

## “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Cultural Re-awakening: A Study on the Revitalisation of Meetei Mayek Script and Meetei Language Movement”

**Bunty Laishram**

### ABSTRACT

Manipuri language is predominantly spoken by the majority of the population of the state of Manipur, also known as the Meiteis. However, the Manipuri language has two scripts- Bengali script and Meetei (Meitei) Mayek script. Meetei Mayek is the original or indigenous script of the Manipuri language, used before the 18th century as evident in the ancient historical manuscripts and puyas (Meitei religious scriptures). For about close to two centuries, the Bengali script has been the primary script used to write Manipuri but the Meetei Mayek script has recently been revived and reintroduced by local Meitei-culture-focused groups. The 20th-century revival of Meetei Mayek is believed to reflect the idea of a distinct Meitei identity, unique culture and tradition. The movement has suffered numerous forms of challenges and local agitations but it has also achieved significant milestones, such as the inclusion of Meetei Mayek to the local syllabus and textbooks in 2005 and the amendment in 2021 by the Official Language Act, Manipur to include Meetei Mayek as the primary script of the state. However, in reality, books and newspapers published in the script remain largely incomprehensible to most readers, as most Manipuris, particularly those belonging to the older generation cannot read and write Meetei Mayek. In this article, the dynamic of Meetei Mayek revitalisation and standardisation in the state will be examined. The study of the work will depend entirely on the historical framework of the origin and decline of the script to reflect and understand the process of revival and linguistic inclusivity of the script, the language policy and the linguistic movement at play. The goal is also to highlight how the script has been politically,

culturally and technologically neglected in a number of ways. Following the synthesis resulted in identifying that the larger section of Manipuris who cannot read Meitei Mayek also acknowledges that the promotion of the script is considered more representative of the distinctive Meitei identity and culture, with a unique language bearing its own unique scripts.

**Keywords:** Culture, Indigenous Knowledge System, Language Revitalisation, Linguistic Identity, Manipuri Language, Meitei Mayek Script

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION MANIPURI LANGUAGE IN PRESERVING THE INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

The official language of the state of Manipur is Manipuri, also referred to as Meiteilon. It is an integral part of the cultural, social, and political life of the state. It is also predominantly used in schools, government offices and local media. “Manipuri language was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution on 20th August, 1992, according to the 71st Amendment of the constitution” (Singha, 2020), as one of the 22 scheduled languages of India. This marked a major landmark in the preservation and promotion of the language. This necessitated government’s intervention to provide adequate support towards developing, standardizing, and incorporating the Manipuri language into administrative and educational systems. Thus, the Manipuri language became increasingly dominant in the field of education, administrative work, literary work, and media, thereby playing a crucial function as a means of communication in the state.

In addition to the administrative and educational importance of the Manipuri language, the language also takes on a pivotal role in upholding the indigenous knowledge system of Manipur. It serves as a platform for transmitting the cultural heritage of the Meitei people, who are the predominant ethnic group in Manipur. The language is a repository of traditional wisdom and knowledge that includes oral traditions, histories, medical practices and ecological information transmitted across generations. The language has helped preserve rich folklore, classical dance forms such as Ras Lila, Maibi Jagoi, etc. and religious traditions and practices that constitute the essence of Meitei identity. The ancient Manipuri manuscripts,

known as Puyas, which was composed several centuries ago and written in the indigenous Meetei Mayek script serve as a living archive of the state's indigenous knowledge and rich literary heritage. The sacred texts include a wide range of topics covering astrology, mythology, historical chronicles, philosophy and cultural practices. Hence, through the rich and symbolic use of the indigenous Meetei Mayek script, the Puyas reflect the region's deep-rooted intellectual and cultural heritage.

Manipuri language is also the vehicle through which indigenous healing traditions, agriculture practices, and martial arts such as Thang-Ta are transmitted. With continued efforts to promote Manipuri in academic and research studies, the language continues to serve as an intermediary between contemporary academic disciplines of study and Indigenous knowledge, thereby integrating Indigenous wisdom as part of the modern contemporary discourse. Today, Manipuri functions as a *lingua franca* among the many ethnic groups for social unity and understanding in the state.

