

Dr Mohendra Irengbam. June 25 2023

THERE WILL ALWAYS BE AN INTACT MANIPUR MANIPUR A CRADLE OF MEITEI CIVILISATION



Ancient British residence in Imphal in 16 acres of land before the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891.
Modern civilisation in Manipur began with the British occupation of Manipur on April 27 1891.

The melody of waters filled
The fresh and boundless wood.
And torrents dashed, and rivulets played,
And fountains spouted in the shade.

- William Cullen Bryant
(The romantic American poet of late 19th century)

The above stanza, extracted from the poem *An Indian at the Burial place of his Fathers* sums up my memory of Manipur.

While thinking of writing a general epilogue to my ongoing narratives, keeping my emotions at bay, I found myself double taking. It has not escaped my understanding that my ignorance seemed to widen with everything I read about Manipur. Yet, somehow, I came close to determining my conclusion that the Meiteis, as the original inhabitants of Manipur had a civilisation, which is something I can hang on to, tinged with little nuggets of warmth in my heart, and making it an easier ending to swallow.

This then, follows a question I want to ask myself, whether Meiteis had a civilisation. This query came up as a reflection from the relevance and implications of my narrative findings, and in view of my simple understanding, that has come about from reading intellectuals who describe civilisation as an advanced state of human development, *pertinent to a particular era*.



Ancient Meitei woman spinning the yarn. Ancient Meitei girl weaving at her handloom.
(Photo credit: public domain).

We know from our recent history that Meiteis became 'civilised' after their conversion to Hinduism in the early 18th century, in the same way the Hills people became, in Manipur after the arrival of Christianity, and in a big way in mid-20th century.

The whiff of Modern civilisation, by which I mean the influences of Western thought, values, economic and political systems, and in some cases, religious and spiritual beliefs, began to waft into the Meitei psyche after the British occupation. But the taste of Western civilisation was available to Meiteis after WWII, which made an important contribution to the present ultra-modern Meitei civilisation.

But the question I have been asking myself relates to whether the Meiteis had an ancient civilisation before they embraced Hinduism in 1717 CE?

Before I begin my journey into civilisation, I want to clear in my mind what is meant by civilisation in simple terms. I take it that civilisation is a state of human society with its well-developed social organisation and culture. An advanced civilisation having a lot to do with technology. For instance, ploughing a field with a pair of oxen or a horse, is less civilised from ploughing with a tractor.

Technology cannot be separated from human civilisation, and human civilisation cannot develop without the help of technology. The two are interrelated. So, the corollary is a more advanced civilisation has a more advanced technology. That is why the Western civilisation in the last few centuries has been more advanced than the oriental civilisation. Because technologies come from the West. Technologies in Japan and China are imitations from the West.

Next, I want to be clear on my mind what is meant by the words, ancient and modern civilisations. We know "ancient" means times long past that no longer exist, while the meaning of "modern" is not what we think. Academically speaking, 'modern' covers a period in history since around 1500 CE. In general, we talk about *recent* things when we speak of modernity.

The word "civilisation" also has some explaining to do. The word "civilisation" has become a confusing word and perhaps, a dirty word. Originally, it was used by Europeans who thought they had a duty to "civilise" the barbaric people – non-Europeans. This act of civilising people has been called the "White Man's burden". Nineteenth century Europeans believed them to be the civilised people while the rest like Indians, Africans and Asiatic were 'natives' bereft of modern civilisation.

The concept of civilisation has merely been the justification for colonialism, imperialism, genocide, and coercive acculturation. We in South Asia, only came to know about this Western concept, following our introduction to Western education and English literature.

Learning English literature gives you a chance to find your inspiration and creativity. It also tells you about the world in general, through novels, poetry, and plays. That is why English language is taught all over the world, now, including France that hated English language. Since 2015, with the introduction of a law on higher education & research, all French higher education institutions like universities, have the right to teach classes in English. About 40% of European Union (EU) citizens speak English as a second foreign language. Even after Brexit it is still the language spoken in the EU Parliament in Brussels.

