a staggering diminution. Johnstone speculated, re-cited by

¹³ Hindu India is used here to highlight the growing aspiration of Meitei class to be a part of India which they saw as Hindu nation. India, though was declared a secular state, was perceived as a Hindu state owing to various reasons, one of them is the partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan on the basis of religion.

¹⁴ Naorem Joykumar (2012) describes Vaishnavite Hindu tradition and the period of Hindu domination not less than an act of colonialism, unlike integrationists who believe that the encounters of Hindu and Meitei faith produced a syncretic tradition.

¹⁵ Meitei Pangals (Muslim) were affected by this invasion as well. They also ran away from Manipur. When they returned, they brought and performed religious orthodoxy, and the first Mosque was also built. Khuraijam remarks that the tradition of Burkha wearing was non-existent before the Burmese invasion. Similar to the Meeteis, they were exposed/introduced to Muslim world when they were outside Manipur. They exhibited “authentic” tradition of Muslim by wearing *Burkha*.

Khuraijam Singh, that the population was reduced to only 2000 inhabitants during this period from a thriving population of at least four lakhs or even probably six lakhs.

The Burmese occupation resulted in a sea change in demography, society and economic life (77). J. Shakespeare (1913) also sees the strengthening of Hindu orthodoxy during Burmese war. He says,

“The princes of the royal, and probably many of the better-class Manipuris, escaped to Cachar, and I think this enforced sojourn in a country which had recently come under the influence of the Brahmans must have strengthened the hold of Hinduism in exiles” (414-415).

The argument here is not to disagree in its entirety with the historical explanation, but rather with the framework that reduces religion to a mere apparatus of the king/state. Historical explanation on the rise of Hindu orthodoxy in the early part of twentieth century cannot be ignored. However, religion was not a mere tool of the king if one looks at the eventual unfolding of history in the twentieth century. Hinduism progressively ventured towards the eventual merger of Manipur into the Indian union. Since Hinduism became the official religion of the kingdom, its name was changed to Manipur, thus aligning the kingdom with the Manipur of *Mahabharata*.¹⁶ According to *Sanamahi Laikan*,¹⁷ the proponent of Sanamahi religion, its growth and protection, the name Manipur first appeared in the early part of the eighteenth century during the reign of Hinduised King Garibniwaz which coincided with the official adoption of the religion (Kabui, 1991). This territory,

¹⁶ Such identifications have been challenged by Naoria Phulo in his writings. Later, historians and scholars working in the field of Manipur have contested and rejected this claim historically and socially. *Cheitharol Kumpapa* does not mention Manipur before eighteenth century. It was seen as an attempt to Hinduise the state. For further readings see, Naoria Phulo (2010), Saroj Nalini Parratt (2010), Naorem Sananjaoba (1988), Gangmumei Kabui (1991), etc.

¹⁷ It is a Puya.

imagined to a larger extent, was known by various names before the eighteenth century. The names ranged from *Kangleipak*, *Poireipak* and *Meitrabak* to many others by which it was known to its neighbours. In the eventual evolution of the religion, Meetei were given the Kshatriya caste; *Ras Lila* was invented by king Bheigyachandra after his return from Assam (Khuraijam Singh, 2016: 78). Further, in the early twentieth century Atombapu Sharma had produced multiple number of writings that *reinforced* and *claimed* Aryan identity. Manipur's alleged claim of Aryan connection was perceived "as an aspect of Sanskritisation [Hindisation]" and a desperate "attempt to gain respectability in the world" (Kabui, 1991: 3). The religious Hindu orthodoxy of twentieth century, particularly of elite Meetei, found its shelter in a political organisation that was hugely influenced by India's freedom movement, i.e., Manipur State Congress. Elite Meetei Hindus took keen interest in the unfolding of India in its last phase of the independence movement. The formation of Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha (NHMM) in 1933 was a step towards becoming a respected Hindu in an emerging "Hindu" state. Therefore, Hindu religion at the turn of the twentieth century had shown its desire to integrate into India.¹⁸

This integrationist stand of one religion was challenged by another in due course of Manipur history. *Sanamahi* movement had the anti-integrationist fervour from its formative years by challenging Hinduism. This specific contestation will be discussed in the fourth chapter. However, it is surprising that King Churachand, instead of working with *Sanamahi* movement which had the political potential to protect his sovereignty, found his allies in Hinduism which led to the eventual merging of Manipur with India. Precisely for this reason, religion cannot be simply underwritten as a state apparatus. Religion homogenises its subjects; it overpowers a

¹⁸ Refer chapter One of this dissertation.

state into submission which leads to the consequent merger into what is considered as its “parent” state.

Colonial ethnographers like T.C. Hodson (1975) and J. Shakespeare (1913) maintained that the Hinduism in Manipur was superficial for Meeteis as they do not observe the strict principles of Hinduism. McCulloh also observed that Hinduism among the Meeteis was not only a superficial connection but was considered fashionable (qtd. in Lokendro Singh, 1998). According to them, Meetei continued to observe their indigenous gods and indulged in “profane” food habits. The sacred place of Sanamahi remained *pure*. Hinduism, for Meetei, was the outer self and their inner was controlled by their deep commitment to their native gods.

Here, Meetei movement sought? to merge or unsettle the outer/inner distinction as a means to overthrow Hindu dominance and revive Meetei religion and identity. As discussed in the introduction, Indian nationalists claim for the existence of spiritual and material binary to mark the East and the West as a political necessity for asserting an indomitable Hindu inner/private. However, this political manoeuvring of the Hindu nationalist had thwarted any alternative political vocabulary (Pandian, 2002) to the marginalised communities. Although, Sanamahi movement can be understood as envisaging a habitation in the public domain, Meetei inner manifests a sharp difference when compared with the inner of the East. Meetei’s inner/private was rendered impure domain not just by virtue of its native impurity, but also because the Meetei’s private was made a repository of condemned Meetei elements. Revivalism, in the context of Meetei, needs to be ascertained as a reclamation of that temporal-spatial space which the colonial ethnographers have described as “superficial.” This superficial exhibition of Hinduness by Meetei was performed in the public domain of Meetei society. This was a political site, and Hinduism controlled this space with the

support of an incapacitated king. And in this process, Meetei elements were forced into private domain. The larger claim of Meetei movement, then, would be that the Meetei inner was impenetrable by Hinduism. But, my argument is to suggest that, although Meetei inner was/is impenetrable, the term of its impenetrability is different from the Hindu inner. Meetei inner is/was impenetrable because it is/was considered impure, discursively produced impurity, while Hindu is impenetrable because it is superior. Thus, Meetei revivalism is to begin from its impenetrable “impure” inner. It is this “superficial” space that was denied to the Meetei¹⁹ in its encounter with Hinduism, and the project of the revivalism is to reoccupy it. This superficial/outer/public realm, which I would like to call the space of revivalism, is a political site that decides/constitutes history of the king/dom and of Manipur. Khuraijam states that the Sanamahi movement is the “manifestation of an old conflict between the two socio-cultural values – Hinduism and Sanamahi” (2008: 18). However, it is also surmised that Sanamahi movement also represented a political language.

Naoria Phulo recreates a sense of crisis, a crisis inhabiting the present because of Hinduism. This crisis paints the deteriorating self-respect, economy and education of the Meetei community. Tradition of his community is dubbed to be a solution for the crisis of the present. Phulo attempts to establish a natural connection between past and present, and forged a desire and responsibility to “change the present” (Chatterjee, 1994). Phulo’s remapping of the crisis encountering his community and

¹⁹ Despite the obvious reference to Partha Chatterjee, it is interesting to point out that this dichotomic understanding of space into domestic/inner/tradition and world/outer/modern (incomplete sentence). Naoria Phulo had elaborated this issue in his attempt to understand the Meetei world and their encounter with the hegemonic Hindu. Education, names, language, religious representation etc. are evidences for Phulo to further his argument, and augment the underlying social and religious ideology of Hinduism.

the answers he sought, underscores Chatterjee's "eastern modernity" which escapes from its present to its past as against the West (ibid: 152). Phulo attempts to draw and understand the general feelings of Meetei of his time. He finds that Meeteis believe the false narrative of the Mayangs, whereby, they consider their language inferior and insufficient; their gods and history insignificant; and, Meeteis' aspiration to be like Mayangs. W. McCulloh had observed that Hinduism of the Meeteis was largely a matter of fashion than a conviction.²⁰ Although, the Meetei crisis as a result of Hinduism was confined to the religious realm, it later spread to history, education, etc. when western education and scripting of the community were taken up seriously. Phulo's crisis is also extended to the realm of lack of scientific knowledge and economic exploitation of Meetei by Brahmins during ritual and other religious performances. The relationship between Hinduism, Meetei apathy and economic exploitation are explored further to create this crisis. Phulo believed that the decline of Meetei economy was factored by three important reasons: one was the decline in the intellectual power; second, lack of enthusiasm to improve knowledge; and, third, decline in economy (Joykumar Singh, 2012: 86). Brahmins had, according to Phulo, destroyed indigenous ritual practice and introduced new rules to exploit the economy of the Meetei. Meeteis were forced to pay for unnecessary religious rituals in the form of money and donations for birth ceremonies, funerals, etc. (Joykumar Singh: 89-98; Phulo, 2010). He observes that Meeteis are over indulgent in non-productive religious activities like Holi, Sankirtan, Pung-esei, etc due to Hinduism.

Phulo project is to escape from the crisis of the present, this escape would be possible when Meetei community becomes non-dependent in every aspect. The

²⁰ Writing in 1859, McCulloh's observation could be correct but by the turn of the twentieth century, this fashion has ingrained in Meetei consciousness. See, N. Lokendro Singh, *The Unquite Valley* (1998) and W. McCulloh, *An Account of the valley of Manipur and of the Hills Tribes* (1859).

formation of *Apokpa Marup* marked as an important moment for this departure (Nilbir, 1991: 116). It envisaged a different trajectory of Meetei world from the hitherto Hindu hegemony. The primary objective of *Marup* was the revival of the traditional religion (ibid). Naoria Phulo led the social movement in Cachar, and his influence in Imphal was also palpable. His writings on different aspects of Meetei world and the means for Meetei emancipation need to be located within the overarching ideology of modernity. It is clear from his writings that his political and religious dispensations were part of the larger desire to be accepted as it should, and participate in the production of a scripted community (Blackburn, 2011). Perhaps because of his investment in a certain mode of consolidation of community, modernity; exclusionary paradigm of the very consolidation cannot be missed. This exclusionary nature of his community might have been mediated by hitherto social and political relationship between Meetei and the tribal as well. This also needs to be placed within the religious bifurcation and demarcation brought about by both Hinduism and colonialism. Therefore, his idea of a new Meetei, and the inability to encompass different communities of Manipur could be a consequence of the hitherto prominent religious and political demarcation — Hindu/Aryan²¹ and Christian/Tribal. His “discriminatory” sense of community bonding and formation will be ascertained in the light of what scholars have earlier pointed out “orthodoxy among the traditional authorities was a by-product of modernisation, which again produced another counter force of nativism [Sanamahi]” (Khuraijam Singh, 2008: 12). Aloysius (2013) states that the emergence of regional political/assertion within a nation or sub nationalism within a larger nationalism is a byproduct of the same modernity. A regional identity

²¹ I use Aryan tentatively here to cover and represent the hitherto dominant Hindu narrative of Meetei community.

became a necessity so as to resist the dominant nation-al identity. Therefore, according to Aloysius, regionalism or sub-nationalism is not a parochial political assertion but a product of modern nation itself. It resists any attempt to homogenise that may amount to losing of identity. Here, Phulo's vision, assertive and discriminatory, radical and yet profane (during his time) was a consequence of Hindu religion. Broadly, his works can be discussed in relation to the later Sanamahi movement, but in this chapter, his views on language, script, history, education, and most importantly religion will be discussed to posit him as the person who initiated Meetei revivalism - revivalism which later Meetei scholars used extensively in their respective prerogatives.

Sairem Nilbir (1991) provides a list of seven points that are considered primary features of the movement:

1. to renounce Hinduism
2. to discard all theories of Sanskritisation invented by the Meitei Hindu scholars
3. to take up necessary measures for the revival of traditional religion, culture, scripts, language, literature and add to them something new without changing the basic elements to meet the changing environment
4. to strengthen the unity between the Hill and plain people to live together as brothers
5. to strengthen the bond of unity among the Meeteis who are living inside and outside the territory of Manipur
6. to take up research work on the History of Manipur

7. to let the world know that a community known as the Meetei has been in existence with their own distinct cultural and religious identity in the north east part of India for? not less than two millennia (119).

Parratt, concurring this objective put forth by Nilbir states,

Sanamahi movement may be characterised as *neo traditional* [sic]: it advocates a return to what is perceived as traditional.... It is essentially an attempt at the recovery of national identity in the face of the threat of ‘integration’ or absorption into the Indian sub-continent, and it focuses on religion as a way into the revival of Meitei traditional social and cultural values. But it is not simply backward-looking, for its aim is not only to recover past values and identity – to ‘reclaim the gods’ – but also to reinvent them to meet the crisis of the present. (1999: 110)

Such broad understanding of Sanamahi movement by both scholars can be understood as an attempt to locate the same within a certain evolution of Meetei community.

However, Phulo’s *Apokpa Marup* and *Sanamahi* movement should not be perceived as same. Attribution of the beginning of Sanamahi movement to Phulo, with no doubt, is correct, but only in retrospection. His *Apokpa Marup* as a religion for the Meetei didn’t consider Sanamahi as its principal god. According to Hodamba (2012), *Apokpa Marup* was formed with Brahmasabha as its framework (125). Phulo believes that “Apokpa”²² as the principal god of the Meetei is equivalent to the “Brahma” of the Hindu pantheon. Hodamba explains, *Sabha tinba*²³ is an equivalent of *Marup tinba*; *Marup famba*²⁴ with *Sabha famba*. In these two different phrases, two Meetei words

²² Nilbir, Saroj Nalini and Naorem Joykumar interpret Phulo’s *Apokpa Marup* as ancestor worship aligning with the tradition of Meetei’s worship of their ancestor.

²³ Translated as “gathering.”

²⁴ Translated as “gathering.”

that mark the idea of gathering — *tinba* and *famba* – are placed with *Sabha*, and *Sabha* is translated as *Marup*. This equation is established as an attempt to acquire a sense of equivalence and validity for *Marup*, a Meetei word, with *Sabha*, a Sanskrit. Therefore, *Marup* carries the meaning of *Sabha* and *Apokpa*²⁵ of Brahma. Hodamba, from this equation, comes to the conclusion that Phulo's *Apokpa Marup* can be ascertained to have been framed with the idea of Goura's (Hindu) *Brahma Sabha*. The difference here, for Hodamba, lays in two interest groups and their effort to protect them: *Apokpa Marup* for the welfare of the Meetei and Brahmasabha of the Hindus (152). Despite such ambiguous interpretation of *Apokpa Marup*, Phulo is considered as a primary figure who initiated the Meetei movement.

The epistemic reconfiguration of self and the contingent self of the future are animated by pre-existing social and political equations. For Phulo, reconfiguration of self and meaning were required to “creatively manoeuvre” (Pandian, 2002) between the hegemonic present and the new identity sought for. It is this part of political creativeness of Phulo that he says, “*Hindugi laining lamchat asida eikhoina wayek khara changjei, - wayek changjabadani thadokke haiduna toujabadi natte*” (We have some criticism against Hinduism, critique alone, sans any idea of renouncement²⁶) (translation mine, 1934: 131).²⁷ He lists out his criticism/disagreements with Hinduism as the chapter of the book progresses. However, it is important to understand that this is not the only chapter where he provides his disagreement with Hinduism, but runs through his entire work. In another instance, Hodamba further says

²⁵ The creator.

²⁶ It is in this particular declaration that the features of Sanamahi movement prepared by Sairem Nilbir and endorsed by many became problematic. However, Phulo did leave Hinduism and formed his own religion that nonetheless seemed Hinduism in another form.

²⁷ In *Meeteigi Houfam Waari* (History of Meetei Origin) was originally written in 1934 but appeared in the collection of his writing titled, *Laininghal Naoria Phullogi Wareng Apunba* published in 2010.

that *Apokpa Laining*²⁸ is not a conversion from Hindu religion to another but an attempt to reform Hinduism. Hodamba cites the same arguments mentioned above to substantiate his point (2012: 141). However, there might be certain ambivalence in the way Phulo had come to agree with a certain positioning of his new faith, but it would not be wise to adopt a reductionist approach in understanding Phulo as such. As explained above, the historical exigency of his time needs to be taken into account in order to absolve him of such ambivalence. The attempt to acquire meaning and validity, and the possibility of it without having to compare with an external entity will be his larger struggle, i.e., to emancipate Meetei, their language, history and culture. The problematic exercise of acquisition of meaning and validity through an act of comparison with Sanskrit and Sanskrit as the principle bench mark was not the norm for Phulo other works.

Phulo says, “*Meegi laibu eigini haina ningibasibu kari haina ekairoi*” (To worship other’s god as mine is shameful) (276) in 1931 and this can be juxtaposed with the statement he made above to argue that his plan to disown Hinduism was absolute, and the formation of *Apokpa Marup* made it evident. Addressing his followers, in 1931, he called Meetei who have socially ostracised them as slaves and stooges of Brahmins. He believed that they had been ostracised by their fellow Meetei as they were instigated and pressurised by the Brahmins. Interestingly, calling themselves member of *Apokpa Marup*, who are “*Lambi amanba semjariba*” (those who are reconstructing old road) (2010: 274) – to indicate their work and sacrifice – were for the reconstruction of the Meetei past. This reconstruction of past as a counter narrative to the Hindu narrative highlights the importance of having a written history of the oppressed community (Nagaraj, 2011). Sanal Mohan (2015) also asserts that a

²⁸ He uses *laining* instead of *Marup* to signify the faith rather than a group.

certain form of rendering of history as a counter to the dominant and to recover the past was essential for Dalits/slave castes. Therefore, through *lambi semba* as a trope for revivalism, Phulo attempts to challenge and overthrow Brahmin dominance with the formation of his *Apokpa Marup*.

His engagement with Hinduism and the larger society created a democratic space within the space dominated by Hinduism. The public sphere of his time was highly autocratic as the space for dialogue between the dominating force and the dissenting voice was non-existent due to orthodox religious belief and strict obeisance to the king. Any voice that questioned the hitherto tradition and belief system were condemned, extending to the point of social ostracisation. Phulo's attempt to break into this rigid social sphere was met by equally strong regressive social forces.²⁹ Due to his relentless efforts to build a democratic space for dialogue and change, his society was beginning to experience a change in the form of questioning the religious practices of Hinduism. Emergence of Phulo and his challenges to Hinduism shook the "superficial" realm of Meetei-Hindu public sphere. Such challenges paved the way for revivalism of Meetei religion which was hitherto pushed into its private domain. According to Phulo, forced confinement of Meetei language, history and script into their private space was a religious measure for the proliferation of Hinduism. For example, Meeteilon was considered an impure language for religious rituals, he said, poignantly, "*Hek sibaga Meetei di Mayang maron lonbani*" (Meeteis speak in Sanskrit as soon as they die) (1940: 81). This indicates the general practice of using Sanskrit for rituals wherein denying a person his own language for ritual performance. Therefore, the presupposition that Meeteilon was not a sufficient language gets

²⁹ I have argued in the introduction that terming Phulo and later Meetei revivalists as mad was/is part of the Hindu hegemony to suppress them. Regressive force of the Hindu religion was a parallel movement alongside the Meetei movement.

established through such denials. Denial as a means to establish superiority of Sanskrit was also seen in education and general conversations, literatures, etc. Discrimination of Meeteilon over the language of the *Mayang*, and his concerted effort to replace the latter by the former was a significant political departure for Phulo. This political move was against the general conception that Meeteilon was impure and therefore to bring the language into the religious sphere was blasphemous. Phulo's attempt to replace Sanskrit with Meeteilon in religious practices is symbolic of the resistance and conflict between two languages which occupied two different spaces of pure/Hindu and impure/Meetei space. This is also true in the case of history, education, script, and religion. Such significant markers of Meetei identity were made antithesis to public while domesticating them in the private realm. During his time, religious and public spheres were inseparable. The concept of public sphere, and the possibility of its formation or the presence of it was overshadowed by religion. The dichotomised realm of public and private sphere, or, the outer and inner self in non-secular terms, will be used here to analyse Phulo's revivalism in particular and revivalism in general. Hindu religion stood as a discriminatory system that forbade the development of Meetei language, script and history in the public sphere. For Phulo, dilapidating condition of education and economic status of Meetei were connected to Hinduism. This can be ascertained as an attempt to bring out the suppressed Meetei identity through Hinduism.

As noted earlier, Phulo's main tools that would reclaim/revive Meetei identity were language, script, education, and history. His concern for language was largely confined to the terrain of ritual practice, but he demanded that Meetei students be taught in Meeteilon. He says Meetei students cannot adapt with the language of other

in schools, because of which they often discontinue their study³⁰ (2010: 24).

However, his stand on language and the language of the ritual is evident when he says Meetei speak Sanskrit when they die. This needs to be understood as a reflection of the degree to which the Meetei were religiously colonised and influenced to consider Sanskrit as the language of God on the one hand, and Meiteilon as the language that lacked the capacity to converse with God; language of man. It was part of the larger hegemonic design to encourage Meetei to inculcate self-hate, for all things Meetei, therefore discouraging self-identification on one hand, and, encouraging acceptance of Hindu and its other complicit tools on the other. This implicit design of the Brahminic hegemony and Hinduism was challenged, and it paved the way for revivalism. In his work on language and identity, he remarks that even though *Wahouron* and *Byakaran*³¹ were similar in their nature of disciplinary propensity, they were irreconcilable entities because of their specific linguistic affiliations. For Phulo, *Wahouron* and *Byakaran* were useful for the study of Meetei and *Mayang* respectively. There is an absolutising and non-interchangeable sense in his construction of these two categories. He substantiates *esing* and *jal* which stands for water in English. He says if one needs to study the etymology of the word *jal*, one should take the help of the *Byakaran* and not *Wahouron*. He asserts with complete authority that *Wahouron*, and not *Byakaran*, will provide the etymology of the Meetei word *esing*³² (2010: 101).

³⁰ Published in 1940.

³¹ According to Phulo, *Wahouron* is a Meiteilon term equivalent to *Byakaran* which is understood as grammar in English. He seems to think that *Byakaran* is a branch of study that studies the etymology of language and not the structure of language. Not going into the nitty gritty of grammar, Phulo's argument is clear here. *Wahouron* as equivalent of *Byakaran* in Meiteilon can only study Meetei language.

³² First published in 1934.

If one were to take Phulo seriously, intra linguistic study will not be possible according to his strict compartmentalisation of languages. Meeteilon is not devoid of foreign terms. However, is Phulo guilty of circumscribing language study in general? What were Phulo's limitations from which such radical proposition of language study was produced? Phulo's articulation and writings were enmeshed with Sanskrit and Bengali words; however, what are the implication of such divisionism for him and Meetei revivalists, then and now? Did Phulo have certain people in mind when he wrote this? One of the possible answers to these questions would be based on the existing education system of his time that imposed *Byakaran* on the students of his community. The education system of the early twentieth century also shows that Bengalis and Bengali-speaking Meetei were the teachers in Manipur (J. Parrat, 2005). Due to the lack of textbooks in Meetei language, students had to study Bengali. As it was practiced in schools, Meeteilon was/is studied using the principle of *Byakaran*. Although, this is one aspect of ascertaining his point of departure from the dominant language study, an important and crucial point is to situate (what?) within his politics of rejection of Hindu narrative of Meetei by asserting an independent history for the Meetei.³³ There was an attempt to assimilate Meeteilon and the Meetei in general into Indo-Aryan language and tradition.³⁴ This assertion can be seen as a rupture in the form of resistance and an exit that was envisaged by Phulo from the dominant Hindu tradition of Meetei community.

³³ See his point by point rejection of the claim that Meetei and Manipur are descendents of Arjuna and part of *Mahabharat*, first published in 1934 (2010).

³⁴ Until very recently R.K. Jhaljit (2012) claimed that Meeteilon of Manipuri belongs to the Indo-Aryan group of languages.

