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Problems of Meeteiron Spelling (Writing in Bengali Script)

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Abstract: The present paper aims at providing the inconsistent spelling system of Meeteiron (written in Bengali-Assamese script) and its problem. Its inconsistent system causes a lot of inconvenience to the users, particularly the native speakers. The present existing spelling system is so inconsistent that the same writer or author seems to use different spellings for the same word in the same book even in the same page also. We have spelling rules but no one cares about it. So every writer or user seems to be a spelling expert. But this problem is found less if we write in the present existing Meetei Mayek. But, we need to use its diacritics, punctuations etc. properly in order to reduce the present spelling (written in Bengali) problems of the language.

Keywords: Diacritics, Mapi Mayek, Lonsum Mayek, Cheitap Mayek, Khudam Mayek, Cheising Mayek, Maatra.

Writing represents a language. People gain their knowledge through writing. It has been taking a great role as a communication channel. It can be an important factor in establishing or maintaining a dialect as a standard one. A written language has great prestige. It is precisely the permanence of writing – the possibility of storing

knowledge for decades, even centuries – that makes it such a valuable tool for any society.

Spelling problem in Meeteiron (written in Bengali-Assamese script) is not a new one. Its spelling system is very inconsistent. Different writers or authors have different spellings for the same word. Even the same writer has different spellings of the same word from one book to another or one page to another even in the same page also. The present existing spelling system of Meeteiron is in a pitiable state. Everyone knows it, but no one cares about it – but they continue to use the same practice.

During the reign of Meetei King, Pamheiba (Garibaniwaz, 1709–1748) A.D., the Meeteis adopted Hindu religion. Before the advent of the Hindu religion in Manipur, the Meeteis used their indigenous script, Meetei Mayek. But the Meeteis adopted Hindu practices in 1729 A.D., and recorded many literary works written about the pre-Hindu religion as well as other historical documents were burnt and imposed Bengali script between (1709-1941) A.D. to replace Meetei Mayek and subsequently became the official script of *Konung* (Palace) and consequently the use of Meetei Mayek for all genres of writing declined considerably. As a result, the Bengali script has been used by the Meeteis as their own script since then.

It is very important to have a consistent spelling system for a standard language. Otherwise, it may cause many problems to the learners as well as the users particularly the native speakers. So we need to have some strict rules for spelling. Since the very beginning of the use of Meeteiron spelling (written in Bengali-Assamese script), there was a great problem. It is because of the excessive number of letters of Bengali alphabet.

Meeteiron is very rich in its literature. We consider it as a developed language. But still there is neither an encyclopedia nor a standard dictionary for language. So it is a huge handicap for the users, especially for the Meeteis. The most important thing is the spelling. Since there was no standard dictionary, every one may write any spelling whatever they liked. Since the very beginning of its use, there

existed a great controversy. It is still there and even increased day by day. Now it is completely independent from any rules. No one seems to follow the spelling rules.

During those days, everyone felt the need of the rules of spelling. So the government of the time formed a spelling committee to look after the problems of Meeteiron spelling. Sir Raja Drumba Singh, Judicial Member, was the president of the committee. After a long study of about 2/3 years, in the year 1925, they formed some rules of Meeteiron spelling. But it could not solve the problems and again it was studied by the experts and educationists of the time and gave their opinions. It is said that the Deputy Inspector of Schools of the days also submitted his opinion about the spelling rules. After this, in the year 1934, the Education Standing Committee modified the rules again. And it was approved by the Maharaja and state government in the year 1935. Then the authors and writers started to write school text books with the rules. During those days all the school textbooks were printed at the state Government press. There were two proof readers in the press to check the spellings. Shri Hawaibam Nabadwipchandra was one of them. The rule was strictly followed by the users. But after the Second World War, it all became a chaos. The government of the time could not tolerate the spelling system and called a meeting of the expert committee and discussed the necessity of re-modification of the spelling system. The expert committee looked over the former spelling rules vividly and made some modifications. It was published as “Manipuri Banaan Kanglon” in Manipur Gazette Extraordinary No. 17-E-101 dated July 28, 1969 with the order to use/follow it by the school textbook writers of the state. But it is very unfortunate that the government ignored it. They did not care about the modified rules of the spelling. So, at last, the authors and writers started to use their own spellings and started to cause inconsistency again.

In the year 1980 there came into existence Manipur University in the state. Everyone hoped that the ‘Manipuri Language and Literature Department’ will help to improve the existing spelling system of the time. On the contrary, those students who were learning post-Graduate courses in the said Department have come across different spelling systems as they have been taught by different teachers. Consequently,

when they became teachers in different institutions, they started teaching the different spelling systems. Thus, the existence of spelling problem even more deteriorated and there seemed no immediate solution to it. Then it became more inconsistent than the former. There are two important reasons for spelling inconsistency. One is the local dailies and the other, the unfit primary teachers of the time.