I can write this article because of English literature. Reading English literature tells us that civilisation does have a broad definition, though it has a variety of meanings. This Western word civilisation comes from Latin word "civis", meaning "citizen" or "living in cities". The term thus, entails people living in group dwellings in cities, and with a social process whereby societies achieve an "advanced state" of intellectual, cultural, and material development.

The first human civilisations were the nomadic hunter-gatherers. These prehistoric humans, until about 11,000 to 12,000 BCE (about the time Meitei ancestors arrived and stayed in the caves of surrounding hill ranges of Manipur) learnt enough knowledge to recognise edible food to sustain them. They knew how to use fire and move on when the food supply became exhausted locally.

As their knowledge advanced and developed new technologies, they came down to the Imphal plain or Manipur valley to start growing food grains, such as Chakhao Poireiton and learnt to use fire for cooking and warming themselves.

As they began to settle down with agriculture ie domesticating plants, they also learned to domesticate animals, such as Meitei hui (dog) from wild wolves. This was about 10, 000 year ago. So, they became more civilised.

Civilisations became to be understood as consisting of two components – (1) physical development, such as urban planning, agriculture, technology, and so on, and (2) human intellectual development, such as high social standards, behaviour, modern religious beliefs and so forth.



Medieval Meiteis in Burma.



Kanglasha (Lion) in Kangla.

Medieval Meitei civilisation with music and sculpture.

(Photo Credit: Public domain. For educational purposes)

Civilisations seem to come and end, such as the Babylonian civilisation, around 2,000 BCE and the two we know best, the Indus valley civilisation (3,300-1,400 BCE) and the Egyptian civilisation (3,150-2,150 BCE). They had many basic similarities but differed also in significant ways. The Greek civilisation followed around 3,500 BCE.

The European civilisation began in earnest about 1,300 CE. Technically, their civilisation began around 30,00 – 15,000 BCE when the first tool technology was brought to Europe by Homo sapiens and their basic cultural adaptations to their new environment.

The European civilisation reached a very high point in the period known as *The Age of Reason* (1558 – 1648 CE). It was the period of Shakespeare, Bacon, Rembrandt, Galileo, and Descartes.

According to some modern philosophers, when great civilisations exist simultaneously, they are likely to clash. Samuel Huntington from Harvard University (USA), a conservative political scientist, who became very eminent after his thesis "The Clash of Civilizations" (1990s), defined civilisation as the "highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have, which distinguishes humans from other species." I am afraid, this is quite a mouthful.

Huntington speculated that the defining characteristic of the 21st century will be a clash of civilizations. According to him conflicts between civilisations will supplant the conflicts between nation-states and ideologies that characterized the 19th and 20th centuries. These views have been strongly challenged by others like Edward Said, and Amartya Sen.

[Amartya Sen is an Indian. He is Thomas W. Lamont University Professor, and Professor of Economics and Philosophy, at Harvard University. He has been awarded Nobel Prize "For his contributions to welfare of economics"]

I think I agree with Huntington. Currently we are having a clash of civilisations. Such is the clash between Chinese and American civilisations because of technological innovations.

Huntington divides the world's cultures into seven current civilizations: Western, Latin American, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu and Slavic-Orthodox (Huntington 1993:26). He has mixed feelings as to whether Africa has civilisation. Huntington's civilisation that, excludes Africa, seems to be defined primarily by religious culture with a few off-the-cuff exceptions.

The phrase 'The class of civilisations' was first used by Albert Camus in his thesis of this title in 1946. Camus, a French philosopher, and an atheist, who was very well-known for his philosophy of 'absurdism'. A theory that existence in general is absurd. The main point of existentialism is the philosophical belief that we are each responsible for creating purpose or meaning in our own lives. *Our individual purpose and meaning are not given to us by Gods.*

Anthropologists on the other, have distinguished civilisations, in which many of the people live in cities from the people who live in small settlements, or nomadic groups that subsist by foraging, hunting, or working small horticultural gardens. Here, civilisation means a distinct society - *whether complex and city dwelling, or simple and tribal.*

That means civilisation is a sort of culture with a specific set of ideas and customs. However, most people regard civilisation as having more intricate cultures, including literature, professional art, architecture, organised religion, and complex customs associated with elite.