Phulo's language question³⁵ is largely confined to ritual service and the reconstruction of Meetei identity. Meetei words were considered impure for ritual performance and treated as inferior language. Such misconception for him was a result of Hinduism and as a consequence of it, Meeteilon was pushed into the condemned Meetei inner. Therefore, *esing* is impure whereas *pani* is pure³⁶ (Phulo, 2010: 130). Such notional integrity in the mind of the Meeteis is instilled through the process of consent generating mechanism, in Gramscian sense, *hegemony*. Imposition of religion and then language, in a community, and then to make them believe in the superiority and rationales of it, function in the subtle terrain of hegemony. For Phulo, Meeteis are taught the language of the Mayang through religion, Sankirtan and education (2010). Hence, when demanded for change of language for ritual performances is coalesced as propagating atheism and anti-social tendencies. Consent generating mechanism of hegemony disempowers community and individual, thereby assuming an authoritative position of unquestionable status. In such a complex functioning of hegemony, Meeteis' consent also lies in accepting the inferiority of their language. Phulo asserts that religious laws of Brahmins were responsible for the deteriorating morale, integrity, economy, and the confusion amongst Meetei community? (Joykumar Singh, 2012: 84).

The notion of pure and impure was well demarcated along Hindu and non-Hindu practices and elements. Such notions were also extended to the use of language not just in religious sphere but also in the public sphere. Speaking Bengali was a mark

³⁵ Phulo, unlike Lamabam Kamal and Khwairakpam Chaoba, did not feminise Meeteilon. He did not attribute or personify the language, instead saw the language as a medium through which certain form of emancipation and growth of Meetei community could be achieved. Language for him, then, was just a medium, a mode through which politics and resistance of the Meetei can be expressed.

³⁶ First published in 1940.

of sophistication and literacy, not just in Cachar, but also in Imphal valley.³⁷ One will find comfortable use of Bengali and Sanskrit by early Manipuri (read Meetei) literary figures. Meeteilon was considered as a subordinate language for public forum, education and everyday parlance. This is a case of alienation, and Phulo's struggle was to fight against this systematic alienation of Meeteilon and other markers of identity.

For Naoria Phulo, the language question intersects with education. In the sphere of education and pedagogy, he believes that Meeteilon should be the language of education for Meetei students. It is imperative for us to see how the idea of education is used in his statement. In the original Meetei language, *lairik* and *tamba* can be translated as book and learning respectively. The combination of these two Meitei words renders the proximate equivalent meaning of the English word education. He says, "Education in other's language [Bangla] does not suit the Meeteis, because of this many of them had to quit school"³⁸ (my translation, Phulo, 2010: 28). In order to ascertain his statement, we have to combine both the medium of instruction and the language of the text. His statement declares the necessity of having Meeteilon as the language of instruction instead of the dominant Bangla. If we assess his bigger political imperative, it becomes clear that his vision was to have text books in Meeteilon. He invented scripts for the language and this invention is connected with education of Meetei students in Meeteilon, and as a response to the Bengalis who mocked him for not having his own script.

In the beginning of *Eigi Wareng* written in 1940, Phulo laments the lack of serious books in his? language, and the common notion that Meeteilon is useless

³⁷ Refer chapter one of this dissertation.

³⁸ First published in 1940.

(2010: 26). Because of such notions and reality, Meetei parents, instead of encouraging their wards in education, pushed them to read *Mahabharat*. Such idea of Meeteilon was a barrier towards achieving education. From his proposition, it is clear that formal education should be imparted only in the language of the students. For Phulo, Meetei students' failure to complete education was a socially engineered failure, because of such failure? Meeteis are made to believe that they are not good in education and instead to pursue *Mahabharat*, *Pung cholom*, *Sankirtan* etc. Meetei parents advise their children – “*Nakhoigi school haibadu karisu kannaba natte, echasa eshusha, mee oige hairabadi pung, esei, Paala tammu*” (Your school is not important, my dear children, if you want to be successful learn *pung*, ritual songs) (2010: 28). Phulo held Hinduism responsible for such deteriorating mindset of the Meetei. He says, “*Gouriya dharmana Meetei gi fagadaba pumnamak sumthi saana saidatlabani*” (Gouriya religion [Hinduism] has destroyed everything that is good for Meetei completely) (29). Such a relegation of Meetei language reached a point where Meetei of Cachar began to think that learning ritual songs and playing *pung* constituted real education. Such religiously inclined activities were considered suitable for Meetei, and *gyan* (knowledge) and *bigyan* (science) were reserved for the Mayang (30). This division is symbolic of the hegemony exercised by the religion. Because of such a notion about themselves, Meeteis of Cachar generally hired teachers from Manipur to master the art (31). Interestingly, as Phulo attempts to highlight, the phenomenon of school dropout among Meetei children was not singularly because of language question but also due to religion, i.e., Hinduism. Hinduism, according to him, promotes non- educational activities, mostly related to religious practices like devotion through *Sankirtan*, reading Hindu epics, etc.

Rendition of ritual songs and practices were in Sanskrit because of the notion of impurity attached to Meeteilon. Marginalisation of one's own language on the basis of which language is suitable for prayer/the "sacred" realm signifies indoctrination and colonialism. Emphasis on religious activities performed in Sanskrit over education is simply a mimicry of the original. Phulo exposed that mimicry in the rendition of ritual songs. He conveys that people who sang such devotional songs were unaware of their meaning though they could understand the rhythm and beats; they were mostly rendered from memory. Similarly, audiences came to witness the performance and not to listen because they did not know the language (ibid, 34). Therefore, Phulo questions the logic of such devotion -- one that does not permit its devotees to use their own language to reach god. His assertion was that such closure would be broken down once the devotees are allowed to pray/sing in their own language. Intersection of language, education and ritual practices here is not accidental. For example, the notion that Meeteilon is impure and therefore unfit for religious activities was inculcated through indoctrination for centuries, and more so, in the context of Cachar. For Phulo, such perceptions can be brought to an end when Meeteilon is introduced in schools and the language of religious practices is replaced. His ideas (from his different books) have been quoted at some length:

We ask – as Hari, Ram and Krishna are not Meetei names, can we give Meetei names to all the Gods? It is possible. Different communities are descended from a single being and they are entitled to name their gods in their respective languages. Mayangs have named their gods in thousands numbers; English, Muslims and tribals as well. Likewise, birds, animals and insects pray in their languages. No one objects to it. Even god cannot object to such a practice. Meeteis, due to their fear of the Mayangs are not praying to gods in their

language. Now, why is problematic to pray to our divine in our language? If it is possible, we can call “Hari Sankritan” as “Mingkheiron Sakpa”. (Phulo, 2010: 36)

Meeteis have language of the God, *Veda* has mantra. In *Veda* it is *ahang*, Meitei says *ei*. *Veda* says *om* and Meitei *hoong*. Every ritual practices are one/similar, only language is the difference. Hence let us not say that Meeteilon cannot be a language of ritual practices, which is very problematic. Meeteilon is impure is a big objectionable claim. If Meeteilon is impure, it is similar to saying Meitei gods are impure. (Phulo, 2010: 129)

What we need to think today is, when Meiteis have similar religious practices with the *Mayangs*, how is that to conduct rituals in Meeteilon is regarded as atheist? ... If the ways are similar, Meeteilon should be allowed in performing rituals. Mother tongue is ingrained in one's dreams, nervous system and body, and to term that language impure today is to invite trouble. If the language is impure, their ancestors are also impure... It is a sin to say your own language is impure. If we address our ancestors in our language, they can hear because they died speaking Meeteilon. (Translation mine; Phulo, 2010: 135-36)

Phulo predicts a dreadful future for Meiteilon following the pervasive influence of Hinduism in the minds of his people. He says that Meeteis are introduced to the language of the *Mayangs* through Sankirtan and other religious songs. According to him, many of the children, and youths, from both sexes, indulge and take interest in (religious) merry-making instead of paying attention to education. He explains that because of the celebration of religious festivals and the preparation for the festivals, most of the people avoid going to schools and colleges. Parents also encourage them.

Interestingly, he uses terms like school and college to understand the surreptitious ideological underpinnings of Hinduism. He says, “College [ideology, teaching of religion] forms/conditions Meeteis belief and behaviour, and it is much bigger than the school-college [modern, formal education] of the present. The latter cannot even compare with the former” (41). He adds further, “Because Gauri [Vaishnavism] is a big school; Meetei youths do not care for school-college” (43). Here, he uses school as a term to signify religion as an institution which is different from the modern educational structure. The former is a religious apparatus for indoctrination of the mind and the latter serves as a medium through which emancipation can be achieved. Knowledge which is generated from religious-school stands antithetically to modern and formal schools that represent modernity, a new social imagination.

Phulo believed that the inability of Meeteis to discuss their religious belief and morality with Mayangs was primarily because Meeteis were ashamed of it (2010: 128). In the African context, Ngugi-Wa-Thingo (1981) calls such method of indoctrination “cultural bomb” (3) and explicates such processes of indoctrination in *Decolonising the Mind*. He looks at the interface between language and culture that the colonising masters seek to control and demonstrates how it is important to decolonise the mind. He says,

The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacity and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with peoples’ languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is

decadent and reactionary, all ‘those forces which would stop their own struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish. Amidst demands that the dependent sing hymns of praise with the constant refrain: Theft is holy.’ (3)

Similarly, Phulo also argues that the role of Brahmins and Hindu is to annihilate Meetei names, history, culture, and ultimately begin to identify with the oppressive religion. Therefore, for Phulo, introduction of Meeteilon in schools became a significant demand for decolonising the mind of the Meetei. As Sardha Saxena elucidates, education in a dominant/mainstream language implicates that “the primary objective of formal education is to teach children the mainstream language and bring them into the mainstream” (1997: 271). Bringing children to the mainstream through education in the dominant language means formation of a worldview different from the spoken language of the children. It produced a narrative of inferiority and lowliness fettered to their language and culture. Saxena says further, “... for teaching children in Mainstream language is not clearly formulated, they would remain backward despite formal education” (ibid). This is Phulo’s concern when he demands that Meetei students be taught in Meeteilon and he sees this as a measure to curb the dropout rates and their over indulgence in religious extravagansa of Hinduism. Teaching children in mainstream language is also symptomatic of colonisation that builds a civilising narrative of the native, and thus establishes a hierarchical pedagogic relationship. However, as stated earlier, because education, both text and the medium of instruction, is in the mainstream language, Meetei could not complete their schooling and had to dropout. Such teaching practices inevitably lead to low language skills with regard to minority students. At this point, Phulo’s affirmation is crucial,

“Two hundred years of learning the language and clothing of Mayang, Meeteis have not yet perfected it. Meeteilon has been almost forgotten. A Gauriya language can be created now³⁹ (63). He saw modern education system as the saviour of his people (minority) because this could question the orthodoxy of Hindu religion and thus assist in realising oneself.

In the later struggle for script during the second half of the twentieth century, Phulo and his script had a political and court tussle with other groups of Meitei revivalists. Phulo’s personally invented Meitei script consisted of thirty-six symbols. It is important to register that there were different script groups demanding for state recognition. However, it is alleged that there are symbols and sounds in his script which do not exist in Meitei sound pattern implying? that it was influenced by Bangla and Devanagiri.⁴⁰

Pedagogical aspect that determines the formation of a nation deserves a critical evaluation. Paulo Friere in his classic text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) examines how pedagogy is a highly political and contested terrain. Two more sentences from Friere here. Pedagogy that constitutes as an important part of making Meitei identity from the beginning of the twentieth century illustrates how Meitei nationalists have overlooked this aspect. This particular point will become clearer if one reads in cognisance with the previous chapter where I analysed the making of Meitei identity through a few canonical texts and authors. The formation of canon, in principle, lacks any critical examination. It is understood that all the three leading Meitei poets, including Hijam Irabot, had a strong affiliation to Hinduism. Their

³⁹ I have shown in chapter one that Khwairakpam Chaoba, in similar tone and vocabularies, would attempt to reject Bangla, because according to him this imitation of Bangla language and literature for three centuries has brought nothing but mockery to Meeteilon.

⁴⁰ See, <http://tabish.freeshell.org/eeyek/history.html>.

reformist agenda suits and partakes in the Brahma Sabha and the strengthening of Hinduism. Such a sanitised form of Hinduism became a basic foundation in the formation of Modern Meetei identity.

Phulo's idea of re/writing history is connected with language, script and recovery of the past. His idea of a community is not "faceless" (Pandian, 1998) but a community that recognises history as an important craft for its consolidation (Nagaraj, 2011; Mohan, 2015). He was deeply concerned with the misrepresentation of Meetei history and identity written by non-Meetei. According to him, history of Meetei written by a non-Meetei was not just a part of social and cultural assimilation but it also produced false history. Thus, he says, "The common notion that we are ignorant is reproduced in books, and, they [Mayang] sell them back to us and through that they fill their stomach" (Phulo, 2010: 150). Rewriting of history for Phulo was not simply a mere countering of false history produced by Mayang after the arrival of Hinduism, but it was also, at the same time, an act of recovery of Meetei past which was kept hidden from the Meetei people. This recovery of hidden history for Phulo (history and philosophy of the Meetei recovered from the archaic Meetei script for the later revivalists), is the political project of revivalism. He explains why and how Meetei cannot be the descendants of Arjuna of *Mahabharat* which was propagated by Hindu literary tradition in Manipur. His contemporary, a Meetei Brahmin, Atombapu Sharma propagated the Vedic origin of Meetei culture (J. Parrat, 2005: 150). According to Sharma, Manipur was referred to in the *Mahabharata*, and claimed that Meeteis were the descendants of Chitrangada and Arjuna of the same epic (Ibid, 151). Meetei Brahminical scholars refuted a statement made by N.N. Vasu that Meeteis were non-Aryan, and this debate was carried over in post-independence period as well. This agitation was led by Pandit Raj Atombapu Sharma (Kamei, 2012: 24). For

Gangmumei Kabui, Manipur's alleged connection with the Aryan as claimed by Atombapu Sharma can be "viewed as an aspect of Sanskritisation and an attempt to gain respectability in the Hindu world . . ." (1988: 4). Many have rejected this integrationist historiography of the Brahmins, and Phulo is one of the first to challenge this historiography.

In this frame of logic, as Phulo puts it, *Mahabharata* was considered the story of Meeteis' ancestors. He claims that the Manipur of *Mahabharata* is in the present state of Orissa. Phulo provides three points to reject afore-mentioned claims by Hindu scholars:

1. If the land of the Meeties was indeed Manipur [of Mahabharat], and Babrubahana was a powerful king, he will inherit the customs and traditions of his ancestors. His forefather spoke Sanskrit; therefore, he will know some amount of Sanskrit. However, there was no scent/element of Sanskrit in the land of Meetei kingdom.
2. Babrubahana's forefathers were under Brahmins. There were no Brahmins in Meetei kingdom.
3. Babrubahana is a Sanskrit name. Meetei kings were not named in Sanskrit but in Meeteilon. There is no evidence to prove that Meetei kingdom was ruled by Kshatriya kings. Before the advent of Ramandi, Gauriya religion in Manipur, keeping aside Babrubahana period [ahistoric Mahabharat], there was a total absence of Mayang language [Sanskrit]. (Translation mine, Phulo, 2010: 141).

Later historians and scholars working on the history and culture of Manipur have agreed and shared the same line of argumentation to disprove distorted and Hinduised historical narrative of Meetei past. These simple and logical explanations get

obfuscated by certain historiography that is motivated by religious and cultural colonisation of Meetei. The simple fact that there were no Sanskrit words before the arrival of Hinduism and there were no Brahmins in Meetei kingdom are enough to disprove this historical claim of the Hindu-historians (Kabui, 1991).

Phulo's rewriting or invention of history is a straightforward act which does not cajole on the sanctity of past. He does not emphasis on the existence or non-existence of a written past. He sees historiography as a necessity and as an exigent of the community to not just counter the dominant Hindu narrative, but also for reimagining a community, as he says, "Absent ought to be filled" (2010: 106). Void of a historical presence was felt and this void needed to be filled. According to Phulo this can be achieved by talking to elders and history can be written from the position of the temporal present (ibid). It is important to mention that Phulo does not take the help of Puya to write the history of Meetei, instead follows a different methodology. It is highly possible that Phulo may not have been aware of the existence of *Puya* as it was kept away from the general public because of religious imposition against it.⁴¹ Elders as an important source of history is vital for Phulo, not simply because the memory of the past was present with them, but, also because a transition was imagined from the non-historicity of orality to the scripted history. Therefore, in his book *Meeteigi Houbham Waari*⁴²(The Origin of Meetei; 2010), elders became an important source of history and he spelled out this fact. This captures his idea of revivalism which is not very different from other revivalists who envisaged/foresaw a

⁴¹ According to John Parrat (2005), the case of Phulo "illustrates the fact that the Meeteis of the diaspora at this period were quite ignorant of the long tradition of writing in *Meetie Mayek*" (26) indicates that Phulo was unaware of the Puyas written in Meetei *mayek*.

⁴² First published in 1934.

total closure.⁴³ Revivalism, as we see in many parts of South Asian countries, is complicit with nation formation and revivalism is often not a voluntary/natural movement but a “. . . concerted attempt by a particular group of people to restore, to use or to awaken interest in a set of old customs in order to counteract the influences of a dominant *alien* culture, . . . ” (Terwell, 1996: 277). For Phulo, it was also a deliberate attempt to revive Meetei history or create a new history if there was no scripted history.⁴⁴ However, this deliberateness should not be confused with total absence of history. Absence of history, for Phulo, is presupposed by a presence of it which has been corrupted or omitted through an intervention from outside. Without the possible presupposition of a presence or availability of history, revivalism as a social and political movement cannot hold, not even theoretically. Phulo argues,⁴⁵

There is no future and past without present... To know the origin of Meetei, even though we were not present then, if we study from our contemporary position, we can find our origin. Many scholars have been able to trace and study ancient festivals which were considered lost... Therefore, there is no rule that says that ancient festivals cannot be given a history. Absence/lack ought to be filled. There is a lack of history of Meetei origin and other community has ridiculed us because of it. Because of this shame, I am presenting [write] you a history of our origin after consulting with elders. (my translation; 2010: 106)

Connection between language, education and history are strongly interwoven here. Phulo's reconfiguration of Meetei community in the early part of the twentieth

⁴³ I borrow this term from Aneesh A. “Bloody Language: Clashes and the Constructions of Linguistic Nationalism in India”. *Sociological Forum*, March 2010.

⁴⁴ This brings to affirm that Phulo was unaware of *Puya* and *Cheitharol Kumpapa*.

⁴⁵ First published in 1934.

century was thus determined by what we see as modernity. Among many of his assertions, he says that the Meetei community/parent need to punish their children when they are unable to excel in education as they often do in the case of *pung-eshei*.⁴⁶ He further says that education should be given priority and the rest will come automatically (66). Such was his attempt to modernise the community through education. His search for a new religion for Meetei was accompanied by his strong desire for a new education system, science and technology which the community had been lacking behind due to its over indulgence on *foreign* religion. Phulo's acceptance of modernity (western) is substantiated when we read his views on science and Hindu religion among Meeteis, "Meeteis are given medicine by Hindu religious guru and they are put to sleep. They cannot remember anything. There is an unending dream sequence. They cannot be woken up. The entire world has embraced logic and science. But, Meetei are playing *abir* (Holi) because they are still in their dreams" (62). For Phulo, assertion and demand that Meetei students should be given education in Meeteilon is connected with his larger emphasis on the production of students with scientific temper and sound education over Hindu religion. For him, education was an important tool for reviving Meetei history and past, culture and religion. Although, (western) education is seen antithetical to premodern customs and traditions, Naoria Phulo in the wake of twentieth century, saw education as an important weapon for revival of Meetei tradition and history. In education, he found freedom from the clutches of Hinduism, its religious superstitions, from *Sankirtana*, from *Holi*, from *Pung Cholom*, from the economic exploitation⁴⁷ of Meetei by the Brahmins.

⁴⁶ Meetei ritual performance.

⁴⁷ Economic exploitation of Meetei by Brahmins in ritual performances is discussed in his book, *Eigi Wareng* written in 1940 and republished in 2010. Also see, Naorem Joykumar, 2012.

Phulo was also able to see the growth of *Mayang* language through religious performances. He says, “Meeteis are initiated to the language of the *Mayang* through the teaching of *Sankritan*” (Emphasis mine, 2010: 62). This is part of the proselytising process of a community to another faith and religion. This initiation to a foreign language through the medium of religious performance would then explain the inferior status of Meeteilon which was deemed unfit for religious performances. As we have seen before, Phulo made it clear that Meeteilon cannot be studied through *Byakaran* and this was hinted at the imposition of *Byakaran* on Meeteilon. This initiation into the language of the *Mayang* through ritualistic process was successful in creating a state of self-hate,⁴⁸ a hatred for everything that is Meetei. This successful instillation of self-hate into Meetei community germinated into the belief that the language was not good enough for ritual performance and literary expression. This whole analysis of self-hate runs through the writing of Phulo (127-128).

Writing in general and history writing in particular as a form of intellectual exercise was an important act of recovering oneself: both from the perceived loss/lack and the misrepresented narrative provided by *them* (Mayangs and Meetei Brahmins scholars). In the first instance, the void created by lack or the loss of history has to be *filled* by the act of re/writing it. It also attempts to establish a linearity of community history that not only provides answer to other communities who look down upon the Meetei community for the lack, but, also meets the requirement of the new modern community. In the second instance, as a result of the lack of history, “they” are writing the history of Meetei. Insincere history produced by the Mayangs serves their benefit on two accounts: one is the larger process of acculturation into Hindu fold and the other as a means of livelihood. Therefore, it is important for Phulo, that Meetei

⁴⁸ Self-hate is a term that is closely associated with colonialism and this term I owe to M.S S. Pandian.

themselves partake in the making of history of the community as it lends authenticity and could challenge the misrepresentation. Similar effort was also seen in the literary sphere with Lamabam Kamal and Khwairakpam Chaoba pioneering it.

The contemporary debate on the question of representation can be best encapsulated by the objection made by Dalit-Bahujan groups on the republication of B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) with an introduction by Arundhati Roy in 2014. Such a critique of representation questions the ethical responsibility of the alleged saviours of the oppressed, the privileged Indian Savarna-Brahmin community (Hatred, 2015) Roy's representation of the underprivileged, here the Dalits, the erstwhile untouchable community, disrobes their right to represent themselves and further subjugates them in the production of knowledge. This reproduction and repackaging of Dalit-Bahujan knowledge as consumable knowledge to the taste of savarnas only after their intervention like the one in question manifests/epitomises the deep seated discriminatory structure of Indian Hindu-caste structure. What becomes apparent from the repackaging of *Annihilation of Caste* (hereafter AoC) with an introduction by Arundhati Roy is that unless a Savarna intervenes and mediates on the "raw" and unrefined knowledge of the Bahujan, their knowledge cannot be accepted as knowledge. This critique can be read as a critique and the very problematic of the concept of what constitutes a knowledge. An "inalienable" caste supremacy of Brahmin as preacher and preserver of knowledge are once again re-established in this case. Roy had to take the "trouble"⁴⁹ (read purification) to read AoC for the impure AoC to reach the bookshelf of the same class

⁴⁹ In Arundhati Roy's response to Dalit Camera's questions which is made available in the book *Hatred in the Belly* (2015).

of people. Such a structure of knowledge production and consumption only augments the vilification and misrepresentation of facts drawn from the realities of the Dalits.