### THE FALL AND RESURGENCE OF MEETEI MAYEK

The very fundamental component of the cultural wealth of the Manipuri language is its script. Manipuri has been primarily written in two major scripts: the Bengali script and Meetei Mayek, which is its indigenous script. Meetei Mayek was originally developed to write the Manipuri language, with evidence suggesting its usage as early as the 11th century. "The Manipuri language has their own script known as Manipuri Script or Meitei Mayek. Manipuri language is the only Tibetan-Burman language in India with its own script" (Singha, 2020). The Bengali script was later adopted in the 18th century due to socio-religious and political transformations during the reign of King Pamheiba, also known as Garib Niwaj. The period brought about a major religious and cultural shift when Hinduism, particularly Vaishnavism, was adopted as the state religion under the influence of Bengali missionaries and scholars. As part of this process, the indigenous faith, Sanamahism and the traditional script Meetei Mayek were replaced with the Bengali script to align with the new religious and cultural paradigm. With this transition came a drastic cultural shift and the destruction of indigenous texts. In 1729, ancient Manipuri texts, the Puyas, written in Meetei Mayek that formed the foundation of Manipur's indigenous knowledge system were reportedly burned in a tragic event

known as the “*Puya Mei Thaba*” (Burning of the Sacred Texts). As a result, this marked a decline in the use of the indigenous script Meetei Mayek, significantly impacting the transmission of indigenous knowledge. The loss of the script symbolised a disconnection of the people of Manipur from their literary heritage. The decline persisted for about close to two centuries until recent revival efforts.

The transition from Meetei Mayek to the Bengali script resulted in linguistic and cultural loss. The new script failed to accurately reflect the literary style, phonetics and nuances of the Manipuri language. This meant that meaning was lost or distorted in reading ancient texts. Moreover, generations passed by without learning or exposure to their indigenous script, and thus there was a loss of understanding and rather misinterpretation of the ancient texts and oral traditions. Indigenous wisdom and knowledge came to be transmitted through the Bengali script (an alien script), and thus indigenous intellectual traditions were marginalized. This was a serious loss of cultural continuity in the state, and its repercussions are still being dealt with to this day. However, in recent decades, renewed efforts have been made to revive the Meetei Mayek script and restore the Manipuri cultural heritage. The script is now introduced to the education system and is found to be widely used in literature, public signage, and the media as a part of a broader tho-cultural reawakening.

## THE REVIVAL MOVEMENT AND LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

The resurgence of Meetei Mayek has emerged as a powerful symbol of cultural renaissance and revival of indigenous knowledge systems in the state. It is also an indication of deliberate effort towards Indigenous knowledge preservation and reconnecting younger generations with their ancestral roots. The revival also marks a powerful cultural revival movement, identity reclamation and linguistic sovereignty within Manipuri society. As Brandt (2017) highlighted, “from the 1930s onwards, revivalists tried to rekindle the Meitei Mayek as part of the Meitei identity”. The constant efforts of educated elite groups, cultural activists, writers, educators and community leaders who saw the script as a vital link of indigenous pride and Meitei identity in the early 20th century sowed the seeds of Meetei Mayek’s resurgence. Many community-based associations and organizations were formed to assist the movement of revitalisation and standardization

of the script. Scholars and learned officials also laid the groundwork for collecting and publishing ancient texts in Meetei Mayek and organizing literacy campaigns for academic and public interest in reviving the script.

#### MAJOR MILESTONES IN THE REVIVAL PROCESS INCLUDE:

- 2005: The Manipur government officially replaced the Bengali script with Meetei Mayek upto class X in the educational curriculum.
- 2011: State level educational boards, like the Board of Secondary Education Manipur (BOSEM) and Council of Higher Secondary Education Manipur (COHSEM), implemented the Meetei Mayek script in textbooks, exams, and government educational policy.
- 2021 Amendment: The Manipur Official Language (Amendment) Act 2021 was passed, establishing Meetei Mayek as the Manipuri language's official script and enhancing its use in public spaces, educational institutions, and government services.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW:

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) is the cumulative body of knowledge, practices, and beliefs developed by indigenous peoples as part of their cultural heritage through lived experiences over generations. Language plays a key role in transmitting and preservation of this knowledge. As Battiste and Henderson (2000) pointed out, "Indigenous knowledge is embedded in the language, and when the language dies, the knowledge dies with it." Language conveys cultural meaning, values, ancestral wisdom and knowledge. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009) asserts "language carries culture, and culture carries the body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world."

Language revitalisation is an important field of study that focuses on the protection and restoration of the world's endangered and minority languages. Joshua A. Fishman (1991), one of the leading researchers in this field, in his seminal work *Reversing Language Shift*, defines language revitalisation as "...efforts to reverse language shift and maintain endangered languages, emphasizing intergenerational transmission as a core element for survival."