Many postmodernists (A handful of Western philosophers who define how society has progressed to an era beyond modernity), argue *there is no difference between civilisations and tribal societies, and each does what it can with the resources it has.* They are reluctant to use the word civilisation; rather, they prefer to use neutral terms "urban society" or "intensive agricultural society".

Still, the word civilisation in common academic use, remains in describing specific societies, such as the Maya civilisation or Inca civilisation. In this context I use the phrase "Meitei civilisation" in a broad academic sense.

And for this article, I would like to leave the discussion of the complexities of what is civilisation, in the fertile brains of great thinkers. For the man in Clapham omnibus like me, it suffices that Meitei civilisation started when the Meitei society had a fairly developed material (physical) and spiritual resources, and an advanced state in social development in a particular era.



Ancient Meitei swordsman. [Ancient Meitei civilisation] Ancient Meitei sword and spear *fight*.
Improved technology for fighting a war
(Photo credit: public domain, For educational purposes.)

A cradle of civilisation for you and me, is simply a location like Manipur where a group of people, the Meiteis had a society characterised by the development of a political state (monarchy of Meitei Ningthou), social stratifications consisting of people in different socioeconomic groups with varied social status, a religious system, a developed written language, and stable food supply.



Meidingu Surchandra [186-1890 CE] and his brothers, especially Tikendrajit, brought about the end of ancient Meitei civilisation in Manipur.

While the ancient civilisations, such as Maya civilisation that began in about 250 CE, and Inca civilisation during the 12th century had disappeared, Meitei civilisation had been maintained and been increasing in the post WWII period.

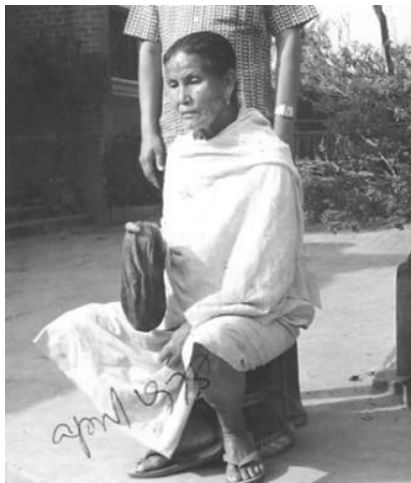
A brief review of the Meitei version of Old Times. A bit like Roby Burns' universal song 'Auld Lang Syne'. [Scottish accent of Old Long Since], I believe, would help to conjure up a sense of ancient Meitei civilisation though I am afraid, it is rather repetitive and at the risk of being jejune. But it will be helpful to form a picture in our mind how the ancient Meitei civilisation developed.



Bonny and flamboyant Jubraj Tikendrajit, the most popular but displaced Hero Prince of civilised Modern Manipur with a monarchical system whose legal system did not depend on the whims of the ruling king.



My son Neil and my wife Margaret in front of the Modern Thrones, red velvet, and mahogany, of Meitei King and Queen from the time of Churachand Maharaj and Ngangbi Maharani at the New Palace. An advanced monarchical system of civilisation (Courtesy: Ningthou Leishemba Sanajaoba Singh).



Civilised Hinduised Meiteis. (L) Author's mother Mani Debi, praying, doing the Mala Jaap at home in Imphal. (R) Author's eldest brother Gokulchandra in meditation on the bank of Radhakund near Goberdhan Hill, 25 km from Brindaban after immersion of our father's *Asthi* in the holy pond.