In a similar pattern of elevation of vernacular knowledge system as knowledge, one is not surprised to see the dominance of western academia that not only decides what is knowledge and what is not, but also, without their touch/intervention/presence, something is not qualified as knowledge. Similar example can be traced to how present education system continues to reinstate “discovery” as a phenomenon that is qualified to be attributed to western geographers in particular, and dominant section in general. Suresh Canagarajah explains such practice and system of qualifying knowledge in his *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing* (2002). He analyses different patterns and practices of academic writing and publication, although, for the time being, I am tempted to look at his clinical analysis of a news report in the *New York Times* of April 1997. The report was about the discovery of a Dinosaur fossil in China by an “international group of team of palaeontologists” (1). The report glossed over the fact that the fossil was already discovered by a Chinese farmer. His name is not mentioned, however, the names of the international team and the university were prominently highlighted in the news print. Canagarajah says,

The point to note about this is not that the role of the West since the dinosaur fossils’ belated discovery gets a lot of prominence. This is after all expected. A newspaper published in the United States for a readership primarily based here will narrate events from that standpoint. Therefore, the persons and events in the remote Third World location are eclipsed by the Western academics and their activities. More troubling is the impression created by the report that the Western intellectuals should get a sole credit for the fossil discovery... The

unqualified manner in which that statement is made reveals that its intent is to claim nothing less than global relevance. *The whole world is claimed to know about the fossils after the announcement at the Philadelphia conference.* It is as if the finding is real only when the West gets to know about it. It is at that point that the discovery is recognized as a “fact” and constitutes legitimate knowledge. *Whatever preceded that point is pushed into oblivion.* (my emphasis, 2)

He further questions the haughty intellectual narcissism of the West, “They quickly concluded that their presence was immediately needed in China” and “they overrode the local knowledge of the Chinese scientists on their find on their own soil is striking” (2) and this only reveals the attitude of the Western scholars and media. In a similar explanation of the existing power structure, particularly in terms of knowledge production, Dalit-Bahujan’s critique finds companion with the third world critique of first world. However, the irony of the critique of the first world by the postcolonial/third world nationalist is their inability to see them performing and maintaining the same hegemony when it comes to their own location. Introduction to the book, *Hatred in the Belly* (here after HITB), succinctly puts it, “In essence, Ms. Roy’s introduction and S. Anand’s attempt to make a scholarly intervention on Ambedkar’s personal and textual legacy exemplifies the symptomatic supremacist attitudes of the ruling class Indians. It could at best be seen as being afflicted by an unexamined saviour syndrome and at worst, as a display of casual racism” (4). The collection of essays that appear in the book attempts to hollow out the meritocracy claim of the Brahmin-savarna class of India; and, leave open the hypocrisy of their brahminic, patronising academic intervention. In the republication of the classic text, AoC, one is not surprised to see the supremacist assumption that their intervention

will gain Ambedkar's text the critical and scholarly attention it deserves. However, what are the important points of objection that HITB raises apart from the textual mistakes and historical amnesia of the savarna class? Further down in the introduction, one crucial point is made,

But *Hatred in the Belly* is not about Arundhati Roy or S. Anand or this particular project alone – that's a vulgar understanding being sought to be spread by certain detractors. It's against brahminic hegemony at large. Though the critiques were triggered by Navayana's new Annotated and Critical Edition of Dr Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* and Arundhati Roy's introduction to it, the issues raised by the writers, collectively referred to as the 'Ambedkar Age Collective', in this book, covers a much wider range of hegemonic endeavours to erase, derogate, suppress or appropriate many epistemic tools of resistance against caste, over the ages. So it is as much about the RSS's attempt to hinduise Ambedkar as it is about the Roy-Navayana project, and much more. (4)

The last sentence of the above quote is crucial for us to come back to the issue raised by Phulo. His project on Meetei writing their own history and particularly the quote that I have used before, is also to resist this very same manoeuvring of the ruling class that "erase, derogate, suppress or appropriate many epistemic tools of resistance against caste, . . ."

Phulo's criticism and attempt to relate with the whole question of representation and the production of knowledge is important to understand why certain section of people, mainly the outsiders, continue to intervene in knowledge which is not theirs. Such intervention very often, not just violates the right to

represent oneself, but it misrepresents and demonises the community that the author claims to represent or write about/for. There has been an overwhelming assumption that certain class can produce knowledge. This is the relationship between Phulo's objection against the history produced by "them" and the global politics of knowledge production and representation. His point that "them" writing about Meeteis, stating that Meeteis are ignorant and uncivilised, cannot be simply pushed aside, but should be connected to colonial discourse. He further says that "they" sell their books back to the Meetei. This exercise of knowledge production is still relevant in the case of Manipur.⁵⁰ According to Phulo, this vicious circle of vilifying a community through misrepresentation only to be sold back as knowledge to the same community is nothing less than a deliberate attempt at dehumanisation through the denial of self-representation and dominance. Such hegemonic oppression of a community through writing, for Phulo, should be countered by writing. This will be achieved via education, and by departing outside Hinduism because, for Phulo, education has been made insignificant by Hinduism over song, music and other non-productive social engagement. Emphasising on education, he says that because *mayang* have received education before the Meetei and the Meetei have depended on their language for religious purposes, Meeteis considered the writing of *mayang* legitimate knowledge.

I have tried to argue in this chapter that Phulo's departure from Hinduism with the formation of *Apokpa Marup* was a significant moment of exit for the Meetei which will define the course of Meetei movement in the twentieth century. Unlike in

⁵⁰ See, Kishalay Bhattarjee, *Che in Paona Bazar* (2013); Sudip Chakravarty, *Highway 39* (2012); Deepti Priya Mehrota, *Burning Bright: From Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur* (2009); Neelesh Mishra and Rahul Pandita, *The Absent State* (2010); C. Balagopal, *On a clear Day We can see India* (2013) are just few examples of recent works on Manipur. As Phulo speaks of his time, the same mode of knowledge production continues to happen as the means for the production of knowledge are often in the hands of the privileged Indians.

the first chapter, Phulo brings a rupture and makes himself and his ideas inappropriable (Williams, 2010) by the dominant Hindu public of Meetei society. Because of his inappropriability, it became a political necessity for the Meetei-Hindus to pronounce Phulo as “mad” in order to delegitimise and reject his new idea of Meetei community. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the rise of Meetei movement in the form of script revivalism is assertive and attempts to purge away the Hindu elements. I also expand further the discourse of “mad” Meetei as a discursive category.

Chapter Three

Language, Script and the Meetei Movement

*They [national languages] are the opposite of what nationalist
mythology supposes them to be, namely the primordial
foundations of national culture and the matrices of national mind.¹*

Eric Hobsbawm

In 1978, Yangmasho Seiza led Manipur government issued an extraordinary notice in Manipur Gazette (1978) to constitute an expert committee to select a “correct” and an “accepted” Meetei *Mayek*.² This expert committee held twenty-four meetings from December 1, 1978 to July 31, 1979,³ which eventually gave way to the present twenty-seven letters Meetei *Mayek*: correct and accepted. The government of Manipur accepted the report submitted by the expert committee on April 16, 1980, and on January 19, 1983, released primers for Meetei *Mayek* (Ningthouja, 2011). The question of correct and acceptable *Mayek* continues to persist and engage within various groups of Meetei revivalists. Such unending negotiations with the *Mayek*, in varied ways, instruct the fleeting nature of identity and how it lags behind the ideal one. Insertion of words like “correct” and “accepted” in the extraordinary gazette

¹ Eric Hobsbawm (2004), p-54.

² However, Prof. Kangjia (1978) asserts that it should be Kanglei *eyek* and not Meetei *Mayek*. He believes that nomenclature like Meetei *Mayek* does not cover all the communities living within the territory of present Manipur. Kanglei, according to him can be generic term because it does not represent one community. In the book, he mentions of Hill MLA walking out of the assembly hall when the bill for the script was introduced as Meetei *Mayek*; and, he takes away the labour of tribal community in reviving the script.

³ However, what is interesting to note is that the Manipuri Language Act 1979 recognised Manipuri as the official language of the state. It further adds that official Manipuri is Meeteilon written in Bengali script and spoken by the majority of the Manipur population (Malem Ningthouja, 2011:217). This makes an interesting point to refer because when an expert committee constituted by the government of Manipur to select an acceptable script, the same government went ahead to pass a language act that recognised Bengali script.

provides an interesting clue to the hitherto script debate and the impending future of Meetei script at the end of committee's proceedings. The mounting pressure of the script revivalists nudged the state government into forming an expert committee. It also points to state government's role in the consolidation of identity that was considered unacceptable by the dominant and Hindu Meetei people. However, delay for more than two decades in the implementation of the script exposes state's apathy and the contesting Meetei identities. The movement and demand for *Mayek* revival (within the socio-religious movement), and the government's usage of the terms like "correct" and "accepted" (acceptable) script in the government gazette,⁴ establish that Meetei *Mayek* exist/ed and a contesting space was available for its selection. It has been made a contested space for its history of encounter with Hinduism and the changes that were brought as a result of it in language, script and history. It also informs that there was contestation over the question of correct Meetei script. Why does this contestation prevail is discussed later in the chapter.

The script is not a mere visual representation of a sound and language⁵ in the case of Meetei. Out of the government approved twenty-seven letters script, the first eighteen letters are considered foundational/original letters of Meetei *Mayek*, also known as *eepi Mayek*. They are carved out or created from the image of different body parts and read/pronounce the name of each body parts in Meeteilon (Meetei, 2016; Yumnam, 1992). Not only this, but Meetei numerals are also supposedly a creation based on the image of foetus; each numeral represents the nine months'

⁴ Besides government's used of these words, other script groups have also urged the warring groups to settle on an agreeable script.

⁵ However, T.T. Haokip (2013) seems to suggest just the contrary. He propagates that script and the language do not have any relationship apart from mere representation of acoustic by visual representation. Therefore, he suggests, as a corrective measure to pass the present political stalemate in Manipur, that Meetei should use Roman script instead of demanding for Meetei script at the moment. Also, the tribals of the hills should not oppose the Meetei language written in Roman script, as the language has assume the role of lingua franca even amongst the tribals.

journey of the foetus inside a mother's womb (ibid). This attempt to re-establish an ontological and epistemological connection between Meetei *Mayek* and Meetei community was the main concern of the 1978 expert committee meeting. Bangla, Roman, Devanagari scripts were not acceptable and hence asserted for a distinct script derived from the *Puyas*. This assertion for a distinct representation and revival of the script from the *Puyas* is representative of resistance against homogenisation and assimilation under Hindu tradition. The revival of Meetei *Mayek* marks a significant departure from the hegemony of Hinduism and Bangla. However, there also was an equally strong rein to freeze Meeteilon within the fold of the Indo Aryan tradition (Khelchandra Singh, 1975). This resistance against Hinduism envisages another "solidity of a single community" and "hypnotism" (Anderson, 2006:27) for realising a nation imagined predominantly by Meetei.

The quotation of Eric Hobsbawm used here as an epigram above, though concerns language per se, can be used to understand the dynamics of script selection in Manipur. Testimony to this is the ongoing insistence that the government approved twenty-seven letters Meetei *Mayek* is unacceptable by Yumnam Tamphajao group who himself was a member of the expert committee. The dynamic of script selection and the politics involved are discussed in the later part of the chapter. Questions that Tamphajao's group throw against the approved script, particularly against the inclusion of nine *loms* (additional letters) testifies the untranslatability of an authentic tradition of the historic past in the present. As asserted by Lisa Mitchell (2009), language is not an area solely reserved for the linguist, the language and script movement of the Meetei are primarily led by figures from a non-linguistic background who have worked on Meetei religion, revivalism and politics. In this

chapter, I attempt to highlight the working relationship between (selection of) Meetei *Mayek* and revivalism.

There is a general agreement that the arrival of Hinduism in the early eighteenth century⁶ was a major force of change in religion and the perspective, often tyrannical and imposing, was the reason for forbidding Meetei *Mayek* from usage for approximately three centuries in Manipur. However, not taking away the role of Hinduism, it is important to record that it was not the single factor that brought this change particularly pertaining to the *Mayek*. Other factors include colonialism and western education that came as a concomitant import to the native society. Western education and the new script were challenged and confronted by Meetei when it was introduced in the valley. In a small booklet written in Bangla script, Thokchom Mangoljao Singh (1967) says, “The people of Manipur were reluctant to leave their Meitei *Mayek* for Bangla and the script. As a result of which, the new education policy was perceived that it would not survive for long until 1891.” (translation mine, 5). He also points out quoting administration’s report of the year 1892-93 that schools in the (Meetei) locality taught Meetei *Mayek* until 1892. Chongtham Manihar (1996) mentions, though as a form of resistance that the people of Thoubal village refused to learn the new language and script in the late nineteenth century. *Cheitharol Kumpapa*,

⁶ However, there are scholars who maintain that Hinduism had reached Manipur as early as 15th century, which is to say that the conversion to Hinduism in the 18th century Manipur was not sudden. Many of these scholars tend to Hinduise/Sanskritise Manipur’s pre-Hindu history and faith. One can see the works of Atombapu Sharma, Khelchandra, Nilakanta etc, and many others who believed and propounded that the present state of Manipur was indeed the Manipur of Mahabharata. Such claim has been refuted by pro-Meetei historians and cultural analysts. These thesis and anti-thesis represent two streams of ideology: first, those who believe in the supremacy of Aryan race, devoted Hindu and pro Indian; second, pro Meitei who contest the assimilative and imposing Hindu ideology, who traces their origin in Southeast Asia, or represent Kangla, as the origin of Meetei community etc.

the royal chronicle of Meetei kingdom, is a living example that bears witness to the continuing existence of Meetei *Mayek*.⁷

John Parrat (2005) states that:

... the recruitment of Bengalis and of Bengali-speaking Manipuris from Cachar as teachers. This led to the use of Bengali script for writing Manipuri, even though it is linguistically quite unsuitable. The use of Bengali script (along with Devanagiri) in Manipur has some earlier precedents. It was also used for the earliest printed books in Manipuri. But it was largely due to western education that the Bengali script became the common medium for writing Manipuri, in which school texts, and later an extensive 20th-century literatures were written. (26)

He further states that because of this nexus between Bangla script/language and the Bangla speaking employees who “most of the administrative posts at this time were held by” them, “a strong pro-Bengali lobby existed, and this was supported by deeply committed Vaishnavs” (ibid). The Manipur state Durbar also rejected a recommendation to drop Bangla and Sanskrit from the curriculum in 1914 from the Director of Public Instruction (Assam). Therefore, vernacular Tangkhul was scripted in Roman while Meeteilon began to take a different route in Bangla (ibid). Another factor that helped in this transition is the printing press (John Parrat, 2005:25).

William Pettigrew, a Christian missionary in Manipur, was aware of the existence of an *archaic* Meetei script and deeply interested in studying it. Pettigrew, along with Wahengbam Yumjao, an amateur archaeologist and a member of Manipur

⁷ However, experts of Meetei *Mayek* points out that *Cheitharol Kumpapa* is also a living example of how the script had undergone change and drastically since the arrival of Hinduism.

state Durbar, advised Grierson in the compilation of his monumental book *Linguistic Survey of India* regarding Meetei script (John Parrat, 2005:26-27). This particular statement of John Parrat invites for a crucial scrutiny in the light of the long-standing script movement of Meetei. The script that Grierson recognised in his work as Manipuri script was the *Konung Mayek* (Royal script) which is an adaptation of Devanagari script. This script, as we will see below, is not the archaic Meetei script which is revived in the present and approved by Manipur government. It is important to note that Grierson's script will find its patronage and support from certain groups which propagate or which do not challenge the oppressive structure of Hinduism.

This chapter provides a historical account of the Meetei script movement of the twentieth century. However, the main focus of the chapter is on the expert committee meeting of 1978-79 to understand the politics of selection of "correct" and "accepted" *Mayek* wherein confrontation between different scripts are used for further understanding of the nature in which Meetei community gets constituted. Roughly, script and language movement of Meetei of the twentieth century can be classified for the convenience of our study and analysis into three different periods. The first phase constitutes Phulo and other literary initiatives which had an assimilative and docile⁸ assertion within the larger fold of Hinduism. This period has been discussed in the first and the second chapter of my dissertation. Phulo's invention of the Meetei script and the research on language in the 1930s, and the spread of his movement after the formation of *Apokpa Marup* in the 1930s and Meetei *Marup* in 1945 (May 14) in

⁸ I have used the term in retrospection. In its own right, Phulo's religious and language assertion was radical which I have elaborated in the first chapter. I used the term docile to mean in relation with the present religious and language movement which began from the late sixties of the last century. Both Phulo's and modern Manipuri literary language assertion carried strong Hindu elements, which is to say that, the context in which they worked were Hindu dominated, therefore, their assertion for identity in linguistic (religious) line was within the fold of Hinduism. For my argument on this, please refer my first and second chapters.

Manipur valley as part of the larger politico-religious movement gives us a glimpse of an interesting and complicated coalescing of script, language, and religion. This complicated blend of script, language, and religion pervades the larger discourse of language and script debate in Manipur in contemporary times as well. The decades between late 1950 till the end of Meetei *Mayek* expert committee meeting in 1978-79 can be considered as the second phase: the phase of manoeuvring. During this time, we have seen meetings and conferences conducted at the level of *leipak* (land or nation) by different civil societal and religious groups. The period of implementation that took about three decades can be considered as the third phase. This period can be presumed to have started from the early part of the 1980s when the state government accepted the recommendation submitted by the expert committee of Meetei *Mayek*. The selection of Meetei *Mayek* was determined by the overarching ideology of revivalism and identity.⁹

The formation of the 1978-79 expert committee of Meetei *Mayek* was preceded by several important conferences held in *leipak-ki* level.¹⁰ The Meetei word *leipak-ki* carries a significant political meaning and needs to be understood in relation to history and the hitherto political assertion of the second half of the twentieth century. The word *leipak* stands for “land”, and with the suffix, *ki* becomes “for the land”. Therefore, those conferences can be interpreted as conferences held “for the land” and nation on the one hand; and, at the level of the state, as a unit of India, on the other. However, if we look at the original Meetei word *leipak-ki*, one finds that it is not just for “land” but also carries an emotional meaning and relation with an idea

⁹ Coalescing of script, language and religion will be further elaborated in the second phase of the language movement, particularly so in the script conference of 1969. See, Sohini Ray (2009).

¹⁰ A pamphlet published by Joint Action Committee for Meetei *Mayek* in the year 1984, titled, “Epanaat Epunaatta Karemkaithainaaba Touganu, Meetei Mayekta Singnaba Touganu” (Do not Challenge and Mock at our Ancestral Tradition and Meetei *Mayek*).

of “community”, ownership, and loyalty to the *leipak*. It gives a sense of national importance, and also a sense of nation-al belonging. *Leipak-ki*, however, at the same time is contained as a unit of a nation when we understand the term in relation to the present political arrangement. Within this understanding, *leipak-ki* becomes a sub-national category. According to Ibomcha (2002), as many as four *leipak-ki* conferences were held from 1958 to 1972. Such emphasis on *leipak-ki* reclaims authenticity and legitimacy of Meetei community and nation.

Before entering into the detail of the proceeding report of the expert committee meeting, it is important to give an account of a special book written by Kangjia (1978), who was also a member of the expert committee, titled *History of Kanglei Eeyeks*.¹¹ This book was published just before the commencement of the expert committee meeting and was meant to serve the urgency of having a book on Meetei language and script. Urgency of having this book was determined by a desire to have a linear, an unbroken history of the community and to claim authenticity of the script which Kangjia endorses in the meeting. This book was also written as a challenge to the existing narrative of Meetei history and language. In the book, an inclusive linear history of Kangleipak is posited to de-legitimise Aryan-Hindu tradition. In the meeting, Kangjia presents the same history and argument on behalf of his script as available in the book. He, in the book, suggests that instead of Meetei *Mayek*, the script that was sought for revival and approval in the committee meeting, be named *Kanglei Eeyek*. For him and many others, who are demanding for a change of name of the state, from Manipur to Kangleipak, this proposition for a different nomenclature of the script would bring peaceful co-existence and claim a shared

¹¹ *History of Kanglei Eeyeks* was published in the month of August of 1978. However, Kangjia has already published a smaller version of the book in July of the same year. Both the books carry similar arguments and claim similar history.

history between hill and valley. In the first page of the book, Kangjia reasons out the following points:

The script that was used and that will be used will be known as “Kanglei Eeyek”. The nomenclature “Kanglei Eeyek” brings Hill and valley as one. “Manipuri Mayek” dismantles the history and origin of Kangleipak as the term Manipur was derived from *Mahabharat*; further, as the case is, there is none who can prove sufficiently that Mahabharat’s Manipur is indeed Kangleipak. The term Manipuri Mayek cannot be used to represent the script. On the other hand, Meetei or Meitei Mayek is a narrow approach, and it amounts to an inability to recognise the contribution made by Hill/tribal leaders like Kabui Tomba, Salang Maiba and Khurkhul Tepiba. (Translation mine, 1978:1)

Kangjia continues to substantiate his argument, “Manipur” is a Sanskrit word, and therefore it should be changed. He asserts that *Kanglei Eeyek* was used by both Hill and Valley and to name it Meetei or Meitei *Mayek* reflects a narrow outlook (2). His central argument of the book is that because present Manipur was known by Kangleipak, and it is “acceptable” to both Hill and valley, the proposed script should be called *Kanglei Eeyek*. The urgency of having this book is highlighted in the introductory note written by the publisher, an organisation for the protection of *Kanglei Eeyek*. This book was written within four days and took only two days for printing. Addressing both the author and the one who was in charge of printing, Puyam Iboton, the publisher (editor)¹² invoked *leipak* and the responsibility that was taken for the land by them. It was a sacrifice carried out for *leipak*.

¹² Interestingly, editor as a designate was given to Puyam Iboton and it is interchangeably used with Publisher. In its introductory notes, Iboton mentions of the formation of an editorial board to select a person who can write a book on this subject. Therefore, when editor is put within parenthesis to

In the book, Kangjia, like many of his contemporaries of Meetei revivalism, attempts to immortalise the script and places his *Kanglei Eeyek* as the oldest script available. This assertion is in line with the belief of the Meetei revivalists that Kangleipak was the first dry place on the earth and the term Kangleipak also implicates that – *Kang*- dry; *leipak*- land. Further, Kangjia advocates the case for eighteen letters script and exemplifies that the eighteen letters are derived from *Wakoklon Puya*. For many Meetei revivalists, *Wakoklon* is considered as the most authentic Puya which describes and records Meetei *Mayek*. In the fifth chapter of the book, he argues that the eighteen letters *Kanglei Eeyek* has been in use for 4000 years until the time of King Pamheiba, from whose period Hinduism became a state religion. The point here is not to challenge or support the historical claim but to analyse the truth claims that feed into making of a nation/community. This history challenges the dominant narrative of Manipur history¹³ that claims 2000 years of civilisation that goes back to 33 AD with Pakhangba as the first king. Both 4000 and 2000 years of civilisation serve as a positive claim in affirming the nation. Such projection of history works as a means through which it could shoulder with other ancient civilisations. However, Wahengbam Ibohlal's *History of Manipur* (2007) interposes itself as a challenge to these modes of historiography and the truth claim of many revivalists.¹⁴

implicate the interchangeability with publisher, it is most likely that it meant the editorial board which was also the in charge of the publication, and, Puyam Iboton was the chief of the editorial board.

¹³ See the Introduction to this dissertation

¹⁴ See "Introduction.", Ibohal argues that the dominant civilisation narratives that push back, particularly to the year 33 A. D. was part of the larger game of distortion and destruction of history by the new Hindu religion. For Ibohal, to accept 33 A. D. as the beginning of Meetei monarch has the danger of succumbing to the very design that the politics of "two thousand years of history" narrative attempts to fight against. According to him, Pakhangba as the first king of Meetei or Kangleipak should be fixed somewhere between sixth or seventh century.

Kangjia maintains that the eighteen letter Kanglei *Eeyek* was still in vogue even after King Pamheiba (1978:23). However, with the arrival of Hinduism, different sounds which are not part of Meetei sounds started to creep in the language (21). In pursuance of the legitimacy of his script, he defines *Puya* and the definition of *Puya* was central in the manner in which *Mayek* was decided in the expert committee meeting of 1978-79. Before defining *Puya*, Kangjia sets the context and gives an account of a larger scheme of fabrication and inclusion of foreign sounds and letters in the Meeteilon. As late as the second half of the twentieth century, there was a deliberate attempt to fabricate history and culture of Manipur/Meetei, according to him, *Govinda Lila Bilas* was brought out before the public and claimed that it was written during the reign of King Bhagyachandra (1764-1798 A. D.) in Sanskrit. However, after a court case, he says that it turned out to be a fabrication and this book was not written during Bhagyachandra. He further says in *Yumsalon Puya*, which was probably written after the arrival of Hinduism contains 305 Bengali figures and numerical figures were written in Bangla; and the *Puya* begins with an invocation of Sri Ram Chaltra. This *Puya* also contains pictures of Hindu mythological figures like Sita and Hanuman (Kangjia, 1978:31-32). The *Yumsalon Puya*, thus, is an impure, illegitimate *Puya* according to Kangjia. It contains sounds like /b/, /r/, /g/ etc. and their corresponding letters which, he claims, were later included in the language after Hinduism. According to Kangjia, *Yumsalon* can be reinstated as *Puya* only after such contaminations are removed from it. He says, “If the *Puya* is not rewritten in the eighteen letters; if the *Puya* does not remove all the added/foreign letters and elements for the satisfaction of the people [of Manipur], no one will accept this *Puya* as *Puya* of Kangleipak” (Translation mine, 32). Essentially, Kangjia’s idea of *Puya* is that it should be written in the *original* eighteen letters and should have been written before

the arrival of Hinduism. Such fixed definition of *Puya* by revivalists automatically delegitimises those *Puyas* written after the arrival of Hinduism or under the impact of Hinduism. This fixation of definition bears a strong reference point in the way Meetei's past gets to be translated in a certain way for contemporary political discourse. In 1992, there were several meetings conducted to select an authentic and supreme *Puya*. However, due to the difference of opinion amongst various Meetei revivalist groups, the meetings could not agree upon a single *Puya*.¹⁵

After the deliberation at Mapal Kangjeibung conference in 1969, a decade later, Yangmasho Sheiza led government constituted a twelve-member Meetei *Mayek* expert committee to “find out the correct accepted (sic) ‘Meetei Mayak’ (sic) and develop the same in the interest of the public.” (Manipur Gazette, 1978). This committee of experts was selected and invited according to the hitherto existing various groups of Meetei *Mayek*. These various groups represented different political and religious positions, and these positions became apparent in the face of the discussion. The twelve members of the expert committee were:

1. Chief Minister of Manipur as Chairman,
2. Agriculture Minister of Manipur (L. Chandramani Singh) as Convener.
3. The Directorate of Education (S) of Manipur as Member Secretary
4. Prof. Mangi Ningomba, JNU Centre, Canchipur as member
5. Ningombam Iboyaima, Thangmeiband, Imphal as member
6. Laishram Kulachandra, Malom Changangei, P.O. Malom as member
7. Yumnam Tamphajao, Keishampat, Imphal as member
8. Prof. W. Tomchou Singh, D.M. College, Imphal as member

¹⁵ See, *Inaatki Asengba Puya Khannanaba Neinaba* (A Consultation to study the original Meetei Puya). Published by the organising committee of the meeting, 1992.

