



## **The Resilience and Renaissance of the Manipuri Language: Linguistic Heritage, Constitutional Recognition, and the Quest for Classical Status**

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Received: 18.08.2026; Accepted: 19.09.2026; Available online: 30.09.2026

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### **Abstract**

*The Manipuri language, which is also called Meiteilon, possesses a lengthy and unique literary and cultural history. The evolution of the language has been closely tied to the intellectual, social, and cultural activities of the people of the Manipur valley. This article looks at some of the main phases in the history of the Meitei language, focusing especially on its early literary traditions, the Puyas, the Meitei Mayek script, the incident remembered as Puya Meithaba, constitutional recognition, and the development of modern Manipuri literature. It also looks at the ongoing demand for Classical Language status and considers the importance of supporting this claim by carrying out systematic historical, textual, and linguistic research.*

*The full history of the Manipuri language and literature cannot be grasped simply by looking at its constitutional recognition or by focusing on the revival of its script; instead, all its older literary traditions, manuscript culture, oral heritage, and modern literary development form part of a single, ongoing narrative. The revival of the Meitei Mayek script and its integration into digital technology have opened up new opportunities for preserving and more widely using the language. Yet, in the end, the survival of a language relies on its presence in education, in literature, in public life, in research, and in everyday communication. The future of Manipuri therefore will depend on how well its historical inheritance can be linked to the requirements of present-day speakers and to the quickly changing digital environment.*

**Keywords:** Manipuri language; Meitei Mayek; Eighth Schedule; Puya Meithaba; Classical Language; Manipuri literature; linguistic revival.

### **Introduction: The Importance of Manipuri Language Day:**

Manipuri Language Day, which is celebrated on 20 August under the name Manipuri Longi Numit, holds a significant position in the modern history of the Manipuri language. It is linked with the constitutional recognition of Manipuri in India. The Parliament passed the Constitution (Seventy-first Amendment) Bill in 1992, and the amendment then obtained the President's assent on 31 August; Manipuri, together with Konkani and Nepali, was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

Government of India, The Constitution (Seventy-First Amendment) Act, 1992, Gazette of India, 31 Aug. 1992.

For Manipuri speakers, however, the significance of their language cannot be measured simply by means of a constitutional amendment. A language contains the memories, the experiences, the values, and the cultural expressions of the community which uses it; Manipuri has maintained a considerable literary tradition and a rich store of cultural knowledge over a long period. Although constitutional recognition has given the language an important institutional status, legal recognition by itself is not enough to guarantee its ongoing development.

The true measure of a language lies in the way it is actually used; it must be kept alive in classrooms, in books, in administrative settings, in the media, in public communication, and in family life. This point is even more significant in the current multilingual and digital world since younger people are exposed to a number of languages and to new forms of communication every day. Therefore, any serious debate regarding the future of Manipuri must include both the preservation of its historical heritage and the needs of modern life.

The issue therefore isn't merely how to preserve what has survived from the past, but also how to make the language meaningful and useful to the present generation and to those who will use it in the future.

### **Historical Antiquity and the Early Literature of Manipur:**

The early development of the Manipuri language and its literature calls for a careful combination of traditional sources and modern scholarly research. The literary history of the language has been put together on the basis of manuscripts, traditional narratives, literary histories, and later academic investigations. A key work in this area is Ch. Manihar Singh's *A History of Manipuri Literature*, which was published by the Sahitya Akademi in 1996. Another important source for gaining an understanding of the older literary traditions of Manipuri is N. Khelchandra Singh's *Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas*, published by the Education Department of the Government of Manipur in 1969.<sup>2</sup>

The Puyas and various other traditional texts are especially valuable since they contain information concerning the literary, intellectual, religious, and social history of the Meitei people; they offer a significant insight into the worldviews and cultural practices of previous generations, and works like Numit Kappa and Poireiton Khunthok have likewise retained a position in the academic study of ancient Manipuri literature.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, any assertions regarding the age of specific texts should be treated with scholarly care since the traditional accounts, the surviving manuscript copies, and the later interpretations do not always give the same details about the dates and the historical circumstances. It is therefore necessary to make a distinction between what is part of the literary tradition and what can be established independently by means of textual, historical, and linguistic research.

