



Schools as New Site of Ethnic Contestation in Manipur

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Abstract: Tension between ethnic groups in Manipur is played out in many spheres. It has only been aggravated in the recent times with different communities asserting their own cultural and identity claims and counter-claims. The Meetei Mayek movement in Manipur opened the Pandora's box in the ethnic and identity politics in the State. Schools in Manipur were drawn into the conundrum of ethnic and identity politics. With the Meetei Mayek movement, schools had become new sites of ethnic contestation in the state. State has to adopt practices in an attempt to revivify democratic practice by devising ways of enhancing public discussion, debate and negotiation in areas of education so as to understand the existing socio-cultural forces and formulate a viable policy concerning education.

Index Terms: Ethnic Groups, Meetei Mayek Movement, Schools, Manipur

Introduction

Manipur has an enormous degree of internal heterogeneity in terms of the different communities having their own social and cultural practices. And, since early 1980s, the State has been witness to rising assertions and mobilizations of community identities based on their respective social, political and cultural reasoning. In fact, group mobilization and contestation is now premised more innocuously on ethnicity and cultural difference by articulating a self-identity based on their specific cultural markers. Ethnic mobilizations in Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular underline a contest over space—social, economic, political and cultural—the spaces in which they were not hitherto represented. Non-representation of ethnic communities in terms of rights, power and authority causes ethnocentric concerns to find expression in contestations in many possible ways, from demand for autonomy to claims of territoriality. In fact, forms of ethnic conflicts in all dimensions are enacted in the State.

This contestation among different communities gets further sharpened through the intervention of the State to negotiate the variegating representations between the communities. In this process, the inter-community dynamics and the meditative process of the State get intertwined to produce degrees of mobilizations among communities to secure representations as and where they find themselves less represented. This mobilization has further created a tension between different communities in the State. It is important here to understand the role of the State. 'The strategy of cultural assimilation employs the power of the State to interpenetrate and absorb politically weaker identities into a dominant core culture. Cultural assimilationist policies use State power to compel the relinquishment of certain cultural traits, they inevitably involve an element of linguistic, religious, and other value suppression' (Neil Nevitte & Charles H. Kennedy 1986: 42), because it

is the State policies that reinforce or legitimize the claims of different communities. The State policies could be on education in terms of adopting curriculum, language or dresses/uniforms etc which primarily reflect the dominant group orientation. The intervention of the State also facilitates in the construction of a culturally dominant identity among the different communities.

Among the communities in Manipur, Meeteis constitutes the majority ethnic population. However, a numerical majority does not necessarily translate itself into a dominant cultural majority. A culturally dominant majority is a construct through a process of assimilation and homogenization of the culture, one in which policies and interventions of the State play an important role. The process of constructing a dominant majority operates with an agenda of cultural assimilation. Assimilation, according to Bookman entails the elimination of differences between peoples, as smaller or weaker ethnic groups conform to the larger, dominant groups. In such circumstances, language undoubtedly plays a very important role in the assimilation process while simultaneously increasing the numbers of one group and diminishing the size and consequently the political potential of the other group (Shimray, 2001). The process of assimilation has never been a smooth and harmonious process with a tacit understanding among the communities. It evokes a strong opposition from the minorities through mobilizations among the minorities by asserting their own identities based on the distinctiveness of their cultures. Here, the language, the script and other available social resources became convenient tools for mobilization. Resisting assimilation into the dominant majority is justified by the minorities in the name of diversity and plurality.

The paper is an attempt to understand how the tension between ethnic groups is played over in many spheres, schools being one of them. Private schools, in such case, are more vulnerable to this contestation. Different groups assert different competing interests through schools. In a way, public institutions like schools got entangled in the whole politics of contestation and appropriation. To put it in another way, schools have become sites for ethnic contestation among various groups through control of the curriculum especially in the wake of the *Meitei Mayek*¹ movement. The paper, however, is not focusing on the evolution of the script nor on the controversies surrounding the actual number of alphabets of Meitei script. Rather, the focus is on how the schools have been dragged into ethnic quagmire vis-a-vis the *Meitei Mayek* movement.