9. L. Mohindro (Jayantakumar), Kwakeithel, Imphal as member
10. Prof. Kangjia Gopal, Oriental College, Imphal as member
11. S. Rohinikumar (Iboyaima), i/c Librarian, Manipur Secretariat as member
12. Miss Sorijini Devi, Archivist, State Kala Akademi, Imphal as member
13. Two experts from outside of Manipur to be co-opted by the committee

The report of the expert committee meeting proceedings and a small booklet on the History of Meetei *Mayek*¹⁶ (Ibomcha, 2002) furnish different representations for various scripts. In the Meetings of the expert committee, the report says that Kangjia Gopal and Yumnam Tamphajao proposed the eighteen letters Meetei *Mayek* derived from the *Wakoklol Thilel Salai Amailol Pukok* and *Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailol Pukok Puyas*¹⁷ respectively. Both of them spoke from the position of the centrality of eighteen letters in Meetei community barring the difference in the representation of *Lom* (additional nine letters). Laishram Kulachandra supported the eighteen letters with the *Lom*. L. Mohendra spoke in support of Yelhou Mayek of Naoria Phulo; Prof. W Tomchou supported the 27 letters proposed by Kulachandra, however, with the omission of two vowel sounds: *ee* and *oo*. Prof. Tomchou advocated that the selection of Meetei *Mayek* should base its resources from different *Puyas* and not just one *Puya*. His emphasis on different *Puyas* in the plural was important considering his disagreement with the eighteenth letters *Mayek* proposed by Kangjia and Iboyaima which has single *Puya* as a source for their claims.

¹⁶ Interestingly, in this booklet, Mangangcha Keisham Ibomcha, does not claim as the writer of the book in a conventional sense, instead he uses *Ithokchaba*, a Meetei word which can be roughly translated as copied or written from an available text or a translator. It does not carry the meaning of authorship which we usually associate with. A Meetei word for the author would be *A-eeba*.

¹⁷ There are marginal differences in these two *Puyas* which can be ignored. The only difference in the title of the *Puyas* is the inclusion of the word *Hilel* in the second one.

However, the small booklet provides various proponents of Mayeks that existed outside the purview of the expert committee. Some of them were, *Konnung Mayek/Mayek* 35 endorsed by Sahitya Parishad; a different 18 letters *Mayek* endorsed by *Asengba Mayek Sandokpa Leisem Lup*,¹⁸ Imphal, which has more dissimilarity than similarity with Prof. Kangjia's and Tamphajao's eighteen letters *Mayek*.

During the call for the selection of Meetei *Mayek* and the formation of the expert committee, *Apokpa Marup* and *Meetei Marup*, followers of Naoria Phulo, raised serious objection on the manner in which the committee was constituted. They warned the government of serious repercussions if the committee was not dissolved. One of the reasons was the perceived undemocratic procedure in the selection of expert members and questioning the whole premise of the term *expert* itself. In the pamphlet published on November 30, 1978, these two groups claimed that Meetei *Mayek* is older than many scripts which are currently used by different communities across the world like Hebrew, Devanagari, Latin, Roman etc. A major objection on the expert committee appeared on the second page of the pamphlet where it problematically supported the Grierson's Manipuri script. The political and historical contradiction of the pamphlet lies in its endorsement of the books written by scholars from "India and Meetei pundits" who claimed that that Meetei script was derived from scripts available in India. They also provide Sahitya Akademi of Manipur finding that the *ancient* script of Manipur was Palini and quotes *Linguistic Survey of*

¹⁸ The name of the organisation bears an interesting narrative of opposition and challenge in the face of the larger *Mayek* movement which claim authenticity. Organisation's names can be translated as the Organisation for the Promotion of Original Script. Interestingly, their script, in the first instance, was discovered by another organisation, called *Ariba Meitei Mayek Thiba Committee* (Committee for the Research of Ancient Meitei *Mayek*). The claim of authenticity by the former organisation for their script is authenticated by its familial predecessor committee. Both these groups work on the basic theoretical assumption of revivalism, authenticity, original, ancient etc. like other proponents, but this group, was not given a voice/representation in the expert committee constituted by the government of Manipur.

India which stated that it was borne out of Bangla script as reasons for raising their objection against the expert committee. This reasoning for their objection against the committee holds little support if the revivalist objective of Naoria Phulo is taken seriously. Phulo's desire to depart from the episteme of *mayang* and establish an independent Meetei episteme is reverted back to defeat the political mobilisation around Meetei revivalism. It further says that because *a Mayek* was already defined and accepted as Manipuri script by the "scholars", they find the constitution of an expert committee a futile exercise. This threat and the unusual support to this particular script and not to the eighteen letters are subtly linked with *Yelhou* or Naorio Phulo's script's close resemblance with the Devanagari script. This also explains the departure of Meetei revivalists from Phulo in the second half of the twentieth century. This pamphlet worked as a pre-emptive measure to contain certain script movement; to delay the government approved twenty-seven letters scripts from implementation in the schools. *Yelhou Mayek* does not have a source *Puya* for establishing authenticity of its script unlike others and this pamphlet manifests political strategy to thwart the new Meetei *Mayek*.

In the eleventh meeting of the expert committee, on February 9, 1979, the committee concluded that there were two schools of Meetei *Mayek*: *Yelhou Mayek* of Naoria Phulo and the other remaining groups (Report 1:6). Discussion on *Yelhou Mayek* is minimal in the report. However, one sees that the second school of *Mayek*, even though agreed on the first eighteen letters as the foundational Meetei script, had serious disagreement on the issue of *Lom eyek*, the additional nine letters. The argument for and against the inclusion of *Lom*, and how they will be represented if they had to be included in the new Meetei *Mayek* revealed varied ideological positions of each group which were determined by their idea of Meetei community. This

discourse on the additional nine *Lom Eyek* reveals the forms of Meetei nationalisms that were emerging in the second half of the twentieth century. Their varied political positions on *Lom* demonstrate their desire to be part of either the larger Vedic-Indic or Southeast Asian narrative.¹⁹

In the context of language and script, there was a general agreement with most of the expert committee members, except for the proponents of Yelhou *Mayek* that the *Mayek* should be revived from the *Puyas*. The reason why Yelhou *Mayek* had a short stint in the committee proceedings is emanated from the basic assumption that script and language are crucial in the formation of identity and this identity should have a historical correlation with the *Puya*. Therefore, a script for Meetei cannot be *invented*, as in the case of Phulo, but *Puyas* should be the sole source for its *re-discovery*. The government gazette (1978) for the formation of the expert committee intentionally or otherwise alluded to the rhetoric of revivalist. It says the committee is constituted to “find out the correct accepted “Meetei Mayak” (sic) and develop the same in the interest of the public.” To “find out the correct accepted Meetei Mayak” (ibid) poses more theoretical and practical impossibility than the Meetei revivalist themselves. Stressing upon “correct” and “accepted” in the quote, the idea of “correct” is contextual, and it is determined by the power dynamic. The notion that a correct script was achievable was a flawed proposition when the notice itself has “acceptable” as a clause. The question of an acceptable script supersedes the question of a correct script. This larger question of correct, acceptable and original will be discussed in the course of the chapter.

¹⁹ See, Partha Chatterjee. “Introduction.” (2015)

The report further reads that the second school of script arrived at an agreement upon fifteen letters and a further discussion on the three letters will be scheduled later (Report 1:6 and 16). Although, the inclusion or the non-inclusion of the three letters are not part of the report, but it is indicated that these three letters are included as the first eighteen letters of the twenty-seven letters constitute the foundation of Meetei *Mayek*. Para two and three of the report (16) shows that though there were differences and variations within the second school, the committee believed that they would be able to arrive at an agreement. The committee decided that once the second school agreed, it will be compared with the Yelhou *Mayek* and the committee will decide on the “correct” script. However, the report does not specify whether the second school compared their script with Yelhou *Mayek* or not, but it is fathomable that the latter has been systematically put aside through reasons stated above.

As mentioned earlier, the main contention of debate on the selection of the Meetei *Mayek* by the experts was between groups within the second school of script over the question of *lom*. Both Kangjia and Yumnam Tamphajao insisted that the eighteen letters are sufficient for writing Meeteilon. According to them, these nine *loms* represent various sounds which became part of Meetei sound after the arrival of Hinduism in the eighteenth century. These nine *loms* are derivatives of the foundational eighteen letters, i.e. *eepi Mayek*. They argue that *loms* replaced the position of the “original” sounds and letters, for example, /p/ was replaced by /b/, /t/ by /d/ and /k/ by /g/, etc. For Prof. Kangjia and Tamphajao, these line *loms* represented the Hindu world that intruded on the sacred eighteen letters *Mayek*. However, the majority of the expert members preferred distinct symbols for each *loms* and both Kangjia and Tamphajao conceded to the distinct representation of *loms*.

The next issue was the question of visual representation of each *lom* sound.

Kangjia prefers the *loms* to be represented with a *lum* (point) on the right-hand side of the *Eepi* letters of which the *loms* are derivative of. For example, the derivative sound “Gok” (Appendix, pic. 4) can be represented by marking a point on the right hand side of the original *Eepi* letter Kok (Appendix, pic. 6). However, Tamphajao, instead of marking a *lum* on the right side of the *Eepi* letters to represent a *loms*, he preferred the *lum* under the letter (Appendix, pic. 7). Laishram Kulachandra proposed different symbols for these nine *loms*.²⁰ These symbols are supported by W. Tomchou.

Tomchou argued that it is scientific to have distinct symbols for each sound; therefore, the additional nine *loms* should have their distinct symbols. Prof. Mangi Ningomba also endorsed Kulabidhu’s *loms* citing similar reason as Prof. Tomchou. He added that separate symbols for *loms* would give convenience in writing and it was the correct way of representation. Prof. Tomchou further argued that distinct symbols of each *lom* were not alien but were used in the *Puyas*. He promised to present the *Puyas* as proof in the next meeting of the committee. Apart from his “scientific” and “logical” argumentation, he also attempted to draw legitimacy from *Puya*. However, he could not place them before the expert committee, as he promised, the following *Puyas*:

1. *Nongshaba Puya*
2. *Yumdaba Puya*

²⁰ These nine symbols are taken from G.H. Damant’s “The Old Manipuri Character,” which he described the character as “. . . a form of the Devanagari, and it was in all probability introduced from Bengal along with Hinduism by some wandering sanyasi in the reign of the Charairongba, which flourished about A.D. 1700; at least there is not an evidence to show that a knowledge of writing existed among the Manipuris at any earlier date.” See this essay in Sanajaoba (2003). Damant’s fifty-five letters script, was later used by G.A. Grierson to support the existence of a script introduced from Bengal in his “Meithei Language” in the same anthology, pp. 646-654. But later essay was part of his Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. III, Part III, 1927, pp. 8, 20-33, 40-43.

3. *Nongchup Haram Puya.*

Similarly, Laishram Kullabidhu could not provide the *Puya* before the committee as he promised. He informed the committee that due to the demise of one Shri Nityai who was in possession of the *Puya*, he was unable to place the *Puya* before the committee as proof. However, in the earlier meetings, Tomchou and Kulachandra placed *Laxmi Charit*, *Hakchangi Laifamne*, and, *Hidak Lanthakki Maram* written in Meetei *Mayek* to prove that the *loms* endorsed by them were in vogue (Report 1:22). Therefore, the committee decided to enter this particular point/proof to mark that *loms* have been in use by Meetei from an earlier time (Report 1:23).

Kangjia, raised his objection to Tomchou's claim that *loms* were already existing symbols. He provides proofs from various *Puyas* to show that the original *eepi Mayeks* were used in place of *loms*. He placed a Meetei script primer which according to him was used during the reign of king Bheigyachandra before the expert committee. In this primer, new letters were encircled to establish that they were new entry in the primer (Report 1:23). He argues that the *Wakoklon Puya*, which was his main source of the script, demonstrates the use of *loms*. He reiterates further that the *Puyas* which were written in eighteen letters before the arrival of Hinduism are authentic *Puyas* implicating that *Puyas* written after the arrival of Hinduism cannot be termed as *Puya*.²¹ According to him, *Wakoklon* anticipated the arrival of additional sounds and the conversion of *loms* from the original letters are shown in the *Puya*.

In the committee meeting held on March 8, 1979, the committee places the following two points: a) that roughly before king Bheigyachandra, *loms* were not used in the books written in Meetei *Mayek*; b) that the eighteen letters are the original

²¹ The same argument is available in his *History of Kanglei Eeyeks* (1978).

letters; c) nine more additional letters were added to represent the new sounds (Report 1:24). Kulachandra raised his objection on these two points. He alleged that Kangjia and Tamphajao influenced the committee members; and, he made a strong case for his distinct *loms*. He says that just because some letters [read *loms*] which are used in the *Puyas* [not all, but in their *Puya*] are similar with other letters [read Bengali], it cannot be the logic for the claim of Kangjia that they were an alteration of the latter. This became an interesting argument for the case on authentic *Puya* and its concomitant language, script, and identity debate.

Here, *Puya* requires a redefinition. It becomes imperative for us to see how these two sets of groups, within the same school of script, use *Puyas* of different eras/centuries. Kangjia and Tamphajao, used *Puyas*²² that were written before the arrival of Hinduism (as they claim), and the other used *Puyas* which were written after the arrival of Hinduism (they do not refute). Such classifications and the use of certain *Puyas* of certain periods/centuries revealed their ideological positions and their affiliation with certain nation-states.²³ Kangjia and Tamphajao's idea of Meetei identity or the new criteria for reimagining Meetei identity is fixed, untainted and invented in the past. Their notion of community is animated by their sharp assertion that "present needs to be changed, that it is our task to change it" (Chatterjee, 1994:151). The second group also believed that the script should be derived from the *Puyas*, that Meetei identity needs to be revived, but the source *Puyas* are written or rewritten after the arrival of Hinduism. Interestingly, none of them refutes the charges

²² Kangjia's and Tamphajao's *Puyas* also face the question of authenticity from Prof. Tomchou in the later part of the report. One of their claim of authenticity is based on the use of eighteen script. Also, see, Sohiny Ray (2009).

²³ Partha Chatterjee argues that different historical claims are a reflection of political mobilisation of the present. These different claims are indicative of one's desire to be part of the same claim. for example, Meetei Brahmin's claim of Aryan connection was a manifestation of their desire to be part of the Indo-Aryan tradition and Indian state. See "Introduction" (2008)

made by Kangjia and Tamphajao regarding the authenticity of their Puyas. Their attempt in the meeting, when the familial relation between Puya and *Mayek* has become inevitable, is to broaden the definition of Puya instead of asserting or attempting to find an antique Puya. On the contrary, they alleged that *Wakoklon* was not an authentic *Puya*. This informs, to invoke Chatterjee (2008), one's desire to be part of a certain ideology, nation, history, etc. Tomchou claim of the non-authenticity of *Wakoklon* and Kangjia's insistence on the same Puya are part of their larger claim to history and nationhood. Kangjia assertion for an eastern connection through his historical claim was thwarted by Tomchou's insistence on Hindu-lineage garbed behind scientific approach to the *Mayek* debate. In the meeting, Tomchou and Kangjia represent two streams of Meetei consciousness: one is the normative Meetei and other the "mad." The normative Meetei represents by Tomchou is open, inclusive, scientific and not against Hinduism. On the other hand, Kangjia is fixed, anti-Hindu and non-scientific in its approach to *Mayek* revivalism.

Tomchou alleged that the *Wakoklon Puya* was not an authentic *Puya* as some parts of it were rewritten and some parts were copied from other *Puyas*. He also alleged that there were new non-archaic words in the *Puya*. According to him, page number 5, 6, 12, and 13 of *Khununglon Puya* are similar with 15, 16, 17, 28, 34, 39, 42 and 49 pages of *Wakoklon*. He further alleged that the handwriting of the "original" *Wakoklon* was similar with Thoukachanba's, the person from whom the *Puya* was recovered. Tomchou raised seven points to show that *Wakoklon Puya* was not authentic. About this allegation made by Tomchou, Kangjia said, Tomchou's *Khununglon Puya* cannot claim authenticity; therefore, his allegation on the basis of it cannot hold any ground. There was predictable line of arguments and disagreements between Tomchou and Kangjia throughout the proceeding of the meeting.

In the course of the meeting, it became evident that the fate of Meetei identity will be fixed, more or less, on the decision taken by the committee on the question of representation of *loms*. As mentioned earlier both the groups of the second school of script agreed on the first eighteen letters as the primary letters. Its source was *Wakoklon Puya*. Proponents of *loms* Mayek with *lum* did not call the attention of the committee for the important fact that the *loms*, endorsed by Tomchou and Kulabidhu were indeed available in G. H. Damant's (1877) "Old Manipuri Character"²⁴ which G. A. Grierson²⁵ (1927) had used in his monumental *Linguistic Survey of India*. In Damant's finding, old Manipuri script from which these *loms* were essentially reproduced, described them as a form of Devanagari, and the Bengali *Sanyasi* have introduced them in Manipur along with Hinduism.²⁶ The "scientific" reasoning of Tomchou and others for their endorsement of distinct *loms* letter, informs an implicit undercurrent of holding onto the religion that the Meetei revivalists were seeking to annihilate. It is this politics that should help understand the debate on Meetei *Mayek*, *lom*, Meetei numeral, etc. and not the scientific arguments of Tomchou. The alleged scientific approach to script selection and the dominant Hindu public and mind foreclose revivalist argument and its negotiation with modernity (Aloysius, 2009; 2013). Foreclosing of revivalist arguments is a discursive exercise derived from the modernity of the capital time (Chatterjee, 2009) where ideas antithesis to it are dubbed as pre-modern. In the meeting, Tomchou's arguments fall in the grey area between science [rational] and Hindu. Kangjia's assertion that *loms* can be symbolically represented by deriving from its original *eepi* letters was contested and his "rational" arguments implicate and allege Kangjia of orthodoxy and pre-

²⁴ See, G.H. Damant. "The Old Manipuri Characters," originally appeared in Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol. XLVI, part I, 1877, pp. 36-38, and later reproduced in Sanjaoba (2003)

²⁵ As reproduced in *Manipur* (2003)

²⁶ See footnote number 29: 631.

modernity. However, in Kangjia, there is a politics of refusal to participate in a debate where rationality was the pre-condition for the debate. Kangjia seems to be aware of the discursive production of the rational domain where his Meetei assertion in terms of the script would only tender submission to Hinduism. His consistent rejection of Tomchou's rational argument and/through invocation of *Puya* for substantiation of his point is an indication of Meetei revivalists' attempt to free themselves from the hegemony of Hindu-mind and to establish a non-dependent Meetei. This refusal to participate in the reaffirmation of Hindu mind/public prefigures as the condition for terming them *angaoba*. Such discursive production of the category of *angaoba* Meetei has its roots in the early twentieth-century literature²⁷ whereby Phulo was made an *angaoba* and an *angaoba* cannot contribute, by logic, to society/community.

In the meeting held on April 10, 1979, the committee took votes and agreed to include the nine additional *loms*. The report says, "The committee has decided to include the nine letters [loms or additional] as the *majority* of the members have agreed to it" (Translation and emphasis mine, Report 1:29). There was a minor disagreement on how these additional letters were to be read/pronounced. The first group (Kangjia and Tamphajao) believed that they should be read according to their names of the body parts from which these letters are believed to have been carved out; the second group (Tomchou), on the other hand, believed that it was not scientific (once again) to read in the manner of the first group. Tomchou preferred, instead, to pronounce the *loms* according to their sounds in the Devanagari. The committee decided to pronounce the *loms* as derivatives of their original letters. Also, in the case of numerals, three groups were propagating different numerals: a) numerals as used in *Wakoklon* ; b) international numerals because there were no numerals in Meetei

²⁷ See chapter 1.

Mayek;²⁸ c) Bengali numerals because it is already familiar with the people as there were no numerals in Meetei *Mayek*. The expert committee decided to approve numerals available in Wakoklon while Tomchou and Mangi expressed their dissent.

The notion that any disagreement or confrontation between the two sections shall be resolved by vote by the committee defeats the whole purpose of constituting an expert committee to find the “correct” script. However, on the other hand, it served the purpose for finding the “acceptable” *Mayek*, as the majority voted in favour of the distinct symbols for the *loms*. What may not be the “correct” was “acceptable”. And this “correct” version of the *Mayek*, if we agree upon that it existed in the past, the untranslatability of it in the twentieth century was caused by the politics of finding an “acceptable” *Mayek*. What are the factors that have made for this correct version to revive itself? Revivalism of script in particular and revivalism in general as a political movement is often conceived as an untranslatable, un-realizable political movement in the face of the *changed* socio-political environment.

Meetei identity that was formed on the basis of *Mayek* has two elements; one is the “authentic” identity represented by the original eighteen letters; and, second is the Hindu elements represented by the additional nine letters. Amalgamation of these two distinct elements, from different traditions of script and language, and its attempt to solidify Meetei identity continues to be challenged from different quarters which believe that Meetei *Mayek* should constitute only eighteen letters. The last meeting of the expert committee was held on July 31, 1979. The report of the expert committee was submitted to the then Chief Minister of Manipur, Yangmasho Sheiza on August

²⁸ It is also because *Wakoklon* is not authentic according to them and Wakoklon numerals are similar with numerals in Bharatiya Prachin Lipimala.

6, 1979 by the convener of the committee, L. Chandramani, Agricultural Minister of Manipur.

After the government of Manipur had accepted the script in April 1980 submitted by the expert committee of 1978-79, transition from Meeteilon/Manipuri written in Bengali script to Meetei *Mayek* was not easy. Apart from logical and material insufficiency, there were resistances from other script groups. In a book titled *Siningde* (Do not want to die), Iboyaima (1982), one of the members of the expert committee, explains the reasons behind the writing of the book and the deliberateness of the title he has selected for the book. In an introductory note, Kangabam Keso, president of Kangabam Leikai Yaifa Lup, while pointing out the flaws of the government approved Meetei script, says that the book was written to rectify certain loopholes of the script and to make the script suitable. However, he cut the sentence short without explaining the question of suitability and suggested that a new committee of the script should be formed to settle the script issue once and for all. Iboyaima encapsulates the dilemma of a script proponent and a revivalist when he explains the title of his book *Siningde* in the introduction. He says that the people of this land are akin to death as they fail to understand their identity. His book works as an intermediary force to bring back lives to the dead Meetei. Thus, *Siningde* as a term stands for a figurative force that calls for realisation and consolidation of Meetei identity before it perishes. The realisation of Meetei identity is linked with the settlement of Meetei *Mayek* and professed that he, metaphorically representing his community, yearned for a recognised Meetei *Mayek* before he dies. This urge is animated by delay and deferment in the implementation of Meetei *Mayek* in schools. He says,

This book on Meitei *Mayek* titled *Siningde* was necessitated by constant embarrassment and shame suffered due to adoption of other's script despite having our own; the community and society are able to overcome from its inferiorised self to reclamation and a new sense of identity; the desire to introduce the script in the schools, so that the common people become aware of the script en mass, doing so would ease the burning sensation that fills my heart for not able to communicate with the people; and, lastly, the book is written to get recognition and respect from the government of India.

(Translation mine; Iboyaima, 1982:1)

A few paragraphs later, Iboyaima alludes to the discomfoting and ambiguous mode in which the script selection went through in the expert committee meeting which the Thoukachanba²⁹ group continues to raise. He says that there is a mismatch between *Mayek* that was recommended and the *Mayek* approved by the government of Manipur. A case was filed in the high court against the script approved by Manipur government by *Yelhou Mayek* group. The Joint Action Committee for Meetei Mayek, Imphal, dated August 3, 1984, published a strongly worded pamphlet in the form of a warning asked people who are spreading lies about the approved *Mayek* to come out in public. They see that there was a group of people who are deliberately delaying the introduction of the script in schools.