The fact that such caution is taken does not diminish the value of the traditional literary heritage; on the contrary, it makes the study of that heritage more significant. By carefully

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Ch. Manihar Singh, *A History of Manipuri Literature* (Sahitya Akademi, 1996); N. Khelchandra Singh, *Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas* (Education Department, Government of Manipur, 1969).  
Manipur University, "Department of Manipuri: Course Materials and References for Old Manipuri Literature."

examining the manuscripts and other relevant sources, it is possible to build a more solid academic basis for understanding the development of the Manipuri language and literature.

### **Meitei Mayek: The Indigenous Script and Its Development:**

Meitei Mayek is the native script of the Meitei people in Manipur, India. People have used it to write the Meitei language for centuries. Over time, the script changed in both form and use. Some believe Meitei Mayek dates back to ancient times, but written records from before the 18th century are rare.<sup>4</sup>

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Bengali script replaced Meitei Mayek in most writing. This happened because of political and cultural changes. Still, Meitei Mayek survived in religious texts and through oral tradition.

In the late 20th century, people in Manipur worked to bring back Meitei Mayek. Teachers, writers, and activists pushed for its use in schools and official documents. The government of Manipur later supported these efforts. Today, Meitei Mayek is taught in many schools in Manipur. The script now appears in books, newspapers, and digital media. This revival has helped preserve the Meitei language and culture for future generations.<sup>5</sup>

The Meitei Mayek holds a special position in the linguistic and cultural history of Manipuri; it forms an important element of the Meitei people's writing tradition and has always been closely linked with the historical development of Manipuri literature.

The development of the script has never been entirely continuous, since at various times its use declined and was then followed by attempts to recover it, to standardise it and to promote it. The present-day revival of Meitei Mayek is therefore not simply about restoring an old writing system; it is also linked to the wider issue of cultural memory and to the relationship between the current generation and its literary past.

The introduction of Unicode support has added a new aspect to this revival. According to the Unicode documentation, a modern standardized group of 27 basic letters is provided together with vowel signs, punctuation marks, and numerals, as well as records of the historical additions. It is important to note that different sources may give different figures for the number of characters according as they are speaking about the modern standardized version or the historical forms of the script.<sup>6</sup>

The Meitei Mayek revival can therefore be understood from both a cultural and a practical point of view. By being introduced into schools and used more widely in public life, it has helped to reestablish contemporary literacy with an indigenous writing system. Moreover, standardization and Unicode encoding have enabled the script to be used on computers, smartphones, and other digital platforms.

Yet merely having the script technically encoded is not sufficient for it to remain alive; it must be put to regular use in classrooms, books, newspapers, official communication, software, digital publications, and in everyday writing. The ongoing development of Meitei Mayek will thus rely on both institutional support and the willingness of speakers to employ it in ordinary life.

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The Unicode Consortium, "Meitei Mayek," The Unicode Standard, Version 16.0.0, 2024.  
Manipur University, "Department of Manipuri: Course Materials and References for Old Manipuri Literature."

### **Puya Meithaba and the Disruption of the Literary Tradition:**

In the eighteenth century, Manipur experienced great political and religious changes. Accounts of history from the time of King Pamheiba, who was also known as Garibniwaz, speak of the destruction or burning of the Meitei manuscripts. This event is generally recalled as Puya Meithaba and has thus obtained a prominent position in the cultural memory of the Meitei people.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that manuscripts were destroyed had consequences that went beyond the simple loss of written documents. As well as containing literary works, they also held information about belief systems, social practices, historical memory, and indigenous knowledge; thus, their disappearance had an effect on the passing on of knowledge from one generation to the next.

The situation still needs to be examined carefully from a historical point of view since different accounts give different descriptions of the incident and its particulars. It does not follow that every traditional assertion can be regarded as a historically verified fact in itself, and so a careful study has to take into account the existing manuscripts, the historical sources, and the research of experts before coming to any conclusions regarding specific events.