An advanced philosophical and metaphysical concept about God

At the risk of evoking monotony and being jejune, here is a bit of repetitive literature. Meitei [*Meithei in English accent*] is the name given to a union of seven tribes (*salai* in vernacular) 'that came to Manipur from different directions', as EW Dunn felt in his bones (*Gazetteer of Manipur, 1886, reprint 1975 p13*), and repeated by TC Hodson (*Meitheis, 1908, reprint 1975 p73*).

I have quoted these mostly outdated British authors, just to show that I do not agree with them. There was no way that they would have known the migration of different Meitei tribes from elsewhere outside of Manipur. They had no historical, archaeological, or anthropological evidence to support their guess work. I have quoted them just to indicate that their assertion was humbug.

What is authentic from history is that the seven tribes in Manipur *who were there*, (Primordial or autochthones) and who formed a Meitei nation under the tutelage of Pakhangba in the first century (32 CE), considered themselves as one great family, while maintaining their own tribal customs and ethos.

Such a unity did away with the old intertribal fighting and paved the way for civilisation. Pakhangba went ahead, instilling a sense of solidarity and creating a common language of Meitei Lon, while allowing each clan to keep some of their tribal characteristics, dialects, and topography, such as Moirang, Khuman and Angom.

If oral traditions are to be believed, the historical milestone firmly points to the *Chingkhong Poireiton* tribe as the harbinger of Meitei nation. Ancient Meitei Puya, known as *Poireiton Khunthok*, though rather mumbo-jumbo like in its narrative migrating from the Land of the dead to the Land of the living. Perhaps it means coming out of the dark caves to settle at the foothills of mountains with bright sunlight. They also learnt how to produce fire, by the method of friction of wood on wood accidentally.

Poireiton habitation is authenticated by the fire that is still burning at Andro, and the Chakhao Poireiton – a species of dark rice named after him.

The formation of Meitei nation is like the English nation that was created in the early medieval period, about 800 CE, by the unification various small Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England because of frequent invasions by the Vikings from Denmark.

Meiteis are thus, from historical and anthropological perspectives, the approved name of the merged seven ethnic groups of people in Manipur valley, who were originally inhabitants in the mountains surrounding the valley. The other tribals who have settled sporadically in these mountain ranges were later migrants from outside Manipur.

I have written in my book, *The Origin of Meiteis of Manipur* that our Meitei ancestors arrived in the hills of Manipur around 2,000 BCE based on anthropological findings.

I am glad to quote here, Prof Gangumei Kabui, the greatest historian Manipur has so far produced. He, a Naga, wrote in his book *History of Manipur*, Second Edition, 2003. Pp 52-53 that the “ *Manipur valley* [part of the composite Manipur that consists of Hill and valley] was inhabited by Neolithic men around 2,000 BC. And Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid people followed them around 2,000 BC.”

The common Meitei language of Meiteilon (Meiteiron, due to word evolution), also known later, as Manipuri, was an archaic language formed by the fusion of many dialects that were spoken by the various Salais (clans). It also had its own unique alphabet, known as Meitei Mayek with oral and written literature (puyas). This puts flesh on the bone of my contention that Meiteis had a civilisation.



Modern Meitei Thabal Chongba. [modern civilisation in Arts and games]. Modern Meitei Kang sanaba.

The existence of an ancient civilisation of Meiteis can be gauged by their ancient language with an equally antique Meitei Script. This antiquated Meiteilon has been studied by world’s top linguists in the 19th and 20th centuries. They concluded in the first place, it was a Tibeto-Burman (TB) language, having scrimmaged a few genetic features like other Tibeto-Burman language groups, as well as odd lexical resemblances to Kuki and Tangkhul languages.

They are now having a second thought. And if I may say so, in the right direction. We must remember that no parent (Proto) language of the Tibeto-Burman group has ever been found howsoever they tried, which would pass on its genetics to Meiteilon as its long-lost and wayward language. Meiteilon has only a few mere lexical resemblances to some TB languages because of lexical acculturation from living close to other communities that speak TB languages. One swallow does not make a summer.