Introduction of Meetei *Mayek* in the schools of Imphal valley (not in the Hills of Manipur) in 2006³⁰ replacing Bangla script is a significant change to ascertain the

²⁹ Thoukachanba is the person from whom the *Wakoklon puya* was recovered. His followers continue to reject the twenty-seven script Meetei *Mayek* because it violates Meetei philosophy and identity. They also assert that the twenty-seven letters are not the script which was recommended by the expert committee.

³⁰ <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=26..120315.mar15>.

different phases of revivalist movement and the reoccupation of the formal/public/pure by the impure Meetei element. As discussed in the introduction, there was a deliberate protection of *Mayek* in the form of *Puya*³¹ from the kings, and the Hindu public was strongly felt by Meetei scholars in the eighteenth century and later due to confiscation and burning of them. As a result, *Puyas* were kept away from the king and the general public. It is significant that Meetei revivalists turn to *Puya*, which was condemned and made illegitimate after and by Hinduism, for *Mayek* revival. The movement to reoccupy the modern-secular spaces of education, newspapers and other aspects of modernity, by scripts recovered from the “profane” *Puya*, condemned in the private Meetei space, hidden inside the personal locker and wrapped in layers, sometimes buried, unsettles the hegemonic Meetei-Hindu public space. The revival of the desecrated script and language in the educational institutions im-purifies the purity of Meetei-Hindu public. I argue that the larger movement and effort to reoccupy Meetei public by “impure” and “desecrated” self of Meetei is the larger project of Meetei movement and revivalism.

However, history of Meetei *Mayek* is still unknown to many in Manipur. The political implication of this lack of knowledge can be attributed to the manner in which the Meetei *Mayek* activists were perceived in the Meetei society. As we shall see later in this section, Meetei as a political category and the *Mayek* revivalists have always remained outside the acceptable and normal Meetei due to their appearance and ideology. They are often referred to as *angaoba* for the same reasons. Perhaps, the role of Hinduism is also to suppress the *angaoba* self — “the original Meetei” – in

³¹*Puya* is broadly understood as manuscript written in Meetei *Mayek* on Meetei religion, belief, customs, law etc. After the arrival of Hinduism, as much as 124 different *Puyas* were burnt by the king under the instruction of his guru, Shanti Das in the eighteenth century. Meetei *maichous* (scholars) kept several *Puyas* in their personal possession, notwithstanding King’s order to submit them in the palace for burning them.

every Meeteis for the proliferation of the former to oppress the latter. Suppression of Meetei self for more than two centuries has pushed the “original” Meetei into their objurgated private domain. This private domain has been rendered part of a sub-conscious realm. The Meetei who is exhibited as “good Meetei” is also discussed in the first chapter, and “good Meetei” is the amalgamated form of both sanitised Meetei and the Hindu. In the “good Meetei” “original” Meetei is a repressed identity due to the oppression of Hindu purity and rationale. The *angaoba* Meetei is tamed, and the expression or the reappearance of the repressed Meetei in the public attracts criticism and censorship. I argue that this censorship is primarily for maintaining status-quo of Hindu society. And if it fails to control the repressed Meetei, their appearance and voice are once again made illegitimate by terming them *angaoba*.

When Manipuri Central Library was burnt down by Akaba and his groups in 2005, it was perceived as an act of madness. But, the mad Meetei was also provoked by the Meetei-Hindu public by deferring the introduction of Meetei *Mayek* in the schools. Official website of Manipur Central Library captures the cultural gaps between *angaoba* Meetei and the “good Meetei” It says, “The Manipur State Central Library was established in 1958. Its office complex at Keishampat [Imphal] was burnt down by *miscreants* in April 2005, destroying thousands of books and other valuable documents.”³². Subhir Bhaumik reports in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC News) about the incident as “Taliban style”³³ Because of such a strong distaste for Meetei revivalists, dominant Hindu-Meetei society paid negligible attention to their work and “sacrifices”. When Meetei *Mayek* was introduced in the schools of Imphal valley replacing Bangla script, it was received as an imposition on the one hand, and

³² <http://manipurartculture.hadrontechs.com/manipur-state-central-library.html>.

³³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4443565.stm.

an unceremonious abrupt change to an unknown script, on the other. I believe that these two different strands of perception were a result of the Hindu mind and mentality of Meetei society. In his introduction to *Meetei Mayekki Waari Leekhun* (2002), Mangangcha Keisham Ibomcha encapsulates the movement thus:

Since 1930 onwards, few elders took up the initiative to discuss on Meetei *Mayek*. They were ardent supporters of culture, language and script of this land and believed in the revival of them. All of them were not well *educated* and as a result they were looked down and mocked at by the society. ...[today] *Mayek* which is introduced in the schools, used in the newspaper and in various signboards of institutions and shops, whether or not the *Mayek* is right or wrong are because of the labour and dedication of those elders who were called *mad* by the society. (Emphasis and translation mine, Introduction, no page)

In another instance, L. Chandramani, convener of the Meetei *Mayek* Expert Committee, in its report of the meeting of the committee reiterates the damning of the Meetei revivalists by the larger Meetei society. He writes, “Meetei *Mayek* literate and researchers were called *mad*, people who have lost sight of contemporary trend” (Report 1:1). He further says that Meeteis have forgotten that they had their own script and accepted Bangla script as their own script. Terming of the Meetei revivalists as *mad* reflects the social and political engineering that would benefit the dominant Hindu ideology. Production of Hindu ideology as a dominant mode of thinking in the Meetei society was achieved by ostracisation of Meetei revivalist and terming them “*mad*.” Terming the agents of revivalists “*mad*” was the first step for

declaring their movement illegitimate and non-modern who are behind time.³⁴ The report further mentions that the society that represents the dominant ideology and religion has made attempts to make it a public issue and humiliate the script activists. Toijam Thawailenpa, formerly Toijam Birchandra, whom I have met as a part of my field work shared his humiliating experience while researching and promoting Meetei *Mayek*, history and philosophy of Sanamahi. He was excommunicated by his locality and he still carries the idea of being mad, defined and attributed by his society.

The rise of the anti-Hindu religious movement in Cachar and in Manipur valley was resisted by Hinduism, particularly through the pronouncement of illogical dictum *mangba* (pronouncing somebody as impure). Naoria Phulo was excommunicated by his society under this norm. Likewise, in Imphal valley, for other various reasons as well, Takhellambam Bokul and other followers of Naoria Phulo were excommunicated for raising and challenging Hinduism. Proponents of Meetei and script revivalism fell outside the ideologically prescribed social concept of good/normal Meetei and thus produced a social and religious binary: Hinduism-Sanamahi/Bangla-Meetei *Mayek*. The general consciousness of Meetei society, then and now, to borrow Thawailenpa³⁵ was/is formed by Hinduism. Therefore, from the above two references (Report 1; Ibomcha, 2002) and the personal account of Thawailenpa,³⁶ the current Meetei society continues to look at Meetei revivalist and their work with suspicion, they are mocked at and call them *mad*. This derisive reception of *Mayek* proponents can be ascertained apart from the hegemonic presence

³⁴ Also see, Malem Ningthouja's analysis of Meetei revivalist in terms of modern and pre-modern and how they are perceived by the general Meetei public (2011).

³⁵ Thawailenpa is one of the important figures who have devoted and sacrifice for Meetei *Mayek* in the second half of the twentieth century. He lives in Imphal with his vast archive on Meetei history and *Mayek* movement. He acted as an advisor of MEELAL that spearheaded the *Mayek* movement in the post twenty-first century.

³⁶ In personal conversation with Thawailenpa during my field work in October, 2015.

of the Hindu mind, through the binary opposition of modern and traditional. They are often termed as people who lag behind from the modern, progressive human civilisation. The history of human civilisation is a linear progressive narration.³⁷ When a (pre-modern) category like revivalism³⁸ appears in the secular time of the capital, it is termed as *mad*. Therefore, in such a binary understanding of society, Meetei who resisted Hinduism were/are seen as the appearance of the pre-modern Meetei.

Toijam Thawailenpa, during my field work in October 2015 answered to my rather meek questions on this particular incidence of burning the Central Library. I was not sure how he would respond. He said that one has to look at the history of the script movement to understand this. Since the early part of the 1980s, despite governmental instructions to start teaching Meetei *Mayek* in the schools, it was deferred due to “political influences”, and this “influences” for him was the Hindu mind of the ruling class. He continued his struggle for almost thirty years. He said, many *Mayek* proponents left their jobs and sold their lands in order to meet the expenses of teaching Meetei *Mayek* in different parts of the Imphal valley. The long-standing demand of the *Mayek* revivalists was contained by assurances. Implementation was delayed by a court case against the government approved twenty-seven letter script. The frustration that resulted from a deferred dream led to drastic action which would shake and shock the people and the government, Thawailenpa explained. It is at this juncture that Akaba led group set the library on fire.

Thawailenpa was firm; he said they knew they had to do “something” and that

³⁷ James Scott. *The Art of not Being Governed*. (2009).

³⁸ However, Thingnam Kishan (2011) maintains that the Meetei society does not fit into modern and pre-modern binary as he believes that the conflict in Meetei society is the clash of two traditional societies – Bengla and Meetei.

something was left to Akaba. At last, the government introduced the script in the schools in 2006.

That act, for them, was a desperation and the last choice available. Although this act had the potential to reinforce the perception of the *mad, radical, fanatic*, becoming mad and fanatic was a sacrifice they had made for their community. Therefore, the delay in the implementation of *Mayek* for more than three decades after the approval was seen as a ploy of the dominant Hindu-Meetei to protect their interests. This demand for implementation of *Mayek* was a direct challenge to the autonomy of the Meetei Hindus – in language, history and institutions. This deferring of *Mayek* introduction in the schools was a weapon and logic through which the *angaoba* Meeteis were compelled to act in ways in which they could be defined as *mad* Meetei. This tactic was served to meet the larger agenda of maintaining the status-quo (of Meetei Hindu society).

Chapter Four

Armed Resistance, Revivalism and Gender

This chapter is an attempt to make a connection between armed resistance movements of Meetei, Meetei revivalism and the question of gender. By doing so, the chapter tries to draw a different trajectory of Meetei movement by deconstructing the existing history. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part provides a brief history of the armed resistance/movement of Meetei community. However, it does not delve into other diverse aspects of armed resistance like micro-study of each group, their influence among the people, the role of the Indian state, and the fallout with the people whom they claim to represent. In the second section I attempt to establish a discourse around two figures: Hijam Irabot and Naoria Phulo, so as to trace and generate a different ideological and historical consciousness. In this part, the political reasons for the emergence of the armed resistance movement are discussed in an attempt draw a genesis of its emergence beyond Hijam Irabot. The problematic aspect of attributing the genesis of armed resistance to Irabot is described here. The third part of this chapter looks at the question of gender and its relationship with the revivalist assertion of Meetei identity. It attempts to trace the evolution of the gendered figure, “Meetei Chanu” in the twentieth century.

I

The history of armed resistance movement in Manipur in the twentieth century can be traced back to the Kuki Rebellion of 1917. However, the movement which is specific to the Meetei is generally traced back to Irabot in the late 40s of the last century

(Kshetri, 2006; Parrat, 2005). Hijam Irabot, before he started the armed communist movement, had led the anti-feudal movement, campaign against the Hindu religious orthodoxy and played a major role in the *Nupi Lal* (Women War, 1939). Irabot's significance can be located in the armed movement's "intent on overthrowing the state administration by violent means" and in the demand for the "abolition of the 'fascist' Nehru government from Manipur and the withdrawal of the Indian military" (Parrat: 131). Even though Irabot's movement was short lived, the armed movements of the 1960s which drew inspiration from his legacy, were formed with a precise agenda of liberating Manipur and forming a pan-Mongoloid nation from the yoke of Indian state.

The armed-struggle-for-social-change narrative manifests a radical political assertion. There have been movements in the in the subcontinent and elsewhere, for example, the Maoist-Naxal movement and the movement for self-determination in Kashmir, to overthrow what the natives believe is "the oppressive Indian-state." The national narrative of protection of the natives and the history of the armed movement in Manipur, are often narrated at the cost of ignoring historical precedence.¹ This inability to record and recognise genesis and history of the movement yield rhetorical/political aggression that terms the movement as that of the *deviant* youths. This has often led to what may be called invitations pouring in every August 15th from the government/state to the "deviant" youths to join the "mainstream" society. Such a

¹Recent writings, Kishalay Bhattarchjee, *Che in Paona Bazar* (2013); Sudeep Chakravarti, *Highway 39* (2012); and Nilesh Mishra and Rahul Pandita. *The Absent State: Insurgency as an Excuse for Misgovernance* (2010) are few important texts that exhibits mainstream bias in reporting and understanding issues of the Northeast India. In the concluding part of *The Absent State*, the authors misrecognise history of armed movements in their effort to misrepresent the movement for mainstream consumption. They say, "Here is an example of the farce that rules the lives in these states: two fringe militant groups are fighting Indian security forces in Manipur, but their main demand is a separate state in neighbouring Myanmar" (265-266). A total clean chit is given to the Indian state for the 70 years long armed conflict in the region, for the corruption, for degenerating communities etc.

call from the state not only infantilises the movement but also works as a powerful apparatus to derecognise history, while at the same time legitimising the term “troubled periphery” (Bhaumik, 2009) which is used to describe this geo-space. The politics of trying to mainstream the troubled youth implicates a normative space i.e., the “mainstream” in terms of affiliation, ideology etc. as the rightful place. Barring a few, Indian academia at large, refuse to place/engage armed struggle in its totality which includes both history and polity. History as a methodological tool is used to deconstruct the state narrative that prioritises integration and denies the agency of protest to the region/state. The purpose of this part of the chapter, therefore, is to put forth a historical precedence for the movement in Manipur so as to assert its legitimacy as against the statist rhetoric of “the deviant child of the nation.”

As has been mentioned before, Hijam Irabot occupies an important space in the history of the emergence of the armed movements in Manipur. Therefore, it is worthwhile for us to remember that the armed movement in Manipur has its root in pre-independent India; or to be precise, in the chaotic, political turmoil and instability of the late 1940s in the Imphal valley. Irabot’s days as a free man came to an end on September 21, 1948 (Kshetri, 2006: 60), which also gave birth to the beginning of the armed struggle movement. Irabot dedicated his life for the poor and fought against the feudal and unjust royal kin until his death. During the tumultuous political instability in the Indian subcontinent, the proposal for the establishment of Purvanchal Pradesh was rejected by Irabot and his party. In a meeting that was held on September 21, 1948, at the heart of Imphal city at Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU) Hall, peasant supporters of Irabot took out a rally against the proposal which resulted into firing by police at Pungdongbam. As soon as he received the news of violence, Irabot went underground. As Kshetri Rajendra says, after Pungdongbam incident, “mass arrests

became the order of the day and a warrant was issued to arrest Irabot and his co-workers of the Krishak Sabha and Praja Sangha by the Interim Government of M. K. Priyobrata. Also, allied organisations of Irabot such as Mahilla Sammelini and Communist Party, were declared illegal” (61). A year later, when merger with or “annexation” of Manipur by the new Indian state was complete, Irabot was reported to have stated that “now Manipur is finished” in anger and despair (ibid, 62). In the year 1950, Red Guard, a secret organisation was formed by the communist party. The main objective of Red Guard was to collect arms and ammunition with a view to overthrow the government of India (ibid, 62-63). This growing armed rebellion was also noted by the government of India. *The Times of India*, dated February 28, 1951, reported a statement by the Home Minister in the parliament (63). His attempt to work with the communist parties from Burma, fighting for independence to form an “‘independent Socialist Republic’ in Southeast Asia” was unrealised due to his untimely death because of typhoid in September 1951 (64). After his death, the armed movement remained dormant for nearly two decades.

The political aggression of the Indian state brought 2000 years of Manipur’s sovereignty to an end after the controversial merger agreement of 1949 and “persisted in the minds of people and there are still sections of people who feel that the 1949 merger was a mistake and a folly” (Kshetri, 85-86). As Kshetri puts it, for the first time, after Irabot, the circumstances that led to the merger of Manipur was questioned in the 1960s. Economic backwardness, lack of opportunities and “step motherly treatment,” added to the wounds of the educated youths who were beginning to see the severity of demoting from a sovereign state to a part-C state. At this instance of collective anxiety, the younger generation blamed Hinduism. As Kshetri observes, the general mood of the youth of Manipur was that Manipur was paid less attention by the

Indian state because Meeteis were Hindus. During the early era of India's independence when Jawaharlal Nehru was occupied with nation building, Meeteis were seen as a harmless and non-problematic population because they were Hindus and the Centre took the issues of Manipur for granted (89). All these factors contributed to the emergence of armed movements in the late 1960s, according to M. K. Priyobrata. He says,

Early when the People Liberation Army (P.L.A.) started its activity, I was paid a visit by some armed youths who told they were P.L.A. They wanted to know who was at the root of the merger. They said they had met Sri S. Krishna Mohon. He is one of the first Manipuris to register as a congress worker from Manipur. He was minister in-charge of Finance and Sri R.K. Bhubansana, the Congress President and the Revenue Minister in my Interim Council, August 14, 1947 to October 15, 1948. They, the P.L.A. said they were sore on the merger. I asked one why he became insurgent. He said he earned many prizes at sports meet at D.M. College. When he applied for a post in the Police he was asked Rs. 10,000. In number of cases that came to light after the arrest of insurgents, they mentioned asking for bribes as one of the main factors for driving our youths to insurgency. Behaving civilly gave Manipur no advantage. Nagas had obtained many advantages and their district had been given Statehood. (1988: 139)

What is suggested here is that the merger with India has brought corruption to the state. The civil behaviour on the part of the people of Manipur did not accord them any extra attention unlike in the case of the Nagas. It is not surprising that this particular mode of understanding is shared by many. However, what is not interrogated honestly is the fact that the armed groups have been foregrounding the

illegitimacy of the merger agreement between the King of Manipur, Bodhchandra (1941-1949), and the Indian state which brought Manipur under the suzerainty of Indian state. As M.K. Priyobrata (1988) points out, the emphasis on corruption and unemployment as being the reasons for the emergence of armed movement made the larger issue of merger agreement inconsequential. The question of identity and self-determination are absent in this discourse.

If we look at it closely, Meetei polity were in the hands of Meetei-Hindus during the merger period whether it was for or against the merger. Laishram Dhanabir says that Meetei youths who raised pro-India slogans at Mapal Kangjeibung during the merger period were the ones who took up arms against the same state.² Kabui (1988) also said that many pro-Hindu Meetei wo/men expected a respectable place in the new Hindu world. However, it was the disillusionment with the Indian state that Meetei took up arms against the state. In both the narratives, the Meetei movement finds no trace.

However, in a survey conducted by Kshetri in order to understand the cause for people joining the armed groups, he found that “Meeteistic/Revivalistic” and “History” attracted more number of people than any other factors like the economy (2006: 104-106). This survey also reveals that the general notion that “. . . the [armed] movement emerged mainly because of the economic under/non development and the increasing problem of unemployment . . . ” in Manipur is wrong (106). However, it is important to note that there cannot be a single factor for its emergence and there are other important factors which led the people to join the movement. This survey and the finding is particularly important to deconstruct the mainstream

² In my personal conversation with him during my fieldwork in first and second weeks of October 2015.

narrative of the movement which often attempts to project it as the movement of the unemployed, deviant youths, and the making of economy as the determining factor. This particular brand of reasoning is dominantly circulated, as I have discussed above, as a tool for politics and policy of mainstreaming of the deviant youths. Now, what this survey primarily does is to challenge the dominant narrative by prioritising the question of Meetei identity and movement. By bringing out these important factors, it departs from the narrative of the state and makes mainstreaming impossible.

On the whole, it can now be said that there is no single predominant factor motivating the participants to join the movement. As shown by the analysis of the tables (Kshetri, 2006), the general accepted view that economic frustration, unemployment and the economic backwardness drove the participants towards insurgency does not hold. This is not to say that the economic factors did not play an important role. It did but what must not be overlooked is the fact that deep down the Meetei psyche there runs a strong current of Meeteistic feeling which are historically and politically driven. *“The memory of Manipur’s past sovereignty and the 1949 merger agreement signed under dubious and questionable circumstances still exists in the minds of the Meeteis.... They are not yet fully reconciled to Manipur being a part of India.”* (my emphasis; Kshetri, 2006: 106). The emphasis here is to highlight the invocation of the memory of past sovereignty (of 2000 years) and the illegitimacy of the merger agreement signed between the king and the Indian union. In many political propagandas of the proscribed armed groups, similar invocations of past and illegitimacy of the merger occupies the central position.

The first armed movement with an objective to secede from India gained momentum with the formation of United Nation Liberation Front (UNLF) on 24 November 1964. Some would categorise this phase as the second wave in the armed

movement, Irabot's movement being the first one. Interestingly, the President of UNLF was from the Rongmei tribe, Vice-President from Kuki tribe and the General Secretary from Meetei community. UNLF was essentially a group led by angry young men inspired by revolutionary ideas and avowed to secede from India through armed struggle (Kshetri: 92). Another important instance that few know about UNLF is its agenda to consolidate the mongoloid groups of south middle Asia. Pan-Mongoloid Movement (PMM), "in essence [it] was evolved as 'a political formula' to solve the complex political problem of the region." An unsigned and undated eight-page leaflet of PMM makes this point clear, "The Pan-Mongoloid Movement would be able to unify all the sections of the Mongolian Group of people into one solid body and direct the Revolutionary force against the Indian neo-colonialist and overthrow its colonial hold on all of us" (93). Because the existence of PMM was unknown to many, as Kshetri claims, this larger pan-Mongoloid movement is attributed to another armed group, People Liberation Army (P. L. A) (93). To reproduce a quote from the same leaflet of the PMM appeared in Rajendra Kshetri:

... the UNLF made this call for unity and pleaded for a common and 'greater cause – a cause for the liberation of all the Mongolian people of the South-Middle Asia.' 'The Nagas,' it said "want an Independent state, the Mizos too. We people of Manipur are also crazed for the restoration of our Independence which we lost again in 1949. We feel that all of us Manipuris, Nagas, Mizos etc., can join hands and make a cohesive unit by looking back to our ethnic unity and cultural affinity and instead of fighting separately for individual objectives, we can fight for a common cause. That is to achieve total Independence and establish an Independent Sovereign Republic of the people of South-Middle Asia, who hail from the same stock of race." (93)

However, this objective of UNLF fiddled away slowly. In the year 1978, People Liberation Army (PLA) was formed, led by Bisheshwar. The formation of PLA can be traced back to the fallout in UNLF between Samarendra and Sudhirkumar in 1968. Due to this fall out, there was a splinter group called Consolidation Committee (CONSOCOM) led by Sudhirkumar. In the year 1975, while Bisheswar was undergoing treatment for tuberculosis in Dibrugarh, the relationship between Bisheswar and Sidhirkumar fell out. As a result, PLA was formed in September 25, 1978, with the help of China. Some considered PLA as the first ideologically oriented movement in the region since Irabot's movement (Kshetri, 95). It is also the first in the northeast to openly declare itself Maoist.

Apart from these two armed groups, there are few other notable armed groups- Peoples' Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) (Kamei, 2012: 110). It is interesting to note that many of these armed groups have objectives, ideologies, and pragmatics which correspond to each other. However, constant and endemic split of parties open up avenues for bigger scrutiny. One of the members of the founding coordinating committee of UNLF, Longjam Manimohan Singh, was a follower of the revolutionary leadership of Hijam Irabot and he was part of the communist revolution of 1948-51 (ibid: 115). It is likely that because of ideological commitment and common urge to eradicate the rising corruption, UNLF, "After the establishment of the organization, the leaders were engaged in the expansion and consolidation among different peoples and groups of Manipur. In the beginning they tried to contact the leaders of the Meitei State Committee to have a joint front with the UNLF. The Meitei State Committee refused to join the UNLF" (ibid, 116). Such a refusal to join hands is symptomatic of the growing opportunism of the later period of the movement. As

mentioned above, split in the UNLF gave way to PLA, O-faction. Sudhirkumar and his followers who attempted to establish a new armed group movement called the Revolutionary Government of Manipur (RGM) failed to survive in Bangladesh, then Eastern Pakistan (Kamei, 119). After the failure of RGM, UNLF revived its armed struggle and political negotiation with the neighbouring countries. In 1990, UNLF decided to launch an armed struggle against the Indian state for the liberation of Manipur. It formed an armed wing known as Manipur Peoples' Army (MPA) for the purpose. On May 22, 1990, the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front was floated. The formation of this front was to bring a pan-Mongoloid coalition and the front had Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K), United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and Kuki National Army (KNA) (120-121). On its 36th foundation day, it reiterated the demand for liberation of the oppressed people from the Indian Union. A few months before this reiteration, Arambam Samarendra, founder and Chairman of the group was shot dead by a dissident group in Imphal. R.K. Meghen alias Sana Yaima, leader of the group after Samarendra, is currently in the custody of the Indian state.