It does not reduce the cultural significance of Puya Meithaba's memory. The incident still has an impact on conversations regarding the loss, the recovery, and the preservation of Manipuri literary heritage, and it also serves as a reminder of the vulnerability of written traditions and the need to preserve manuscripts for future generations.

### **The Path to the 71st Amendment: Constitutional Recognition:**

The fact that Manipuri was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1992 marked an important point in the modern history of the language; this was no single legislative action but the outcome of continuous public and political campaigns for linguistic recognition.<sup>8</sup>

The Constitution (Seventy-first Amendment) Act officially incorporated Manipuri into the constitutional framework of the scheduled languages, and parliamentary records show that the legislation was discussed and passed in August 1992, with presidential assent being given later that same month.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of constitutional recognition was not only practical but also symbolic; it helped to strengthen the standing of Manipuri and gave it official status as one of India's scheduled languages. It also meant that the speakers of the language received recognition of their long-standing linguistic and cultural heritage.

Yet recognition also brings with it responsibilities. All educational institutions, writers, researchers, government agencies, and members of the community have a part to play in making sure that the language keeps on developing. It is possible for a language to retain its constitutional status even if it encounters difficulties in the areas of education, publication, administration, technology, and everyday use. Constitutional recognition must therefore be seen as an important foundation rather than as the final stage.

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Ch. Manihar Singh, *A History of Manipuri Literature* (Sahitya Akademi, 1996).  
Government of India, *The Constitution (Seventy-First Amendment) Act, 1992*.  
Parliament of India, "Journal of Parliamentary Information," vol. 38, Dec. 1992.  
Volume-XII, Issue-V

### **The Resurgence of Meitei Mayek:**

The push for constitutional recognition went hand in hand with, if not exactly formed as part of, the revival of Meitei Mayek, and the issues relating to the form and standardization of the script as well as its incorporation into educational institutions gradually became significant elements in educational and governmental planning.

The Government of Manipur's participation in the process of developing a form of the Meitei Mayek script suitable for digital encoding is also noted in the 2008 Unicode working document. This was a significant achievement since it introduced an indigenous writing system into the technological setting of the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup>

Public activism also contributed to the revival of the script. The recollection of the destruction of the manuscripts became linked to a broader cultural initiative aimed at recovering and reinforcing the indigenous writing tradition. However, the survival of any script finally comes down to regular use. A script cannot stay alive simply on the basis of symbolic recognition; it must be seen in books, classrooms, official documents, software, websites, digital publications, and all other forms of modern communication.

The Meitei Mayek revival should therefore be seen as a continuous process, standardization, education, publication and digital development being interconnected elements of it.

### **The Modern Literary Renaissance:**

The rise of modern Manipuri literature occurred together with broader changes in education, society and literary institutions. The introduction of printing, formal education, literary societies and modern publishing provided writers with new opportunities for expressing their ideas in ways that were different from those of the earlier literary traditions.

The literary history of Ch. Manihar Singh offers a significant insight into the development of Manipuri literature, and the various activities and awards of the Sahitya Akademi also show the position which Manipuri literature has attained in the broader context of Indian literature.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Lamabam Kamal Singh holds a prominent position in the literary history of modern Manipur, and his work, *Madhabi*, is considered a significant addition to Manipuri literature; an English version of it was issued by the Manipur State Kala Akademi in 1975. Hijam Anganghal Singh was also a major figure in the development of Manipuri poetry, as his collection *Khamba Thoibi Sheireng* shows a continued literary engagement with the famous Khamba-Thoibi tradition.<sup>12</sup>

A notable aspect of contemporary Manipuri literature is the connection between oral tradition and written literature, oral stories, legends, cultural memories and traditional themes having continued to serve as a source of inspiration for modern writers. Meanwhile,

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The Unicode Consortium, "L2/08-136: Meitei Mayek," Unicode Working Documents, 2008.

Sahitya Akademi, "Akademi Awards: Manipuri."

Lamabam Kamal, *Madhabi*, translated by R. K. Birendra Singh (Manipur State Kala Akademi, 1975).

these materials have been reinterpreted by the writers through the use of new literary forms and as a result of changes in social experience.<sup>13</sup>

Modern Manipuri literature may therefore be regarded not only as a break with the past but as a continuous dialogue with it; although the literary tradition has changed, many of its earlier cultural resources are still relevant.