For Fishman, revitalizing a language requires passing on the language, usually through everyday use within the family or community. Rather than relying on formal education and policy reform alone, Fishman

argues that the revitalisation effort should begin at the grassroots level, “limitations on school effectiveness in connection with mother tongue transmission highlight the necessity of community and family engagement in language revitalisation efforts.” “Community-driven language revitalisation is more likely to succeed than top-down initiatives that neglect local voices” (McCarty, 2003). Within this framework of language revitalisation, Grenoble and Whaley (2006) argue that while language shift often begins in the home, the reinforcement or revitalisation of a minority language is heavily influenced by formal education systems, “revitalisation requires institutional support in the form of educational policies, curriculum development, and trained educators.” They caution, however, that institutional involvement must be guided by the needs and objectives of the language community. “Successful revitalisation requires institutional backing — from curriculum development to teacher training — yet it must remain rooted in community control and vision” (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

The revitalisation must also be viewed through the lens of a broader postcolonial context as pointed out by Ninghaiba Singha (2020) on how state policies under British colonialism and Manipur’s subsequent integration into the Indian Union, significantly disrupted the indigenous language and script, Meetei Mayek and gave way to the Bengali script. Brandt also observed that the introduction of the Bengali script is significantly tied to the colonial preference for Bengali in educational and bureaucratic systems, “Bengali script was introduced in Manipur quite effectively through the schools established by the British from the last quarter of the 19th century” (Brandt, 2017). Smith (2012) highlights that “Colonisation not only dislocated people from their lands, but also from their languages, their memories, and their ways of knowing.”

For Chaudhry and Meetei (2024), restoring Meetei Mayek is not merely changing languages but also claiming cultural memory and challenging external influence. This movement gives today’s Meitei individuals a sense of belonging to their indigenous heritage. Outside of schools, Meetei Mayek is also becoming more visible in everyday life. The ethnographic study conducted by Devi and Choksi (2022) shows that the script is now used on signs, posters, protest banners, and even online. This visibility helps people recognize Meitei Mayek as part of their shared identity. In a state

such as Manipur—where various communities employ various scripts (e.g., Roman for Christian tribal groups, Bengali for older generations of Meiteis), the revival of Meitei Mayek is also an indicator of belonging and cultural pride. Brandt also notes, “The Meitei Mayek can be seen on almost every signboard, advertisement, or political poster.” Nonetheless, it was also pointed out that there are certain challenges present, “this has produced a generation of Meiteis that can only read their language in the Meitei Mayek, whereas their older relatives only have a command of the ‘Bengali’ script” (Brandt, 2017). Such challenges are further compounded by insufficient trained staff or textbooks and irregular implementation across regions.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

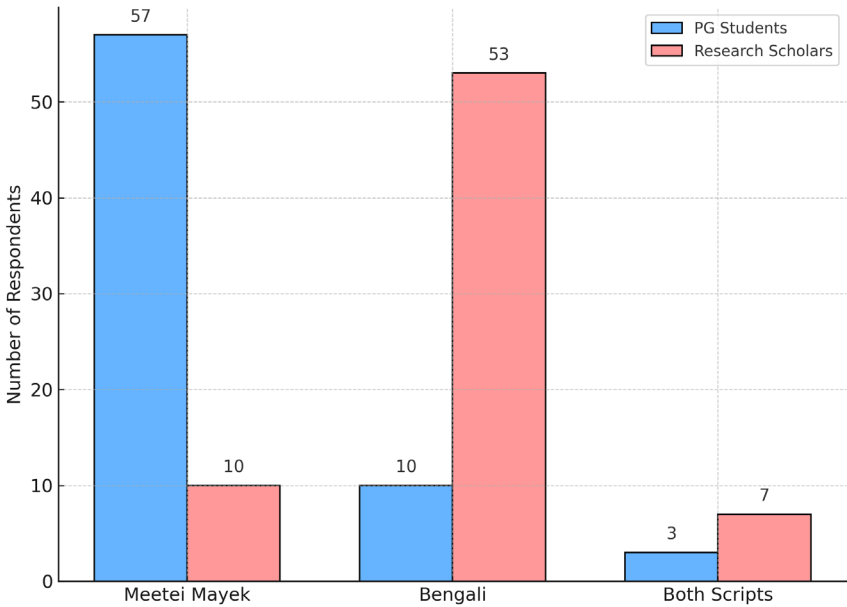
1. To determine the awareness and perceptions toward the historical and cultural significance of Meitei Mayek.
2. To evaluate the degree of script literacy and usage across various age groups.
3. To identify challenges faced in accessing Manipuri literature because of the transition.
4. To analyze the willingness to learn Meitei Mayek and gather recommendations for effective implementation of the script.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilises a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative survey data with qualitative insights to analyse the revival of the Meitei Mayek script and its nexus with linguistic identity, indigenous knowledge and cultural reawakening in Manipur. The study design was exploratory and descriptive in an attempt to understand the attitudes, usage, and challenges involved with the script transition. The data was gathered through structured online and offline surveys consisting of 35 questions administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire contained both close-ended and Likert scale items tailored to match the study goals.