Meitei Mayek Movement

The Meitei Mayek issue or Meitei Mayek movement is a movement to replace Bengali script by Meitei-Mayek and compulsory introduction of the script in the schools. It may be noted that during the 18th century, the then Manipuri King Pamheiba, under the influence of Vaishnavism, decreed the replacement of Meitei script with that of Bengali. The movement to revive the Meitei script began in the 1930s by a *Meitei* scholar, Laininghan Naoria Phullo. He developed a script with 24 alphabets and named it after him as *Naoria Mayek*. Movements to revive the script continued throughout the 1940s and subsequent decades. For example, an organization called the *Meitei Marup* was formed in 1947 to propagate the *Naoria Mayek*. Serious debates on the script began in 1950. A state level committee called the *Mayek Lupteen* Committee (MLC) was formed in 1958 to conduct a study. A sub-committee of the same group concluded that there are only 18 alphabets in the *Meitei Mayek* which was also endorsed by various conferences on the script in the 1960s and 1970s. Nine letters called the *Lom Eeyek*, which are derivatives of the previous 18 alphabets, were added so as to incorporate additional phonetic sounds (Dhiren).

In response to the Mayek movement, a state government Gazette notification² was issued in April, 1980 for implementation of Meitei Mayek and an order passed in 1983 to introduce the script in the school syllabus to be taught upto Class VI. On the 19th of January, 1983, the Education Department of the Government of Manipur, prescribed "*Meitei Mayek Tamnaba Mapi Lairik*" as text book for students of class VI.

¹ Indigenous script of the Meitei community in Manipur.

² Manipur Gazette No 33 dated April 22, 1980.

However, a new phase in the Meetei movement began with the formation of MEELAL (Meetei Erol Eyek Loina-sinlon Apunba Lup) in 2003 over the non-implementation of the introduction of Meetei Mayek in schools. The movement spearheaded by MEELAL, resorted to violent protest that included burning of the state library and books written in Bengali script. The State government, on 18 May, 2005, published a white paper which led to introduction of Meetei Mayek in the school syllabus in classes I and II in the year 2006. This particular date is commemorated as '*Mayek Chatpa Numit*'.³

Schools as New Site of Ethnic Contestation

The Meetei Mayek movement opened the Pandora's box in the ethnic and identity politics in the State. Conflict among different communities is not a new phenomenon in the State of Manipur. It has only been aggravated in the recent times with different communities asserting their own cultural and identity claims and counter-claims. Schools in Manipur are now drawn into the conundrum of ethnic and identity politics. With the Meetei Mayek movement, schools have become new sites of ethnic contestation in the state.

In Manipur, Manipuri language⁴ was declared Manipur Official Language in 1979.⁵ Meiteilon is also commonly used as the lingua franca of the various ethnic groups in the State. However, a majority of the hill communities (tribals) cannot read or write because it uses Bengali script. Tribal groups have their respective dialects and use Roman script. Language problem is not a new issue in Manipur. The language problem in Manipur began during the early 1980s when the Government of Manipur tried to introduce Meiteilon as a compulsory subject in Class X. But the issue was settled by keeping Meiteilon as an option for the tribal students in lieu of Additional English or the State's recognised tribal languages (Shimray, UA, 2001:3676).

It is important here to highlight the geographical distribution of ethnic communities in the state. The Meeteis settle in the valley districts while the hill districts are settled largely by the Nagas and Kukis. Introduction of Meetei-Mayek in the hills is strongly opposed by other ethnic communities with many organizations articulating their opposition towards introduction of Meetei-Mayek to the tribal communities. They feel that such approaches induce to "cultural imposition," and also attempt to use language issue as a political tool for ethnic assertion and hegemony (Shimray, 2007). Such a process has indeed evoked a strong reaction from other communities, thus instigating other communities to appropriate education and educational institutes like schools as a medium to assert their cultural or ethnic identity. Such a process of 'conscious' or 'unconscious assimilation' marks many interethnic encounters in Manipur. As mentioned earlier, when Manipuri or Meiteilon language was declared as Manipur Official Language in 1979, it triggered fears of 'cultural imposition' among minority groups. The Manipuri language movement to replace Bengali script by Meetei-Mayek and the demand for compulsory introduction of the script in the schools evoked a strong reaction from the minority ethnic communities in Manipur.