### **The Present Demand for Classical Language Status:**

The call for Manipuri to be granted the status of a Classical Language has now become a significant current issue. Yet any debate regarding this demand must rely on the criteria set by the Government of India.

The criteria which were published in 2014 took into account the substantial age of the language, its original literary tradition, and a body of ancient literature which has been considered a valuable heritage by successive generations of speakers. These criteria were altered in 2024. As a result, the Government granted Classical Language status to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese and Bengali. Information given by the Ministry of Culture and quoted in this paper from 2026 states that eleven languages are now recognised as Classical Languages, Manipuri not being among them.<sup>14</sup>

In this situation, the need to study Manipuri should be the subject of thorough scholarly investigation. Although there is an existing manuscript tradition and a lengthy literary history, which provide a solid foundation for such research, assertions about its antiquity and classical status must be backed by evidence that is in careful agreement with the present governmental criteria.

There thus requires further systematic study of manuscripts, textual chronology, historical linguistics, philology, and literary history, and critical editions of the major texts together with a thorough recording of manuscript traditions would also help to enhance the academic understanding of the language's historical development.

The issue of granting Classical Language status should therefore lead to more research rather than merely involve a cultural claim. A substantial and well-documented body of scholarly work would offer a more solid basis for assessing the historical and literary importance of Manipuri.

### **Manipuri Language in the Modern Era:**

The future of the Manipuri language is increasingly going to depend on the extent to which it is used in the digital world, and entry of Meetei Mayek into the Unicode Standard was a major achievement since it has enabled the script to be displayed correctly in today's digital systems.<sup>15</sup>

At the moment the main priority is to produce a much larger collection of digital materials for the language. The old manuscripts and more recent books can be turned into digital form,

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"Performing the Landscape: Orature around Loktak Lake and the Love Story of Khamba Thoibi," Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, vol. 14, no. 2, 2022. Ministry of Culture, Government of India, "Criteria for Declaring Classical Language," Press Information Bureau, 5 Feb. 2014; Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Cabinet Approves Conferring Status of Classical Language to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese and Bengali Languages," 3 Oct. 2024.

The Unicode Consortium, "Meetei Mayek," The Unicode Standard, Version 16.0.0, 2024.

properly catalogued and then made available so that people can search them. Such resources would be useful for various purposes including optical character recognition, spell-checking, machine translation, speech technology and other applications relating to language.

Moreover, digital dictionaries and online libraries would make it easier for students, teachers, and researchers – indeed even younger readers – to access older texts, and since the language has a long tradition of manuscripts, digitization is not merely a technological measure; it is also of help in terms of preservation.

Digital growth should be regarded as a way of helping to keep the language alive. If historical materials are properly digitised and people can access them, they will be of use not only to academic researchers but also to those involved in teaching and to the general public. The availability of such resources might even cause younger speakers to become more interested in the older forms of the language, something which had been very difficult to achieve in the past.

### **Conclusion:**

The Manipuri language's history shows an ongoing interaction involving its literary tradition, historical issues, cultural reawakening, and eventually constitutional recognition. Manuscript traditions are quite useful here, giving good material to understand the community's linguistic and literary past. In 1992, the constitutional recognition actually gave Manipuri a significant position among India's scheduled languages.<sup>16</sup>

Meitei Mayek's revival and the effort to standardize it have really made the link between the old writing system and how people use it for reading and writing now much stronger. And Unicode support took this link even further because it lets the script be used inside current digital systems. All these are important steps, but they have to be backed up by constant teaching, research, publication work, and people using it every day.

Now, the talk about getting Classical Language status for Manipuri gives us another chance to look at its history, using proper academic study. Instead of just saying it is ancient, future research really could focus on things like making critical editions of texts, documenting manuscripts, historical linguistics, philological studies, and careful comparing with the government's actual criteria now.

So, Manipuri Language Day can be seen in two ways: first, it is celebrating a significant accomplishment in the language's constitutional history. Second, it is a chance to think about what comes next for the language.

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