However, the remaining three armed groups such as PREPAK, KCP and KYKL, alluding to Kangleipak specifically, fight for the self-determination of the state. "The principle objective of the party was to establish an independent State of Kangleipak by removing Indian political parties, their agents and imperial forces" (Kamei, 2012: 125). These groups claim that they stand for the entire population of the state of Manipur (Kangleipak) and vouch to fight for the entire northeast region of Indian Union and Southeast Asia; for the workers and peasants and to strive for a classless society (ibid). KYKL was formed in 1994 after the merger of Oken group of UNLF, Meiraba group of PREPAK and Ibopishak group of KCP. Interestingly, the

immediate objective of KYKL was not the liberation of Manipur from the yoke of the Indian state. It wanted to make Manipur free of *immoral* activities and to curb drug abuse and trafficking. They also initiated an anti-corruption drive in the state. The group launched “Operation New Kangleipak” (ONK), an anti-corruption campaign to clean up the education system in Manipur (126).

II

The emergence of the armed struggle movement in Manipur in the 1960s is characterised by an agenda for self-determination coalesced with the revivalist and the nationalist movement. Revivalist work of the first half in terms of language, history, identity etc. took a sharp turn in the second half when the armed groups became a movement for self-determination. It has become a movement associated with radical and assertive political discourse. In the case of Meetei *Mayek*, as discussed in the third chapter, assertion of Meetei identity is strong and radical. Attempts were made through their movements to reject Hinduism completely. Conglomeration of these two varied yet closed concepts is manifested in the ideology of Meetei armed groups which propagate revivalism of Meetei religion, history and identity. Invocation of the “unbroken 2000 years of history” and the “flawed” treaty of accession as strong cases for their demand of sovereignty and the reason for secession from India intersects with the ideology of the revivalist movement. The pattern of renaming of the members of the armed groups, who had joined with a Hindu name, with Meetei names is a significant symbol for the merger of revivalism and nationalism (Chelliah, 2005). It is also symbolic of the rejection of Hinduism and embracement of Meetei identity. In December-November of 1729, Meeteis were forced to jump into the Lilong River as a

mark of conversion into Vaishnavite-Hinduism with *Nongkhrang* branches in hand (Nilbir, 1991: 123). On 6 October 1974, in the presence of the titular king Okendrajit, a group of Meetei jump into the Lilong River to reverse the conversion and free themselves from Hinduism. This act of reversal is known as *Nongkhrang Parei Hanba*, *Nongkhrang*: a kind of tree; *Parei*: knot; and *Hanba*: Unbinding or undoing (123-24). After this reversal of the conversion, it was declared that “Meetei are free to accept their long lost religion . . .” (ibid: 124). Therefore, joining of an armed group was an act of reversal where, in the case of religion, one jumps once again into the river to mark the end of a Hindu identity. The change of names is an act of bringing the profane Meetei elements to the public. This phenomenon of re-naming in both the realms of armed and Meetei revivalist movements, reflect the growing capacity to exit from Hindu dominance into entering the “trampled” (Jangam, 2015) Meetei identity. It is important to acknowledge that the invocation of an independent history, Meetei culture and religion by these armed groups marked a grand, national imagination that anticipates a revivalism of the past, the culture and religion of which would grow into an independent imagined geography.

In this section, more attention is given to the linearity of the wave that was initiated by Naoria Phulo. It is important to understand this relationship between Phulo and the armed groups however distant it may seem. This is because Phulo has always been denied a respectful place in the general consciousness of the people and his contributions to the Meitei movement/society remained under-acknowledged. I claim that there is a manufactured amnesia regarding and around Phulo by official/state/the elite to keep the masses in oblivion of him while ascertaining the larger historical consequences of contemporary Meetei community. While this issue has been discussed in other chapters, it is worthwhile to once again delve into the

patterns of amnesia. Why this manufactured/selective amnesia is practiced is discussed in the context of ideological differences that existed between Phulo and the society which is/was entrenched in the hegemonic Hindu mind and normativity associated with it. At the intersection of these ideological clashes, an acceptable/normative (good) and mad (bad) Meetei subject emerges. There has been a movement and evolution of these Meetei subjects across time. The formation of a normative Meetei subject is determined and mediated by the dominant Hindu mind/religion. A person like Phulo and his followers are/were pronounced “mad” from the ideological position of Hindu mind. In short, “mad” was/is a pejorative term for Meetei who does not adhere to capital Hindu time and Hinduism. In this larger project of constructing a normative subject, Phulo’s contribution and the figure himself as an important figure is strategically suppressed and elided.

Many have invoked Hjam Irabot, an anti-feudal crusader and a Marxist revolutionary of Manipur, as the pioneer of the armed struggles, perhaps rightly so. However, my attempt here is to draw a different trajectory of history or to broaden the canvas of History where Phulo can be situated as a central figure. For this, I place Phulo as an ideological opponent of Irabot at crucial points (although not always), and his contemporaries in Imphal valley. This point has been summarily described in the second chapter. But, it can be elaborated further in explicating the reasons for stating Phulo and Irabot as ideologically opposed to each other. An analysis of their difference would help in understanding the armed movement from a different perspective. However, my attempt here is not to delegitimise Irabot, but recover Phulo from an uncanny situation that finds a figure like Irabot “suitable” to represent a struggle and not Phulo.

Suppression of Phulo's legacy and contribution from various socio-political and religious movements is part of the convenient and conformist political imperative. Guite³ who argues that Irabot was suppressed from official imagination of the state because he was a communist does not venture to push a little further and look at a figure like Phulo who has been dehistoricised and elided by both official and unofficial memory of the state. Guite further argues that memory of Irabot was preserved by his people (unofficial memory) and thus contributed to the elevation of Irabot from unofficial memory of the people to the official memory of the state. Manipur observes September 30 as Irabot day marking it as a revolutionary and patriotic day. His statue stands tall in front of Manipur University library. In this celebration, what is conveniently suppressed is Irabot's last years of armed struggle for an independent Manipur. How does the state/official memory reconcile with Irabot and his history, his communist ideology, nomenclatures like martyr, or leader of the state? Irabot was a communist who raised war against India. Guite is not wrong here when he looks at the Meetei dominant state and the transfer of unofficial memory to official memory. There is a subtle religious and social implication and understanding between people and the state that made this transfer possible. Failure of Phulo then is the inability to establish this relationship between him and the state. This was because of the fact that Phulo is absent from the unofficial memory of the state usually preserved by the people. The question that needs to be asked is why is Phulo absent.

Irabot, as a pioneer of armed struggle, and the inheritance of that legacy by the armed groups of the state do not sit well with the structure in which Manipur has become a part of India. Induction of Irabot in the official memory of the state, and the

³ Although Guite argues the elision of tribal from the official memory of the state, I use his assessment to similarly understand the structurally manufactured memory and history. See Guite, 2011.

unofficial memory of the common people which kept him alive outside of the state memory, manifest modes that function between the state and its people. This is a simple logic to gather. I argue that the conversion of an unofficial memory to an official memory is possible when the official was a representative or strongly connected to the preserver of such unofficial memory, i.e. the people. The keeper of Irabot's memory shares a common ideological and religious ground with the state which Phulo failed to establish. As explained in the earlier chapter, in a hegemonic Meetei-Hindu public, Irabot was never a "mad" person while Phulo was. Phulo as an intellectual, as an agent of change, as a literary figure, and most importantly, as a person who ignited Meetei revivalism in the early part of the twentieth century, has been suppressed from the unofficial memory of the public. In more than one ways, Meetei community continues to abhor those Meetei who challenge the orthodoxy of Hinduism; it continues to detest the revivalists. The Hindu mind continues to dominate the society which in turn produces the "norm." The unofficial memory of Phulo fails to attract the general Meetei public. Attempts to therefore rechristen Phulo as part of an official memory would amount to rupturing of the affinity between unofficial Meetei memory and the ruling class/State. It is this attempt of Phulo – to rupture Meetei Public and mind – and the resistance of the Meetei public memory to it which precisely makes Phulo different from Irabot.

Irabot's struggle against feudalism is well known, but his contribution was limited to the reformative agenda of the conservative Hindu-Meetei society. This is particularly true of other leading Meetei literary figures as well. His seemingly radical outlook was limited to reforming Hinduism which helped in the consolidation and promotion of Hinduism instead of uprooting it. The ideology of Nikhil Hindu Mahasabha of which he was the Vice President, was guided by an intense desire to be

part of the Hindu world. The manner in which Meetei community remembers Irabot, with respect to contemporary political and identity assertion, speaks volumes of the persisting desire to self-hate i.e. Meetei. Therefore, this dominant mode of thinking assumes the power to declare a person an outcast, mad, or abnormal.

Irabot's taking up of arms and the subsequent underground armed movement after the Pungdonbam agitation (Parrat, 2005: 104), and the larger context of controversial annexation of Manipur, have a strong impetus on the later armed, self-determination movement of the 1960s. Irabot's *Punjibatin* written in 1949, published posthumously in 1989 discusses the capitalist and socialist divide yielding into the pressure of his young comrades to disseminate communist literature in the villages. After this incident, due to the dirty politics of the ruling party along with the new Indian state, his political career came to an end (ibid, 104). “. . . military wing of the movement, the Red Guard, started training in guerilla tactics some eighteen months later [after he went underground]. Thus began the Meetei “insurgency” movement...which have continued up to the present day to press for autonomy or for the complete separation of Manipur from India” (ibid, 105).

It is critical to bring in Phulo and his ideologies for understanding the demands propagated by armed groups. Phulo's idea of reviving Meetei history and identity as well as his movements against the oppressive structure of Hinduism are placed as important ideological support for their political goal. However, Phulo as a figure is side-lined from the narrative of the armed group. Gangmumei Kamei gives the following factors for the emergence of revolutionary movements in Manipur, and these factors are also applicable to the Meeteis:

The revolutionary movements in Manipur are an outcome of several deep rooted factors, namely the crisis of identity which was the motivating factor in the revival of Meitei nationalism, Indian apathy towards the political aspirations of the people of Manipur after the merger with India, economic exploitation and the policy of internal economy followed towards Manipur, the bureaucratic corruption as a result of the imposition of central rule for 23 years (1949-1972), growth of highly educated elite group followed by a serious problem of unemployment of the youths, exposure of the disconnected leaders to the ideas of revolution in many countries of the third world including Marxist ideas. (2012: 105-106)

Besides many other factors for the emergence of armed struggle, “crisis of identity” is important for discussion here. According to Kamei, this crisis of identity was instrumental in the revival/assertion of Meitei nationalism. The cause for this crisis is worth researching further.

Many other intellectuals including Kamei have invoked Meitei nationalism without providing a rightful place for Phulo. My argument is that Phulo was the first person to have felt and discussed this crisis of identity. Quoting himself, Kamei analyses the historical, religious and cultural movements that began in the early part of the twentieth century and argues,

The Sanamahi cult revived the Meitei script, old literature and contributed greatly to the reassertion of the distinct Meitei identity. This movement turns out to be at later stage anti-Hindu and to some extent anti-outsider. This assertion of identity in political system means sovereignty of Manipur, the Meitei cultural tradition and separateness of Manipur from the rest of India...

The Meitei nationalism has been simultaneously aroused... It is strongly felt that the Meitei identity can be preserved and fostered in a Meitei sovereign state... The fear of being swallowed up by the great Indian multitude due to the influx of the immigrants from outside causing immense demographic imbalance and this causing the loss of cultural identity of the people is strongly felt. *The intense search for self identity... is the greatest motivating factor in the revival of Meitei nationalism.* (my emphasis; 2012: 106)

As Kamei puts it, “the intense search for self identity” is the greatest cause for the revival of the Meitei nationalism. Kamei’s “revival of nationalism” has three important instances such as the frequent wars and the conquest by its neighbouring kingdom – Burma; the British conquest of Manipur in 1891; and the controversial 1949 merger of Manipur with India that denied the democratic constitutional rights to the people of Manipur (2012: 104). The legacy of the national feelings aroused in the aftermath of these three events finds its way to the contemporary armed movement. Therefore, he says, “Indian nationalism which tries to accommodate the Meitei identity cannot harmonise the Meitei nationalism” (ibid, 104). Kamei defines Meitei nationalism as “... loyalty and devotion to both the Meitei as a nationality and loyalty to the multi ethnic state of Manipur” (106). “This idea is promoted by the urban elite of Manipur,” (ibid, 106) according to him. M. Priyabrata (1988) seems to agree with Kamei’s proposition. He quotes Kamei at length in his semi-autobiographical account of Manipur and suggests the paradoxical turn of political misfortune of the urban elite youths once Manipur became part of India, as the ground for emergence of armed movement. He quotes Kamei,

It is an irony that the urban elite of Manipur who was a vociferous group in 1949 to merge with Indian Union, in another thirty years, was disenchanted with the

Indian political system. The frustration is due to the Indian apathy to the political aspirations of the people of Manipur. *In 1949 the people did not like the feudalistic monarchy of the king and wanted to enjoy a democratic country like India.* But instead of giving the same political rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, Manipur was put under Central administration for 23 years (1949-1972). The Central rule with its bureaucratic set up produced an adverse effect on the people (139).

Although, it is hard to disagree with the view, as it serves as a window to understand the political aspiration of the elite Meetei-urban-youths, what was fundamentally missing in his approach to the issue is the desire of the Meetei urban youths to be part of the new “Hindu Indian nation.” Democracy as a modern principle against the feudalistic, monarchical society was used as a veneer to cover up the religious affiliation of the youths with the new Indian state. This becomes clearer if we look at the evolution of Manipur State Congress from Nikhil Manipur [Hindu] Mahasabha, its political opposition against Hjam Irabot and the political coup during 1947-1949. However, it is (not) surprising why he missed out on the religious aspect of the annexation/merger. It is clear from the composition of state congress and its ideological leaning towards the Indian National Congress that they had envisaged Manipur as a part of the larger Hindu world; a dignified political status under the new Hindu state. This dream was an accumulation of centuries of acculturation into Hinduism; and, a counter force to another dream: an independent Meetei community which was beginning to challenge this dream from the early part of the twentieth century.

This search for “self” identity of Meetei and their anti-state activities work from the same pedestal from where they identify Hinduism and the state from the same lens. For example, a re-embodiment of Meetei names in their armed movement

does not only signify Meetei revivalism and rejection of Hinduism, but also marks an impediment to the Indian state. Meetei, in both the cases, becomes a legitimate political category to critique and refuse both the forms. This refusal to participate and identify as Hindu and Indian through the embodiment of Meetei names recaptures the collapsing of Hinduism and the Indian state into one in the pre-annexation period of Manipur by elite Meeteis. This discussion has appeared in the first chapter and Phulo in the second chapter in an attempt to break this identification of the latter in his work. Phulo's (2010) assertion that Meetei cannot be studied under the structure of *Byakaran* but *Wahouron* reemphasises this break. He states unambiguously that Meetei and *Mayangare* are two different entities. Imposition of an alien structure on the Meeteilon as an injustice which would subsequently lead to assimilation into the mainstream (Saxena, 1977) and loss of identity have been substantiated in his writing. Meetei identity was created as opposed to *Mayang*.

Phulo's contribution as a Meetei revivalist paved the way for the production of a strong Meetei nationalism in the second half of the twentieth century in terms of embracing and reclaiming what is Meetei- its history, language, religion, culture, etc. It is through him that it was made possible to reclaim Meetei identity as a political category which had been otherwise subdued by the strong Hindu religio-feudal combination in the first half of the twentieth century. Within the complex socio-political context of his time, working under the nose of the Brahmins, Irabot's inability to reject Hinduism or his devotion to Vaishnavite Hindu faith is juxtaposed with Phulo for the pursuance of my point. As it is recorded, in the first session of the Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha, Irabot was careful while addressing the meeting. He presented a strong plea for English education, education for women and girls. He also advocated the use of Meetei *Mayek*. In the first session of the Sabha, he asked for

the adoption of Manipuri as the language of education for Manipuris both within and outside the state and the teaching of Meetei *Mayek*, apart from many other social measures. Ironically, the session also resolved to set up a historical society which was to be led by Atombapu Sharma,⁴ a Meetei Brahmin scholar (Parrat, 2005:30). In the second session of the Sabha, held at Silchar in 1936, contrary to its important resolution in the first session, *Gouradharma Pracharini Sabha* was established (ibid: 31). “Atombapu had prepared for publication of a brief book by Mutua Jhullon *Manipur Bijoy Panchalli*, a book which made extensive use of Hindu myths as a preface for the history of Manipuri kings. It reflected the Hinduised re-interpretation of Meetei history which characterised the Atombapu school” (ibid). It is no surprise that the *Sabha* not only just propagated Meetei revivalism of a certain kind but also encouraged proliferation of Hinduism and Hinduisation of history. Later, in the third session of the *Sabha*, held at Mandalay, speaking to his audience, mostly the Meeteis of Burma, Irabot “urged for the need for them to preserve Meetei language and cultural identity” (as quoted in Parrat, 2005: 31). It is worth quoting the following lines from Parrat and Nalini Parrat:

If we *do not preserve* the essence of *Sanaton Gourdharma*, he declared, our country will one day be gone like an insignificant bubble on the vast ocean. At the same time, he was sharply critical of some of the Manipuri Brahmins, whom he accused of keeping religious teachings from the people and using the position to make money. They were, he declared, “playing the role of social hypocrites by earning material gain ... alleging (i.e. making allegations against) the innocent people with religious crimes and sinful commitments.”

⁴Atombapu Sharma was a Meetei-Brahmin scholar who rewrote history of Manipur with a sole intention to place Meetei history, language, religion within Indo-Aryan tradition.

He seems to have seen an answer to this problem largely in the spread of English education which, Irabot believed, had played a positive cultural role in “*recalling the lost memories of the ancient racial consciousness.*” He was also supportive of the Gourdharm Prachini Sabha, a new Hindu organisation founded by *liberal* Brahmin, Lalita Madhop Sharma, with the approval of the maharajah. Lalita, aside from attempting to counter the worst excesses of the new Brahmins, had also made an abortive attempt to Hinduise the hills. But clearly strains were beginning to appear in the ranks of NHMM. On the one side were those who like Atombapu Sharma, wished to use it to consolidate the control of the new Brahmins, while on the other hand Irabot and his colleagues saw in it a real force for social reform (my emphasis, Parrat, 2005: 31)

On the one hand, Irabot warned the Meetei against the abandoning of “Sanaton Gourdharm,” while on the other, he believed in “recalling the lost memories of the ancient racial consciousness” (ibid: 31). He was against the excess of Meetei Brahmins but was supportive of the *liberal* Lalita Madhop Sharma’s *Gourdharm Prachini Sabha* which initiated reformative measures for the preservation of Hinduism. This is an important contradicting indicator of his position and this can be a tool to ascertain the process of making a public figure not just of the armed groups but also of the official memory of Manipur. To begin with, while interrogating his contradictory positions, it is important to ponder upon the tenability of clutching on to a religion which is considered an imposition on the Meetei i.e. Hindu-Vaishnavism, while at the same time, propagating emancipation through the revivalism of “lost memories of the ancient racial consciousness.” Invocation of Meetei race and racial consciousness becomes antithetical in the face of his assertion for Vasinavism. As discussed in the first chapter, such an exhibition can be read as a political

manoeuvring between Meetei and Hinduism. When Lamabam Kamal and Khwairakpam Chaoba propagated and unleashed a new sense of identity and responsibility in the 1930s, they were simultaneously devout Vaishnavites. They cannot be seen separately from Hijam Irabot. Except for Irabot's political activism, all of them have propagated, envisaged and given a new identity and responsibility that stood uncompromised within the Vaishnavite Hindu tradition.

The second part of the problem in his articulation of position is his submission to Brahmins, and the idea associated with it, which controlled the social and cultural sphere of his time. His position helped in instituting a hegemonic social norm that allowed the exclusionary Brahminical ideology to proliferate. Irabot's support for *liberal* Brahmin's initiative for the reformation of Vaishnavism in the Manipur valley can be read as a ploy to re-energise Hinduism. For Irabot and the society of his time, both orthodox and reformed Hinduism which were led by Brahmins seemed to be the only available options. This choice between conservative and liberal Hinduism suppressed and disavowed the possibility of Phulo's religion to emerge. It is not clear whether or not the liberal school of Hinduism contested the distortion of history by Atombapu Sharma and his ilk. But, conjecturally, it is very unlikely considering the works of the elite Meetei Hindus. Phulo had rejected Hinduisation of Meetei history while many of his contemporaries remained silent. Irabot's ambiguous silence except the "recall racial consciousness" should indicate the deep cultural and political connection between religion and the liberal position. It is clear that the underlying politics of Hijam Irabot and his contemporary educated male Meetei elite were to reform Hinduism while rejecting its orthodox elements.

If we carefully look at the history, and the pedagogic sector of Manipur, it is this reformed Hinduism endorsed by Irabot and his other contemporary elites that

defines what/who is to be a good Meetei. The content and contour of nationalism is largely determined by the characteristics and behaviour of its leading class (Aloysius, 2009:10) and the one who emerges as the “nationalist class” creates/produces the national-popular depending on their ideology and politics.⁵ Aloysius further elaborates hegemony, “... the national-popular refers to the way in which the leading class reaches out to the masses and achieves their consent and cooperation.” (ibid). Similarly, in the Indian context, according to Aloysius, Ambedkar articulates the formation of a nationalist class and nationalism by the ruling class (ibid). Ambedkar, in his *States and Minorities*, summarises this relationship between the ruling class and the production of nationalism in India. He says, “unfortunately for the minorities in India, Indian nationalism had developed a new doctrine which may be called the Divine Right of the Majority to rule the minorities according to the wishes of the majority. Any claim for the sharing of power by the minority is called communalism while the monopolising of the whole power by the majority is called Nationalism.”⁶ As it is clear, nationalism is created according to the need and convenience of the ruling class while vilifying the oppressed section for challenging their hegemony. This uncanny relationship between creation of the national-popular and the nationalist/ruling class is relevant in the context of Meetei community as well. Distribution and promotion of a reformed Hinduism as consumable Meetei national-popular in the first half of the twentieth century was manufactured by the elite Meetei-Hindus. The nationalism that was thus created surreptitiously protected Hinduism under the guise of preserving and reviving Meetei identity. This link that was established between Hindu hegemony and the Meetei, declared Phulo and his

⁵ Gramsci’s idea of popular as discussed in G. Aloysius (2009).

⁶ G. Aloysius (2009: 26).

followers impure and *angaoba*, and later, excommunicated. This hegemony of the Meetei ruling class, dent any movement that challenges Hinduism.

Naorem Sanajaoba declares, “The insurgency in Manipur dates back to 1948, when the Manipuri community under the charismatic leadership of Hjam Irabot, took up the cause of liberation of Manipur from the suffering in a state and semi-feudalism, by resorting to the Maoist line of armed struggle against the power that be” (1988, 245). The problematic element of Sanajaoba’s entry into the genesis of “insurgency” in Manipur (read Meetei) is not his declaration that Irabot was the father of insurgency movement, but also his assertion that Meetei nationalism of the post-Merger Manipur was mainly due to neglect and non-recognition of its past glory, history, identity etc. The problem that I am attempting to articulate here is not that Sanajaoba’s argument is flawed. Glory, history, and identity as important factors for the rise of Meetei movement and the armed groups anticipate a recognition of the Meetei revivalist movement. However, my discomfort at this juncture is his lack in locating Naoria Phulo as a central figure. Further, Rajendra Kshetri (2006) looks at the history of the emergence of nationalism with a meagre representation of Phulo. However, an interesting departure from other readings of the armed group movement of the 1960s (in the book) is his admission that the armed group movement has to be looked in conjunction with the growing “conflict between two diametrically opposing forces – Hinduisation on the one hand and the Meeteization on the other” (90) which had become a tangible conflict in the state. He also mentions significantly that “De-sankritisation in the valley is basically aimed at rejecting Hindu identity and its full import lies in the reassertion of the pre-Hindu Meetei identity. The 1990s was the period when the question of the origin of the Meetei was prominently revived and the

century old theory of Aryan descendancy was strongly attacked by the educated young Meeteis” (ibid).