Private schools are more vulnerable to this contestation. Therefore, there has been an intense politics brewing over the private schools. It is therefore important here to see how the private schools manifest and respond to different cultural and political orientations of various groups and communities depending upon where they are located. In fact, they respond in specific ways to the policies of the State. Private schools in the hill districts where other ethnic communities like the Nagas and Kukis settle threatened to withdraw their affiliation from the Manipur state education board, justifying the decision on the grounds of syllabi, educational policies and administrative concerns. They cited the "imposition of *Meitei-Mayek*" and "distortion of Naga history in the syllabi" as the most important reason for their demand for withdrawal. In fact, the private schools in Naga settlement areas started to affiliate with Nagaland Board of School Education (NBSE). As first batch, more than 2000 (two thousand) Nagas students from Manipur already appeared in the Matriculation examination in Nagaland in 2007 (Shimray, 2007). They express their resentment against what they called, 'forcible imposition of foreign script, language and history'.

³ In loose translation, day of the introduction of Meetei script.

⁴ Manipuri language means Meiteilon written in Bengali script and spoken by the majority of Manipur population.

⁵ Manipur Gazette No 221 dated October 27, 1979.

Organisations like All Tribal Students Union, Manipur (ATSUM), All Naga Students Association, Manipur (ANSAM) and Kuki Student Organisation (KSO), United Naga Council (UNC) articulate their opposition towards introduction of Meitei-Mayek to the tribal communities. Even if this whole reaction to the Meitei Mayek (Meitei script) Movement is understood in the context of the political reality of the Naga's demand for a Greater Nagaland with the integration of Naga inhabited areas in Manipur, there was also opposition to introduction of Meitei Mayek in schools in Churachandpur district where Kukis largely settle. The Churachandpur District Students Union (CDSU) and its activists confiscated a the Meitei-Mayek textbooks and set them ablaze in Churachandpur town.

The government's clarification that the Meitei Mayek (Meitei script) is not imposed in these schools and that 8 tribal dialects are offered to the tribal students by the Board of Secondary Education, Manipur with an option to learn Manipuri through the Roman script have not provided a respite to the fear among other ethnic communities in the state. When ethnic groups see learning the dominant language well and fluently to be in the best interest of their children and there are social institutions available, like the schools and the religious institutions, which can help them do so, there are very few problems associated with the educational policies for ethnic minorities. But, when the same ethnic groups instead of socio-economic opportunity see stigmatization, discrimination, economic exploitation, they put up resistance and in Manipur, the Meitei Mayek movement has further complicated the already uneasy ethnic relations in the state.

In Lieu of Conclusion

Conflicts of identity leave a mark on the political, social and ideological space. Educational institutions become a crucial site of contestation. In a context where private institutions exist, all communities—the majority and the minority—use educational institutions to further their ideological perspectives. And the attempt to construct a dominant cultural majority often meets with resistance from other minority communities as they see this as a way of marginalizing and disadvantaging them. Agenda of cultural homogenization results in counter identity based mobilizations, which challenge not just the agenda of assimilation but also the authority and the legitimacy of the State. So what role should the state play? Is State a neutral entity? Does it merely manage the contest among various communities? Or does it intervene on behalf of some communities? How is the democratic State used by a group, trying to construct itself as a majority? State has to adopt practices in an attempt to revivify democratic practice by devising ways of enhancing public discussion, debate and negotiation in areas of education so as to understand the existing socio-cultural forces and formulate a viable policy concerning education.

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