In the late 21st century, there was a volte-face in the classification of Meiteilon. It was led by the eminent American linguist Matisoff. Well, almost. It was because of several features that are not shared between Meiteilon and other Tibeto-Burman group of languages. Meiteilon has been *declassified* ie no more a TB language. Britannica Encyclopaedia presently records, ‘until more definitive information is

available it suffices for Meitei language to remain as TB'. It has now, stopped calling Meiteilon a TB language outright.

Now, here comes the long-awaited genetic recognition, that proves Meiteilon is *not* a TB language. I have been saying it since 2008 (cf. Author's book: *The origin of the Meiteis of Manipur & Meiteilon is not a TB Language*, 2009, ISBN- 978-81-901774-1-2).

A "genetic study", the first of its kind, by 11 Indian researchers, including 4 Meiteis viz Sanjembam YM, Devi KN, Nongthombam AD, and Khangengbam SM at the Department of Anthropology, Delhi University, published in 2009, has proven that Meiteis are not Tibeto-Burman (*Genet Test Mol Biomakers*.2009 Dec;13(6): 831-9.doi:10.1089/gtmb.2009. 0047).

Their conclusion: "High heterogeneity and predominance of ancestral haplotype (B2D2A1) among the Meitei suggest an admixture of incoming Mongoloid groups *with an already existing proto-Australoid element*. The study also highlights the distinctiveness of Manipuri population groups with respect to DRD "gene polymorphism." *Their genetic finding agrees with my proposition from empirical evidence that Meiteis were autochthones in Manipur.*

In the modern Hindu period, there has been a great deal of "culture contact" between Meiteis and the Mayang society in the west, leading to acculturation, displacement, and other related changes among the Meiteis.

My conclusion: The current European criteria (Winks et al 1995 xii) of a civilised society should have some or all of the following: (1) toolmaking (2) intensive agricultural technique (3) permanent settlements (4) division of labour (5) social hierarchy consisting of different social classes (6) a form of writing (7) organised religion (8) education (9) complex forms of economic exchange (10) a concept of higher being (11) a concept of time (12) a concept of leisure, and (13) development of faculty of criticism.

As the ancient Meiteis fulfilled all these criteria, it should be fair to say that they had an advanced stage of civilisation, pertinent at that time.

What's more: Meitei civilisation is growing, expanding in the physical and human geography of India. It is symbolised by the national recognition in 2023 that, Manipur is the fastest growing among the small states in India, including Delhi. The credit has been bestowed for the past three consecutive years.

It stresses my view that Manipur state is incessantly growing in its civilisational parameters. Manipur's literacy rate 79.85%. There are 9 universities: 3 state, 3 central, and 3 privates. There are more than 80 colleges. Manipur's population is 3.6 million (36 lakhs). There are more per capita, Manipuri officers (mostly Meiteis) in the Indian Army.

An old Meitei aphorism tells Meiteis the universal truth about their advancement in civilisation: *shamu mayana_thingatlakpada mange thengu na shujinba yade*. Likewise, a popular English poet, Richard Loveless in the 17th century, wrote his famous line in the poem 'To Althea from Prison': "Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage."

External constraints cannot imprison free Meitei spirits and thought. Frankly, I would say, quoting, an equally famous but more modern line, "*Frankly, my dear. I don't give a damn*" (Gone with the Wind, the classic American civil war movie, starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh, 1954 that I saw in Bombay, 69 years ago) *to what other people say they would do*.

To end it all, I happy to quote the first paragraph of the late Gangumei Kabui's book again, as it takes the words right out of my mouth. "Manipur was an ancient kingdom which had enjoyed the fortune and glory [...] in her long history. Manipur is the cradle of human civilisation [...] under the influence of many cultures of many different ethnic groups who came at various times and contributed to the growth of the civilisation in this *hilly state* in India's northeast frontier."

It has been my belief ever, that all the communities in Manipur, who were all immigrants including the Meiteis, at different times of history, will continue to exist in Manipur as Manipuris. There are no ifs and buts. We have been living together for over 2,000 years.

There will always be an intact Manipur.