This effort to revive the origin of the Meetei by the educated youth of the 1960s, I claim, was derived from the movement initiated by Phulo, “a crazy old fellow” (Kshetri, 2006: 90), to reclaim a separate and independent Meetei identity. This revival of the origin of Meetei community and the rejection of Aryan descend by the youth of the period cannot be separated. As mentioned above, Irabot never abandoned Hinduism, although he stood against its oppressive social practice. Perhaps, Irabot was aware of Phulo’s activity and thus warned the Meetei to distance themselves from the preaching of Phulo. Irabot’s idea of a Meetei community, thus contradicts those “deviant youths” who were attempting to de-Sanskritise themselves and seeking a pre-Hindu Meetei identity in the second half of the twentieth century. The fact that Irabot started an armed group to overthrow the Indian state to liberate Manipur does not negate the strong ideological difference between him and the 1960s armed groups. Taking ambivalent position in this manner implicates a disservice to ideological source of the second movement of 1960s. As a matter of conjectural exercise, if Irabot had not died in Burma and succeeded in overthrowing the Indian state, the divide between Meetei-Hindu and Meetei-Sanamahi would have been wider than it is now. Though it is clear from the gratification of Irabot as the pioneer of Meetei nationalism in contemporary times, both by the state and the people through erection of statues and naming of roads, celebration of Irabat’s birthday as state holiday, understanding of this phenomenon should go back once again to the whole discourse of “good Meetei.” While it is known why Irabot is celebrated by the state government, what is paradoxical is the act of taking Irabot unquestioningly as the new figure/symbol for the Meetei by the masses. The social and political basis from which

Irabot is elevated as a figure of importance emanates from the self-abnegation of Meetei identity. The production of an ideal Meetei subject here is politically and religiously determined. Therefore, Meetei community continues to evade Phulo, consciously or unconsciously, as part of being national. Despite a considerable stride in the religious and identity assertion amongst the community, Phulo continues to remain in the periphery of Meetei social and political imagination. Thus, from this logic, Phulo cannot be attributed as one of the main ideological reference points of the armed struggle movement. Such marginalisation is visible in Guite's essay on the question of representation in the official historical site of the state when he argues how the official memorial/historical site of Manipur is exclusively of the dominant community. This essay looks at the omission or partial commemoration of Irabot, however, completely forgetting to mention how even within the dominant Meetei community, memory is determined by what is considered acceptable to the dominant taste of the Meetei community. Even though Irabot is beginning to enter into these official spaces and has been accepted by general masses as their hero, Phulo does not appear in any of these official spaces. He continues to be confined within the group that was started by him. It is worthwhile for us to see the reasons behind the acceptance of Irabot as the hero of the community while a figure like Phulo fails to capture the imagination of the general public. The argument/debate here is not to complain against or vilify Irabot, but an attempt to analyse the intriguing process of making a hero by a society that is beginning to see a real power of revivalism. Though the digression from the main argument is lengthy, it is important to consider the relationship between Naoria Phulo and the armed movements that saw a strong revivalist tendency associated with anti-Hindu sentiments.

III

The topographic re-presentation of present Manipur, before it became part of British India officially in 1891, has been a subject of interrogation for many. The Treaty of Yandaboo⁷ of 1826 between the Burmese king and the British Empire was a significant point of departure from an approximated territorial imagination of Meetei Kingdom, Manipur, to a fixed territory. Before 1826, Manipur's territory was subjected to expansion and shrinking due to frequent wars between its neighbours particularly the Burmese or Awa in the locally available nomenclature. When, on October 15, 1949, Manipur became part of the new Indian state, its territory was frozen into an immovable territory. The objective of this section is to understand and grapple with the idea of territory and its representation in Meetei collective *imagination* in relation with gender. It deals with the question of how a fluid territory can be understood in relation to gender and the transformative journey that the female figure, "Meetei Chanu" (metaphorically) undertakes in the twentieth century.

The growth of the nation and its concomitant hegemonic and oppressive idea of nationalism in the eighteenth century Europe and the theory of its evolution have been centrally contrived as neutral, non-gendered phenomena.⁸ Benedict Anderson's (1983) *Imagined Communities* can only be produced in a space where modern technologies are made available. It assumes an empty, homogenous, horizontal time and comradeship. Production of an imagined community for him is inseparably linked with literacy and capitalism⁹ that boils down to the masses for consumption. When

⁷ Treaty of Yandaboo recognises the present geography of Manipur as an Independent Kingdom. Manipur was under the Burmese rule for seven years. This seven years period from 1819-1825 is known as Seven years Devastation in the history of Manipur.

⁸ For a detailed study, see Racioppi Linda and Katherine O'Sullivan, 2000.

⁹ E.J. Hobsbawm, 2013.

this modern phenomenon reached the colonised third world countries, the nationalists of the nineteenth century in India (and later) distinguished itself not only from the West but also from the Indian mass. Partha Chatterjee says, “It [nationalist] has generalised itself among the new middle class, admittedly a widening class and large enough in absolute numbers to be ‘self-producing,’ but is *irrelevant* to the large mass of subordinate classes” (135). However, feminist theorists have contested such gender neutral constructions of nation and nationalism. Nation as an idea is tied to a female figure and quality of femininity is attributed to it. The actual physical territory of the nation is metonymically and metaphorically represented by a female body in most of the countries. *Bharat Mata*,¹⁰ *Tamilpattra* (Ramaswami, 1997) as humiliated figures were/are invoked to invigorate the nationalist feeling. The image of India as a mother figure, strong, hard-working, suffering and asexualised, was/is epitomised in popular culture. However, the architects of a nation, who protect and guide, are always men. Neluka Silva grapples with such an intricate discourse of gender and nation thus:

The image of the nation as a female body or mother earth functions in one of two ways – either as a “pure” (and synonymously, maternal) body, spiritual, inviolable and intact or, as bruised, ravaged, raped and violated by the invaders. Both these representations are contingent upon the input of a male actor, who deifies, defends and rescues them. (2004: 23)

The mainstream theorisation of nation and nationalism according to Nira Yural-Davis “are not only eternal and universal but also constitute a natural extension of family and kinship relations. The family and kinship units in these constructions are based on

¹⁰ The figure of *Bharat Mata* of the nineteenth century and later till contemporary times is perceived to have excluded a large number of populations: religious minority, Dalits, Tribal and almost the whole of Northeast India. This figure seems to represent the Hindu community of a particular region.

natural sexual division of labour in which the men protect the ‘women and children’” (2000: 15). The conception of nation in such terms is patriarchal and infantilises the other half of the population thereby preserving the nation as a space for men. The formation of nationalist movement, whether as a part of anti-colonial movement or otherwise, across the world, tends to produce strong revivalist feelings and I have attempted to substantiate this in my earlier chapters. The nationalist leaders (men) “‘rediscover’ ‘collective memories,’ transform popular oral traditions and languages into written ones, and portray a ‘national golden age’ in the distant mythical or historical past, whose reconstitution becomes the basis for nationalist aspirations” (ibid: 2). Davis says that it is not just the bureaucratic and intelligentsia but women as well that re/produce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically. She questions the hypocrisy of mainstream nationalist theorists for undermining and for keeping the contributions made by women “hidden.”

The dominant narrative and conceptualisation of nationalism perpetuate gender discrimination wherein women are characterised as unequal partners who are seen clubbed together with children. In a scathing critique of Anderson’s community, Zilla Eisenstein says,

Anderson’s community is made up of men and their devotion to a “deep, horizontal comradeship” a *passionate brotherhood*. As such, he thinks nationalism as an identity like kinship, or religion, rather than an ideology like liberalism or fascism. (my emphasis, 2000: 42)

The critique of Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* by Chatterjee (1999), though made from the position of a third world country, failed to weave in the question of gender. However, Chatterjee did mention the unwillingness of the Indian nationalists to make

women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state (1989: 133). Chatterjee's *desi*, and derivative discourse of Indian modernity has been received as exclusionary of Dalit communities. Gopal Guru (2011) suggests that as these two ideas do not include Dalits there is a need for invention of a political category "beyond" that not only contests these two categories that house only the privileged caste/class, but also provide a space of self-recovery for Dalits. The three notions of the idea of India (Guru, 2011) derivative, *desi* and beyond, continue to evade the gender question. Gender question is subsumed or considered insignificant within the larger ambit of nation and nationalism. In such a narrative, women are reduced to a mere figure of male fantasy, as carrier of virtue and honour of men's investment in family and its extension, the nation.

Nation and its relation to territory bring forth an interesting read in the context of Manipur. Like other nations, Manipur as a nation pre- and post-1947 is imagined over a female body. Terms like Meitei *Chanu* and Meitei *ema*¹¹ substantiate it. The image of a Meitei female figure as a metaphorical representation of Manipur has been in a continuous flux. The revivalist Meitei nationalists starting from the 1920s and 1930s have been able to manufacture a female figure that is made to mutate depending upon the anxiety and interest of the male Meitei revivalists/nationalists. Here, I am interested in looking at the intersection between gender and nation making and how in this process of making and unmaking, the female Meitei body undergoes transformation and translation which is a *travel* in another sense. Transformation becomes self-evident when we compare the figures of Meitei female across time and space. Meitei *Chanu* as a figure from the 1930s is distinctly different from that of the

¹¹ The construction of a figure of a Meitei *Chanu* and *ema*, a Meitei female figure excludes other communities of the state. The figure, under the strict watch of Meitei nationalists, is perceived to be under constant threat from the outside.

1960s. Here, this difference or the change in the figure of Meitei *Chanu* is representative of the change or travel the male Meitei nationalists have undergone. There is a shift in the descriptive imagination of the figure—transformation and change as categories of understanding travel, the female figure travels from one idea to another idea, from one figure to another figure. Here, unlike the general sense of covering a certain distance, travel is performed ideationally. Such travel is manifested in literature and other art forms. Such travel or say changes in the representation of the female figure, in the context of Manipur and particularly in the context of dominant Meitei community of the state, opens up new avenues for interrogating nation and nationalism.

The Meitei *chanu/ema* figure of the 1930s are represented as an unnoticed, poverty stricken, neglected and an unexplored one. Khwairakpam Chaoba and Lamabam Kamal of the generations were able to use and exploit this sorry figure for the rejuvenation of feelings and love for Manipuri literature in particular and Manipur in general. Frequent usage of terms like *Meitei Chanu* in their poetry reinforces such idea of female body. In Kamal's poem "Meitei Chanu," (1924) he says,

After a long time
 Mother *Meitei Chanu* has come
 To occupy the temple of Meitei Literature;
 With basket full of flowers

Let's pay obeisance in her feet. (Translation mine, *Collected Works*, 1993: 1)
 Khwairakpam Chaoba in "Meitei Kabi" (1933) wrote with strong emotion and desire to bring/showcase (out) the beauty and quality of Manipur. He compares Manipur with a wild flower, an unappreciated diamond in the deep sea. For him, Manipur surrounded by hills and tribal, shines and blooms, is unnoticed by anyone. Around the

same time, another renowned poet Arambam Darendrajit continues to echo the dominant mode of representation of the state: attribution of feminine characteristics.

In his poem “Ereipak,” he says,

O mother who gave birth to god

O mother who gave birth to Narshingh¹²

Please dry your tears in your eyes

Please smile once again as you used to earlier. (Translation mine, 2012: 1).

In all of these above examples from literature of the early twentieth century, there is a collective call for new energy and participation from the youth in the re/making of Meetei nation and literature. They invoke a Meetei female figure in symphony, addressed as *Ema* (mother), to provoke the educated youth from their deep slumber. However, as mentioned earlier, this Meetei mother figure suffers from poverty, neglect and lack of appreciation and notice despite her rich abundance.

However, in the artistic representations of post 1974 and broadly after the 1960s,¹³ this mother figure underwent a drastic change. The mother figure transforms (changes) from an unnoticed figure to a violated and abused figure. It is important to remember that by then, Manipur has already become part of the Indian state. Such change in representation and transformation from the early part of modern Manipuri literature (twentieth century) presupposes an encounter, an encounter with a bigger force that led to the violation of the figure. This violated figure of the post 1960s also implicates the inability of the Meetei males to *protect her* from varied invasions: cultural, social, physical and territorial. In the works of Heisnam Kanhailal like

¹² Narsingh is a historical figure who had ruled Manipur for six years from 1844-1850.

¹³ The decade of 1960s in Manipur like elsewhere is important because disillusionment with the Indian state had begun to manifest in various forms, literature, theatre, and insurgency movements. The formation of United Nation Liberation Front in 1964 and Pan Manipur Youth League as mouthpiece in 1968 marked the beginning of armed and political struggle in Manipur.

Draupadi (2000) and *Pebet* (1975), the humiliated mother figure is epitomised. In *Pebet*, the mother Pebet's nightmare re-enacts the forceful conversion of Meetei (children) from their ancestral religion to an alien Hindu religion in the eighteenth century. (Bipin, 41-47). Thus, leaving the mother deserted in the hands of the Indian Army in the second half of the twentieth century is represented in *Draupadi*.

Although, keeping aside the dream sequence that foresees devastation due to conversion into Hinduism, it is the mother Pebet, representative of Meetei mother, who could re-unite and reconvert her children. In *Draupadi*, an adaptation of Mahashweta Devi's short story of the same title, Dopdi is repeatedly raped by the Indian army. Here rape is symbolic of dominance and control. Dopdi as a representative figure of Manipur, as a Meetei *Chanu/ema* of the post 1960s, is violated by a bigger and powerful force, the Indian army. Kanhailal's contextualisation of *Draupadi* in Manipur anticipates the naked protest by the *emas* of Manipur in front of Assam Rifles in 2004. The naked protest was an anger directed against the Indian army after they gang raped and killed Thangjam Monorama. In the play, Dopdi, unable to bear the repeated humiliation, sheds her clothes and screams at the Indian armies: *encounter tourulao, eibu encounter tourulao* (Come and encounter, come and encounter me). The naked protest was a re-enactment of Dopdi's humiliation and anger. The protesters had held "*Indian Army, Rape Us*" banner. The figure of Irom Sharmila delineates such figures of abused Meetei female figure. Thangjam Monorama and many others were killed under Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958, against which Irom Sharmila fasted for over a decade and a half.

Saratchand Thiyam in “Eche”¹⁴ (sister) insists his *sister* to stay and remain at home. The dangers of going out of their house and consequence of it is foretold:

This rain has not let up
 Don’t go out yet, sister.
 It’s only a semblance of afternoon.
 After it decided to live in
 With night, its paramour,

This is no longer the afternoon we recognize. (Emphasis mine; 2009:284)

In both the periods, 1930s and post 1960s, there is an idea of an existence of a golden period. In “Eche,” the poet imagines a past which no longer recognises its presence. Also in “Ereipak,” the poet asks his mother to smile like she used to. Therefore, in both periods, there is a recreation and romanticisation of a figure, a Meetei female figure from the past, un-neglected, un-humiliated and un-abused.

In *Freedom from India: A History of Manipuri Nationalism (1947-2000)*, Malem Ningthouja (2011) reiterates the intersection of gender and nation. Ningthouja, in his attempt to rewrite the history of Manipur’s¹⁵ nationalism, in many occasions uses masculinity and femininity as trope to understand the nationalist movement in various stages of his book. For him, and many other Meetei nationalists, all the negativities, for example, shrinking of territory and the “present” oppressed states are attributed to the female (17). In this quotation, masculinity and femininity in the making of nation is clearly indicated:

¹⁴Appeared in *An Anthology of Poetry from Northeast India* edited by Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkhyurich. Eche is translated from Manipuri into English by Robin S. Ngangom, 2009.

¹⁵Manipur as an umbrella term is also a much-contested territory, but these discussions may not be relevant to this dissertation.

Manipur seemed to regain *masculinity* with the conclusion of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. However the “*honour*” *that came about was short lived*. Manipur masculinity could not withstand British intervention disguised as an “ally.” Nationalists portrayed an effeminized picture of Manipur as one that helpless or ignorant when “British officers as Commissioners” undemocratically represented Manipur and signed a controversial agreement with the Burmese on 1st January 1834. The agreement *effeminized* Manipur as mere spectators to the British game plan but they could not immediately fight back against the infringement on the ‘sovereignty of the Manipur.... Kabaw Valley was transferred to Burma ... helpless king could not protest or defend the “space” as “honour.” (my emphasis;18-19)

The history of Manipur’s territorial expansion was automatically linked with masculinity and inability to preserve that territory with femininity. Manipur’s territory is believed to have covered areas of South China, parts of Burma, extended up to present day Dimapur in Nagaland (17). In many instances, Ningthouja, drawing from revivalist-nationalists rhetoric (though, it is not clear whether he endorses them or not), talks about the revival of a “community masculinity” (240); “construction of Meitei masculinity through claiming a divine origin” (242); the [glorious] past as masculine and the present as feminine (248); Kanglasha in the Kangla¹⁶ represents Meitei’s sense of masculinity and has a role to play in revitalising the Meiteis (267).

¹⁶ Kanglasha represents Meitei’s pride and emblem and is located in the Kangla, in the heart of the Imphal valley. Kangla once a palace of Meitei kingdom, is the centre of Meitei’s theory of origin. It is spiritually, historically an important place for the Meiteis. When the British left Manipur, Assam Rifle occupied the place till 2004. The Indian government transferred the Kangla to the people of Manipur in a formal function.

In the context of revivalism and nationalist movement in Manipur by the Meeteis around the figure of the female, the attempt here is also to look at the gradual negative progression in the representation of this figure in relation to revivalism and territory. Revivalist agenda is to reconstitute an asexualised, highly chastised figure which existed in a mythical golden past. Such an existence is realised with the idea of a thriving territorial expansion before the conversion of Meitei into Hinduism in the eighteenth century. Here, the intersection between gender, nation and revivalism produces three prominent female figures. These three female figures are located in three different time periods. They are: the pre-Hindu Meitei female figure, from the ahistorical golden past; the second figure is from the conversion into Hinduism in eighteenth century till 1949; the third figure belongs to post 1949. These three female figures negatively progress towards a humiliated and abused figure. The presence of a perfect mythical figure, as we have seen in some of the poems above, created the possibility of gendered nation to travel ideationally. A nation which is tied to a female figure travels from a mythic figure to an abused and humiliated figure within the phallo-centric nationalist narrative.

Further, intersection between gender, nation and territory in Manipur provide an interesting point of departure. After Manipur became part of India in 1949, its territory has been fixed. The “glorious past” of a vast territory and a mythical golden past which the revivalist rely upon, has shrunk into a fixed territory of another nation-state. The geographical territory of Manipur, instead of an outward movement, expansion (which is masculine), experiences an inward, shrunken (which is feminine), movement. In the present context, Manipur’s chance of outward physical mobility is close to impossible. Instead its “territorial integrity” is under “threat” with

the rising Naga integration movement. Such inward physical moves alongside the loss of sovereignty to India created a sense of defeatism among Meetei nationalists.

Journey or the travel of the female figure, as re/created by male actors, progresses negatively from a mythical figure existing in a golden, ahistorical time to a suffering figure. This figure culminates in an abused and humiliated figure in the contemporary times. The creation of such a journey is important for the male revivalists who have to manufacture a past for their community to look/go back to. This can be understood as an escape from the *present* to the *past*.¹⁷ The revivalists, through their manufacturing of various female figures, envisage a return to the past for an (im)possible attainment of the mythical female figure. A reversal of journey to the past is envisaged through an abused figure. In another instance, from the contemporary perspective, considering the heavy investment on Meetei revivalism, the mythical figure and present figure are created on the foundation of an anti-Hindu, “authentic” Meetei past. However, due to the strong influence of Hinduism, from the beginning of twentieth century, the female figure was created with elements of both Meetei and Hindu traits.

Thus, territory and nation which are tied to a female figure produce and reproduce different images of that figure depending on their needs. In such a situation, the nation, in the figure of a female, embarks on a travel. The female figure, likewise “women and children,” in the words of Davis, needs to be protected. Within this protected space, the Meetei female figure takes its journey in relation to its national

¹⁷ Partha Chatterjee, in his essay ‘Our Modernity,’ believes that the basic difference between western and eastern (India) modernity lies in our different reception of our past and present. According to him, western modernity, beginning from Kant, is an escape from the past to the present, whereas, India’s modernity is an escape from the present to the past. Therefore, eastern modernity constitutes self-recovery, that self that is located in the past. The revivalist/nationalist heavily rely on this particular mode of social transformation, and identity formation. This essay is part of the anthology titled, *Empire and Nation: Essential Writings; 1985-2005*, Permanent Black, New Delhi: 136-152.

territory and the health of the nation; and men continue to be the main actor.

However, escape/travel from the present to the past or the superimposition of past to the present, as a mode of revivalism, also have elements of *a posteriori*. The past that has to be revived, therefore, the female figure located in the past, is an unattainable figure, an untranslatable past. Hobsbawm says that the “nation” as conceived by nationalism, can be realised prospectively and the real “nation” can only be found *a posteriori* (2013: 9). Therefore, nation and the female figure, here the Meetei nation and female figure, are located in the future as unattainable categories. The Meetei female figure undertakes a journey towards this unattainable future that is mediated by a particular *past*.

Conclusion

In the context of a rising critique of nation and nationalism¹ and its defense (Chatterjee, 1997); the implicit glorification of stateless condition (Scott, 2009) as a response to the oppressive structure of nation-state and the systematic annihilation of “stateless” Rohingya Muslims by Myanmar’s government; the question of gender and of community (Menon, 2000), race and caste questions; nation and region (Aloysius, 2011, 2013); and the global stratification of power, etc., the study of a minor community, its resistance and assertion against hegemony and power invites one to be aware of several such domains and structures of cultures and politics. As a minor community nurtured and shaped by a product of modern political imaginary, its resistance and consolidation need to be located and ascertained within and through the same political arrangement. Without losing the essence of a vernacular political vocabulary, the attempt ought to be engaging with the larger global phenomenon.

I have argued that the encounter and negotiation of minor community with modernity produces a significant rupture and consolidation in/of power. Within the overarching notion and working of modernity, the faceless past (Pandian, 1998) and the ordinariness (Pandian, 2008) of present, past and future become unattractive. The Meetei movement is a departure from such faceless histories and the ordinary to a significant history with a hero figure to reconfigure Meetei (Manipur) nation. In many ways, an attempt at recreating history and its figures is an assertion of a nationhood which, perhaps, for the revivalist is the oldest (Kangjia, 1978; Chingtamlen, 2012).

¹ Arjun Appadurai, “Patriotism and its Future,” in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 158-77; M. S. S. Pandian, 1998, 2009; Nivedita Menon, 2009.

The present political assertion of different Meetei positions is highlighted in the figures of Naoria Phulo and Hijam Irabot. Both represent different Meetei positions in terms of religion and identity. The debate of these two figures charted out in the last chapter was primarily to discover a different route to understand and envisage the evolution of Meetei movement in the twentieth century. Although, Phulo's religion and script do not find much appreciation from the contemporary Meetei revivalists, he has remained a primary figure of Meetei dignity and emancipation. Naoria Phulo represents the ideology of Meetei revivalism, religion and political assertion. The juxtaposition of "mad" Meetei and "good Meetei" respectively in the figures of Phulo and Irabot allows an uncovering of dominant Meetei-Hindu public on the one hand, and, it paves the way for the entry of the mad Meetei in the domain of Meetei public and consciousness on the other. The binary of mad and good Meetei created in the wake of twentieth century in its encounter with modernity and capital Hindu time was a strategy to annul the rising legitimacy of the mad Meetei in the public. This binary has sustained the growth of Hindu hegemony and thus blunt Meetei assertion and critique of Hindu and the Indian state. Through the discourses of script revivalism, I have argued that the deferring of the introduction of Meetei *Mayek* in schools seems a deliberate attempt to deny a legitimate entry of mad Meetei into formal and public space, and thus reinforces Hindu hegemony. It is not surprising that the formation of BJP government in Manipur 2017 was a celebratory moment for closeted Meetei-Hindus. This particular moment of celebration is a return of the good Meetei to the forefront of Meetei politics. The present BJP led Manipur government's proximity with Hindu sadhus and the recent agreement signed to protect the cows² in

² Although this has not been reported in media but shared widely in Facebook recently (September 2017) with photos of Meetei Brahmins, Hindu Sadhu and a Minister from the BJP Manipur. It is widely criticised for its attempt to bring cow politics in Manipur.

Manipur is a result of normalising the hegemonic “good” Meetei which rejected Phulo and alike over Hinduism for a respectable entry into its world.