During those days, most of the press machines of the local newspapers were very small. The Bengali-Assamese letters were not made in the state. They brought it from Calcutta or Guwahati. Most of the press did not have enough / appropriate letters due to which they faced a lot of problems. Frequently, they faced problems of lack of letters and sometimes they used substitute letters which seemed to be similar in pronunciation / sound. For example, for writing the letter ‘ঐ’ in the word ‘water’ or ‘God’ they had no sufficient letter ‘ঐ’; then they used the letter ‘ই’ instead of ‘ঐ’. It happened frequently to other letters too. After sometime it became a culture which resulted in an inconsistent spelling problem. Soon, such types of inconsistent spelling increased more and more. Still, it can be seen even in the local dailies. Now it seems to have different spelling systems for every newspaper. Some papers write ‘শনা’ instead of ‘সনা’ [gold]. In this way newspapers also play a great role in bringing out the different spelling systems in the language.

On the other hand, in the early period there were no qualified primary teachers. So, those who could read and write their names were appointed as primary teachers. As a result, they could not teach the students properly. In the meantime, the state government also ignored the spelling system. At last, after some time, everyone seems to have forgotten the spelling rules and started to use their own spellings without hesitation. Nowadays, one can say that the existing Meeteiron spelling system is absolutely independent. No one cares about its rules. All the users seem themselves to be an expert. They write in their own spellings. It is a very dangerous problem, especially for the students and teachers. The confusion is which spelling should the students use and how would the teachers evaluate them? It is a difficult problem.

Lonsum / Lom Mayek (Unreleased letters):

Meetei Script	IPA	Meetei Script	IPA
𑜋	k	𑜊	l
𑜌	m	𑜍	p
𑜎	n	𑜏	t
𑜐	ŋ	𑜑	i

The above mentioned examples show that Meetei Mayek has two separate forms, especially the seven consonants viz. k, l, m, p, n, t and ŋ depending on their occurrence as initial and final. Initial occurrence of Meetei Mayek is called *Mapi Mayek* while syllabic final occurrence is called *Lonsum Mayek*.

Cheitap Mayek [Vowels Signs including maatra]:

Meetei Script	IPA	Meetei Script	IPA
𑜒	u	𑜓	i
𑜔	a	𑜕	e
𑜖	o	𑜗	əu
𑜙	əi	𑜚	ŋ

Khudam Mayek [punctuation mark including diacritics]:

Meetei	Diacritics	Meetei	Punctuation
• (<i>Lum</i>)	High tone mark	𑜀 (<i>Cheikhei</i>)	• (full stop)
– (<i>Apun</i>)	Cluster mark		

Cheising Mayek (numerals):

Meetei Numerals	IPA	Arabic Numerals
᱆	/p ^h un/	0
᱇	/əmə/	1
᱈	/əni/	2
᱉	/əhum/	3
᱊	/məri/	4
᱋	/məŋa/	5
᱌	/təruk/	6
ᱍ	/təret/	7
ᱎ	/nipal/	8
ᱏ	/mapəl/	9

Meetei Mayek:

Consonants:

The following are the consonants of Meeteiron:

᱁, ᱂, ᱃, ᱄, ᱅, ᱆, ᱇, ᱈, ᱉, ᱊, ᱋, ᱌, ᱍ, ᱎ, ᱏ, ᱐, ᱑, ᱒, ᱓, ᱔, ᱕, ᱖, ᱗, ᱘, ᱙, ᱚ, ᱛ, ᱜ, ᱝ, ᱞ, ᱟ, ᱠ, ᱡ, ᱢ, ᱣ, ᱤ, ᱥ, ᱦ, ᱧ, ᱨ, ᱩ, ᱪ, ᱫ, ᱬ, ᱭ, ᱮ, ᱯ, ᱰ, ᱱ, ᱲ, ᱳ, ᱴ, ᱵ, ᱶ, ᱷ, ᱸ, ᱹ, ᱺ, ᱻ, ᱼ, ᱽ, ᱾, ᱿ and ᱽᱰ.

Vowels:

There are six vowel sounds in Meeteiron. They are:

᱁, ᱂, ᱃, ᱄, ᱅, and ᱆.

Monophthongs:

In Meetei Mayek, there are five Monophthongs. They are:

᱁, ᱂, ᱃, ᱄, and ᱅.

Examples:

ক	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫	/ka/
কি	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/ki/
কু	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/ku/
কে	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/ke/
কো	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/ko/

Diphthongs:

In Meeteiron, there are six diphthongs. They are:

əi, əu, ai, au, oi and ui.

əi	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/kəi/
əu	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/kəu/
ai	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/kai/
au	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/kau/
oi	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/koi/
ui	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜃𑜫	/kui/

But we are very fortunate that Meetei Mayek (27 Scripts) had been started to be learned in the schools gradually. The present existing spelling problem will be reduced if we use these 27 meetei scripts in place of the former Bengali-Assamese script. If so, there may not be any more problem with the language. But we need to use all the necessary diacritics, punctuations, etc. properly to maintain consistency in the spelling of the words in our writing. Since Meeteiron is a tonal language, we need to use the tone marker properly in order to read the words correctly by the users, especially for the non-native speakers.

Now, everyone seems to ignore the use of the diacritic (*lom*). If we write in this script, most of the problem of spelling would be solved.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, we learn that the spelling problems in Meeteilon writing with Bengali-Assamese script can be reduced if we use the present 27 Meetei Mayek scripts. But we can't say that it will completely solve the problems of the language. Still, there are some problems also in Meetei script, especially in the loaned words. As such, we need further study about it in order to solve the problems completely.

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