In the debate between Phulo and Irabot, an internal dialogue within Meetei community has been prioritised over its engagement with the external Indian state or Hinduism. A foregrounding of this internal dialogue is an attempt to unsettle the binary of “mad” and “good Meetei” so as to arrive at the external engagement whereby critique and departure of/from the external is non-ambiguous. This is also a means to disrupt the allegiance between good Meetei and the dominant external force so as to reconceptualise the Meetei movement and invent a new vocabulary for dialogue.

The Meetei movement is a critical site of both resistance and assertion where attempts to heterogenise time and experience are accompanied by a desire to homogenise the same. The larger research question of this project initially was to study the double-edged effect of the revivalist movement of Meetei.³ The first one was to understand Meetei revivalism as a mode of political resistance to overthrow the dominance of Hinduism, and, the second was to see how Meetei resistance in turn could become hegemony in itself over different communities of Manipur. Doing so, in principle, was an attempt to critique the modern nation-form. Although, I feel that the first research question of the project is fulfilled, more or less, the second remains far from complete. In the course of my writing, I realised that my second research question was not forthcoming as I desired it to be. I took a decision therefor to focus on the first objective. This decision was also animated by my inefficiency and the lack of resource on tribal literatures. However, it has also helped me avoid a mere token

³ I have discussed my shift in research from the question of (non) belonging-ness of Manipur in India-state to present work in the introduction.

representation of the tribal perspective. Therefore, it is safe to say that my primary focus on Meetei revivalism and the omission of tribal questions were a deliberate choice. Besides attempting to highlight the exclusivity of the normative Meetei, I was also countered by a potential narrative of collapsing *angaoba* Meetei, tribal and other minority communities into one in my line of argumentation. I wanted to avoid this unintended consequence in my argument and focus on the Meetei movement per se. This decision has allowed me to extend my research on other realms of politics and cultural exhibitionism of Meetei community.

However, the Meetei movement cannot be fully ascertained without taking into consideration the history of tribals and their assertions and vice versa. I have tried to focus as much as possible on the Meetei community. However, there are instances and sections where it became imperative that the tribal question be brought into my dissertation. The marked distinction of hills and valley and this distinction as a “dialogic space” (Suan, 2009), points to a mode of resistance by the tribals of Manipur against the epistemological and ontological homogenisation of the Manipur experience by the Meetei. The recent demand for the implementation of Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in Manipur and the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for Meeteis and the expected counter resistance against these demands from the hill tribals is a significant evidence to substantiate the ongoing contradicting political assertion in Manipur.

Future research on the Meetei movement in particular should consider the intersection and the internal dynamics of the state. The tribal and the Meetei-Muslim population play a major role in the consolidation of Meetei community and good Meetei. It would be an interesting and challenging area to explore this further. I have attempted in a limited way to understand how the present political crisis in Manipur

has its root in the formation of a new Meetei identity in the early part of the twentieth century. I have also hinted that the formation of new or good Meetei in the literature of early twentieth century was a consequence of western education and modernity. The role of British colonialism cannot be missed as we take Hinduism as one of the major actors for the present crisis. Now, the challenge is to explore how Hinduism and western education (of the Bengal variety) worked in tandem to break into the slippages of tribal and Meetei. Jillangamba (2015) has stated that the nomenclatures of hills and valley as marked social divisions became current only after British colonialism. This particular exploration should intersect with Lal Dena's (2008) work on British polity and policy in Manipur. The larger aim of the discourse is to form a new conceptual vocabulary or a category that addresses the present crisis instead of borrowing from elsewhere to analyse an issue of the region. Formation of a conceptual vocabulary from its ground and day-to-day experience should be a challenge that the future researchers should explore. These new conceptual categories would not only allow contestation of the Indian categories of caste and adivasi,⁴ but also emerge a tool to understand the crisis in a more nuanced way. This endeavor should seek to challenge imposed knowledge and recreate knowledge which is a product of the region.⁵

Anti Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) movement, ILP and ST demand intersect with the Meetei movement at various points. All of these movements, AFSPA in a limited sense, carry a nativist discourse of protection of indigenous community from the outsiders. Outsiders are often perceived as a threat to

⁴ Prathma Banerjee, "Writing the Adivasi: Some Historiographical Notes," 2016.

⁵ See, "Introduction" to this dissertation where I have argued about emptying and making meaninglessness of knowledge produced in the Northeast India.

indigenous communities in terms of culture, economy, population, and polity.⁶ If one takes the ILP demand and the rhetoric, the convergence of the Meetei movement and such different facets of contemporary Meetei anxiety are apparent. A constant invocation of outsiders as invaders into the eco-system of Manipur which bringing disruption has its prehistory in the conversion of Meetei into Hinduism in the eighteenth century. It brings back the memory of coercive religious conversion, from the indigenous religious belief system to the new belief, Hinduism. The anti-foreigner⁷ (or outsider) sentiment and movement of the last three decades or so particularly in the Imphal valley can be posited to understand the demand for ILP. The notion of the outsider collapses all non-mongoloid features in one bracket. Mayang could be a Meetei word that captures the essence of the outsider here. Both ILP and ST demand seeks to protect the indigenous community from the invading outsiders. In both the cases, the hill people have protested for they allege violation and intrusion into tribal autonomy and rights. A meeting held on September 24, 2017 to discuss and demand for the inclusion of Meetei in ST is reported thus:

Since the question of tribes in India is closely linked with administrative and political considerations, Meiteis' demand is to give due cognisance to its indigenous tribal ethnic identity and include it in the ST list now which was not included in the said list in 1950 so as to provide Constitutional recognition and safeguard to Meiteis' identity as indigenous people of Manipur.

⁶ See for more on ILP and the larger discourse around it, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-cry-for-an-inner-line-permit-system/article7622240.ece>.

⁷ Anti-foreigner feeling has its roots in different forms which I will discuss later here. However, here, I use the term to invoke the anti-foreigner movement of the 1980s of All Manipur Students Union (AMSU) which extended till 1990s See, <http://www.easternmirrornagaland.com/manipur-students-observe-1980-anti-foreigner-movement/>. I think that this anti-foreigner agitation has an important link with the Inner Line Permit (ILP) agitation of 2015.

[The demand is to] provide Constitutional safeguard to the whole State of Manipur under the fifth schedule which is already enforced in the hill areas of Manipur.

... remove the Constitutional divide between Meiteis and hill people of Manipur and to restore a cohesive and harmonious society in Manipur based on ethnic social equality and respect for all indigenous ethnic communities as a composite ST dominant State.⁸

The development of Meetei movement and its attempt at making a pan-Manipuri discourse via invocation of shared history, culture, language and experience, especially in the effort of Kangjia, needs to be reoriented. The postnation condition and the “freedom outside the construct of the nation” (Pandian, 1998) can be taken seriously for inventing a new vocabulary for dialogue and understanding the political apathy that is plaguing the state. Ethnic movements of the state have the tendency of foreclosing dialogue because of its strict political agenda and territory. Strict territorial boundaries and identity — notions of homeland — often have failed to address the complex history, cultural and demography of the state (Phanjoubam, 2010). The bigger challenge ahead is to invent conceptual categories that address the complexities of the region.

Revival of an authentic tradition in the changed world as an unchanging variant (Hobsbawm, 1983) of the historic past is impossible. This impossibility of revival of an authentic tradition can be seen in the context of the revival of Meetei script. However, the rhetoric and effort of revival continue in different forms and

⁸ <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=1..250917.sep17>. It also set 20th October as the deadline for the Manipur government to submit a recommendation to Central government.

degrees. The urgent political questions that need to be asked are – can one revive a past in its authentic form? How far can one push for revival when one realises that revival is impossible in its full form? Answer for this can be looked at the food practices of Meetei and ascertain how revivalism of tradition reconfigures differently at present.

Meetei food practices have undergone a massive change after its religious conversion into Hinduisim from its “primary” religion (Naorem Singh, 2012). As it is available in history and evidences from many ritual practices, Meeteis consumed meat and locally produced alcohol before Hinduism. Meetei “savage” food habits were curbed extensively in order that they be translated into becoming a devout Hindu subject/Vaishnavites (Shakespeare, 1912). One needs to look at this act of imposed conversion as a certain kind of faithful translation, aiming towards authenticity. In a way that questions this authenticity, one could understand revivalism of pre-Hindu religion as translation as well but an unfaithful one where an authentic practice can never be realised, a practice that is far removed but aspired for.

In the pre-Hindu practices of the Meeteis, a clear evidence of consumption of liquor not just in private spaces but also in ritually sanctioned ceremonies can be observed like in the birth ceremony of a newly born baby. In Meetei-lon this ceremony is known as *Ipan Thaba* or *Yupan Thaba* before Hinduism. The usage, *Yupan Thaba* is an act of “giving intoxicated liquor,” (Singh, 2012) where *Yu* means liquor, *Thaba* offering to the God (or to the baby?). This is symbolic of feeding liquor which is now considered impure by the logic of Hinduism is given to the baby in a formal, ritually sanctioned ceremony even to this day. Animal sacrifices were also prevalent in religiously/ritually sanctified ceremonies to various Gods in the pre-Hindu period. These examples and many others make it clear that meat was central to

Meetei way of life. Imposition of Vaishnavite food practices on the native Meeteis continued unquestioned and unchallenged until Naorio Phulo came as a strong force against the discriminatory Hindu belief system and practices. Phulo's important contribution in such an organised anti-Hindu movement was the effort to revive, assign meanings to indigenous food as a part of the larger Meetei revivalism (Ningthouja, 2011). As a consequence of this long anti-Hindu religious movement starting from the 1930s, there have been major shifts in the outlook of the Meeteis, their religious practices, their political and cultural effort to depart from the Hindus. However, in contemporary times, Meeteis satiate their taste buds according to spaces marked on the basis of pure and impure notion of Hinduism. One is ritually sanctified religious/public space, and private, individualised, outside the realm of Hindu religious space by both *Sanamahi* Meitei and Hindu Meitei.⁹ The distinction between private and public space in regards to the food practice of Meitei is complex and I will try to explain them here.

In the contemporary valley-centric (Scott, 2009; Suan, 2009) society like the Meetei, the turmoil and conflict between Hinduism and Meetei revivalist trends, religiously sanctified public spaces constitute formal public gatherings, rituals like religious feasts which are locally known as *Utsav* (a Sanskrit word). This category includes mostly community feasts like *Mangani chakkouba* (Feast at the bride's home after 5 days of wedding), *Firoi* (First death anniversary), *Din katpa* (Monthly ritual), etc., where the presence of a religious priest is necessary. On the other hand, private spaces include informal parties like wedding reception, socially closed group-

⁹ Three broad categories of Meetei – Hindu Meitei and Sanamahi Meitei, (converted Meitei and revivalist Meitei, which overlap, take from each other in practiced rituals) and the third – Lois, unconverted, Meeteis who resisted conversion to Hinduism and have been practicing pre-Hindu practices.

gatherings, picnic party, etc., which are outside the domain of sacred religiosity. It does not need a “bamon”¹⁰ to declare it pure, it is an impure food practice as the menu includes meat outside the accepted Hindu food practice.

Therefore, Meetei public space¹¹ is still a space controlled and dominated by the dominant Hindu belief, codes of conduct, and the notion of pure and impure. These supposedly private matters of the Hindus control Meeteis’ food practices not just in private but public as well. What the Meeteis eat in public (ritually sanctified) spaces and what they actually eat in their private spaces are separated by unimaginably powerful discourse of *pure* and *impure* sanctioned by Hindu belief systems. How Meeteis move between these spaces indicate a translation, while the impure space still remains outside the bounds of religious purity. I claim this because Meetei revivalism as it is seen from the Loi/scheduled caste Meetei position can hardly be differentiated from the Vaishnavite food practice, a point which will be explained later. Food menu in private spaces consists of meat items starting from chicken to beef and pork and to dog meat. In a public space where all sects, ages, sexes are present, fish is the only acceptable meat. This again talks of a practice that translates between pure and impurity of normative Hinduism. Contemporary Meetei kitchens are highly abominable of any meat item except for the fish. This is largely because kitchen is considered a sacred space in a religious sense, and curries and rice of the day are sacrificed to the goddess of the kitchen/family. If any non-fish-meat curries have to be cooked at home, Meeteis cook outside the sacred space, kitchen.

¹⁰ Bamon is a term referred to Brahmins of Manipur. They cook food in the religiously sanctified public as mentioned above. As a reflection of such term, Meeteis who follow Sanamahi have also coined a term which can be a deflection of the original Bamon: Piba or Meitei Bamon, which has the authority to declare anything pure or impure.

¹¹ Public space as it was evolved in Europe and later in India through colonialism, is space of the dominant class/class/community/. Their private spaces are played out and portrayed as rational.

Over the past few years, the politics of identity and revivalism have definitely changed the practices of what is allowed and not allowed in a Meetei kitchen but beef and pork are still ostracised by the Meetei kitchen. However, in any Meetei informal, non-religious food practices, one would be consuming meat of all kinds locally available: pork, beef, dog meat, etc.

This should allow us to look at and introspect various food habits available and inclusion of it in *Utsav* menu. *Utsav* as the name suggests is heavily guarded by Hindu codes and belief system. *Utsav* is observed by both Hindu-Meeteis and Sanamahi Meiteis (Sanamahi Meetei uses *Chaklen* a Meetei word to indicate their religious affiliation). This leads me to ask larger questions regarding what constitutes Meetei revivalism. Meetei revivalism as a religious, socio-cultural and political movement/struggle which began in the early part of the twentieth century needs to address and translate some of these readily available social practices which often go unaddressed. As mentioned above, food habits of the Meeteis before Hinduism were similar to *Loi*-Meeteis, the non-converted Meeteis and various Hills tribes. *Loi* Meeteis have a very different food practice from the Hindu and Sanamahi Meeteis. They are seen/considered as untainted / authentic Meeteis still observing Meetei pre-Hindu beliefs and food practices. Unlike Hindus and Sanamahis, they do not abstain from the consumption of meat including pork. Therefore, Meetei *Lois* do not have the concept of *Nga Tangba* like others. *Nga Tangba*, which means *Nga* - fish, *Tangba* - taste, is a community feast observed on the 13 or 11 day after the death of a person depending upon which religion one follows. During this intermittent period, they do not even eat fish. As the name *Nga Tangba* suggests, Meeteis are supposed to eat only fish which is acceptable to some extent among Vaishnavaitic practices and not any other meat. This goes back to history of how Meeteis had to change their behaviors

and food practices to be a Hindu, to be different from the hill people, after they accepted Hindu-Vaishnavism. This event *Nga Tangba* is often served and cooked by *Bamons* and in the presence of *Bamons* Meeteis cannot consume any meat other than fish. This links to other religious public spaces mentioned above, where *Bamons* occupy a significant place, where there is a need to adhere to Hinduism. It is here that “other” Meetei dishes¹² are made invisible, untranslatable. The *Lois*’ food menu in the religious space is free of such control and dominance. Despite strong religious revival movement within the Hindu Meetei and struggle to break away from Hinduism, certain practices still continue to conform to Hindu food practices in religious spaces including the highly guarded kitchen.

When the dominant Meitei community claims to have been undergoing a social and religious change, the non-inclusion of meat items suggests a reluctance and inability to accept the pre-Hindu practices completely. This not only excludes part of pre-Hindu Meetei identity, thereby implicating an existence of an “other” within. An “other” which is codified and castrated by Hinduism for consuming meat, for being impure, pagan. This brings to the point that unconsciously there is recognition of the “other” within the Meitei; and there is also an acknowledgement of the Hindu idea of dominance that preaches this “other” as savage and not presentable in the religious sphere of the pure. Hence, Meeteis secretly eat pork and beef in their private spaces.

Here, the food practices of the Meetei in their private and public domains are brought in for discussion to underscore the idea that the revivalism of the Meetei past is still incomplete and that it will be an incomplete project. Revivalism and the search for identity, although an unrealisable project, becomes a political exigency in the face

¹² They are largely Meeteis’ primary dishes which have been marginalised.

of the predatory nature of the dominating force. Revivalists needs to creatively function between this contradicting facts of our contemporary politics.

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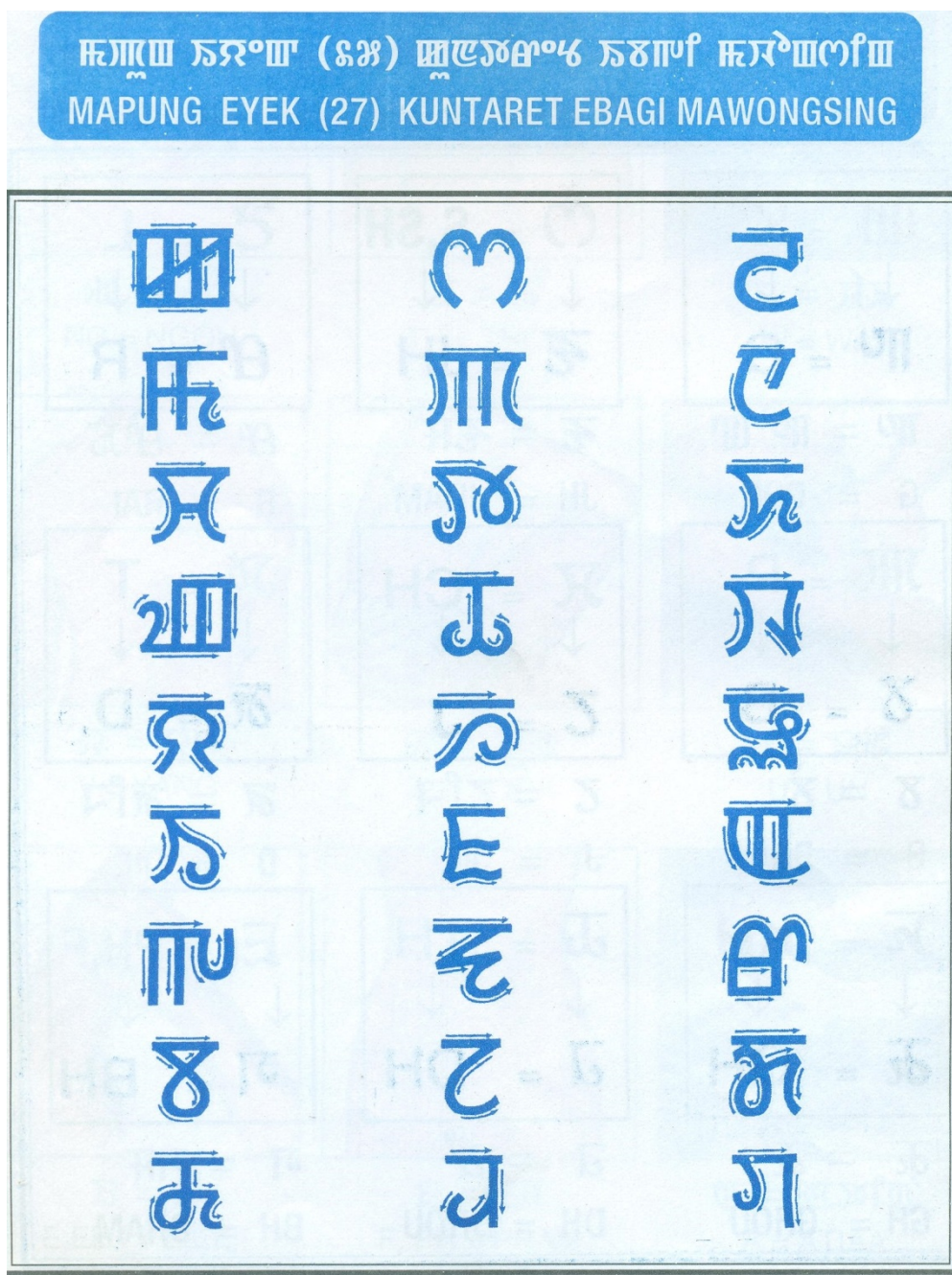
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Singnaba Touganu” (Do not Challenge and Mock at our Ancestral Tradition and Meetei *mayek*)

Meetei Mayek Tamnaba Mapi Lairik (Primer for Meetei Mayek), published by Eyek Maru SAnaba Thourangba Kanglup for The Directorate of Education (S), Government of Manipur, 2006

Appendix A

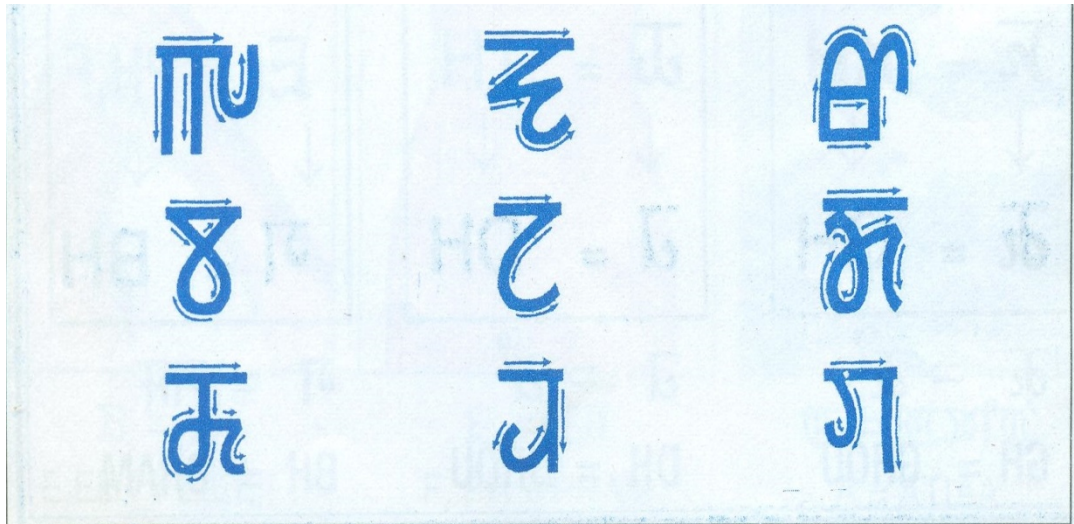


Pic. 1: Government approved twenty-seven letters Meetei *mayek* The first eighteen letters, are also known as *eepi mayek*, the original and foundational letters.

(Source: Meetei Mayek Tamnaba Mapi Lairik (Primer for Meetei Mayek), published by Eyek Maru SAnaba Thourangba Kanglup for The Directorate of Education (S), Government of Manipur, 2006.)



Pic. 2: The original eighteen letters, also known as *eepi Mayek*: (Source: *ibid*)



Pic. 3: Additional nine letters, also known as *lom Mayek*. (Source: *ibid*)



Pic. 4: Government approved visual representation of Gok (Source: *ibid*)



Pic. 5: The first symbol of the government approved *Mayek*

Source: *ibid*



Pic. 6: Visual representation of Gok symbol suggested by Kangjia in the expert committee meeting of 1978-79. 9 (Source: *ibid*, modified to illustrates suggested change to the alphabet)



Pic. 7: Visual representation of Gok symbol suggested by Yumnam Tamphajao in the expert committee meeting of 1978-79 (Source: *ibid*, modified to illustrates suggested change to the alphabet)

တဲးနုာ်မုာ်တဲးနုာ်မုာ် (၉) မဲးမုာ်မုာ် မဲးမုာ်မုာ်
LOMTHARAKLIBA EYEK (9) MAAPAL AMADI KHONTHOKSHING

<p>𑜀𑜂𑜆 = K ↓ ↓ 𑜀𑜃𑜆 = G</p> <p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = 𑜀𑜃𑜆𑜀𑜂𑜆 G = GOK</p>	<p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = S,SH ↓ ↓ 𑜀𑜃𑜆 = JH</p> <p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = 𑜀𑜃𑜆 JH = JHAM</p>	<p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = L ↓ ↓ 𑜀𑜃𑜆 = R</p> <p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = 𑜀𑜃𑜆 R = RAI</p>
<p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = P ↓ ↓ 𑜀𑜃𑜆 = B</p> <p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = 𑜀𑜃𑜆 B = BA</p>	<p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = CH ↓ ↓ 𑜀𑜃𑜆 = J</p> <p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = 𑜀𑜃𑜆 J = JIL</p>	<p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = T ↓ ↓ 𑜀𑜃𑜆 = D</p> <p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = 𑜀𑜃𑜆 D = DIL</p>
<p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = KH ↓ ↓ 𑜀𑜃𑜆 = GH</p> <p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = 𑜀𑜃𑜆 GH = GHOU</p>	<p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = TH ↓ ↓ 𑜀𑜃𑜆 = DH</p> <p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = 𑜀𑜃𑜆 DH = DHOU</p>	<p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = PH,F ↓ ↓ 𑜀𑜃𑜆 = BH</p> <p>𑜀𑜃𑜆 = 𑜀𑜃𑜆 BH = BHAM</p>

Pic. 8: Original *eepi* and derivative *loms*. (Source: *ibid*).