A purposive sampling approach was used with the aim of targeting respondents with basic literacy in at least one script (Bengali or Meitei Mayek) or both. Particular attention was given to gathering perceptions across age groups. This was carried out to acknowledge the views of older generations, educated primarily in the Bengali script and have experienced

the transition while the younger generations have been introduced to Meetei Mayek at the grassroots level. The sample primarily consisted of postgraduate students (70) and research scholars (70) from the humanities stream (total=140), focusing particularly to those enrolled in literature, cultural studies, history, education and language. The targeted selection was intentional, since these respondents are most likely to approach the questions critically and offer nuanced perspectives on the issues of script, culture and identity. The chart below presents the demographic details and script usage preferences of the respondents.



**Figure 1:** Number of Respondents Categorised in Script Usage

Presented below is a comprehensive breakdown of how the data was analyzed, outlining each step taken to examine and interpret the findings.



**Step 1:** Assigning numerical scores to each response

Response Category	Score
Strongly Disagree / No / Not Aware / Not Important	1
Disagree	2
Neutral / Maybe / Slightly Aware	3
Agree / Somewhat Aware	4
Strongly Agree / Yes / Very Important/ Strongly Aware	5

Table 1: Response categories and corresponding scores

**Step 2:** Converting responses to numerical form

**Step 3:** Calculating Mean (Number of values/Sum of all values) and valid responses (N) for Each Question

**Step 4:** Interpreting the responses based on Mean Scale with reference to the table below.

Mean Score Range	Interpretation
1.00 - 1.99	Strong Disagreement / Very Low Difficulty
2.00 - 2.99	Disagreement / Low Difficulty
3.00 - 3.49	Neutral / Moderate Difficulty
3.50 - 3.99	Agreement / Quite Difficult
4.00 - 4.49	Strong Agreement / Highly Difficult
4.50 - 5.00	Very Strong Agreement / Extremely Difficult

Table 2: Mean Score Range and their Corresponding Interpretations

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Questions	Age Group (20-25)	Age Group (25-35)	Interpretation
How aware are you of the historical significance of Meetei Mayek and its role in Manipuri history?	3.63	3.44	Slightly to somewhat aware.

The replacement of Meetei Mayek with Bengali script during historical periods impacted the transmission of indigenous knowledge.	3.77	4.10	Slight agreement that the script change impacted indigenous knowledge.
Do you think Meetei Mayek should have always remained the primary script instead of Bengali script?	4.54	4.77	High support for Meetei Mayek as the original and preferred script.
How important do you think the revitalisation of Meetei Mayek has on the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems in Manipur?	4.51	4.71	Very strong consensus on the importance of script revival.
The restoration of Meetei Mayek has strengthened the Meitei people's cultural identity.	4.64	4.65	Overwhelming recognition of Meetei Mayek's role in cultural identity.
The use of Meetei Mayek in education and government institutions will ensure the long-term survival of the Manipuri language.	4.56	4.65	General agreement for adoption to ensure survival.
Do you support the promotion of Meetei Mayek in all official and academic settings?	4.26	4.39	High support.
Sample Size (N)	78	62	

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics Summary of Objective 1

**Cultural Reawakening is evident across age groups:**

As can be seen from the dataset above, cultural pride and identity with the script are strong across both age group, scoring highly above Mean= 4.5 when asked about their cultural attachment to Meetei Mayek. This suggests that regardless of age, the respondents feel that the script is deeply tied to their identity. Moreover, scores above 4.2 suggests overwhelming consensus on the importance of support in education and official settings for its revival

and long term preservation. There is a slightly lower mean score regarding historical awareness of the script among the younger respondents which indicates potential gap in formal education and exposure to the script's origin and evolution.

Questions	Age Group (20-25)	Age Group (25-35)	Interpretation
Do you think the generational gap affects the promotion of Meetei Mayek?	4.28	4.19	High Agreement
The introduction of Meetei Mayek has increased students' interest in learning Manipuri.	3.61	3.44	Moderate Agreement
I have made efforts to learn the alternative script (Bengali for Meetei Mayek learners and vice versa).	2.72	3.48	Limited effort among individuals
The younger generation should be encouraged to be proficient in both scripts.	3.52	3.58	Moderate support
Learning both Bengali script and Meetei Mayek would help bridge the gap between generations.	3.68	3.72	Moderate agreement
Sample Size (N)	78	62	

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics Summary of Objective 2

### **Generational Gap and Learning Both Scripts:**

The table above addresses how the generational gap is one reason that affects the promotion of the Meetei Mayek Script as age group 25-35 has primarily received formal education in Bengali script and their own indigenous script remains unintelligible to them. However, the older age group has shown more interest in learning the alternative script (Mean=3.48) as compared to the younger respondents who have shown less interest in doing so (Mean=2.72). In this regard, the younger generation may

require some educational support and motivation to dual-script learning. While both the age groups is aware of the generational challenges tied to the script, the respondents agreed that such challenges can be addressed through education and a willingness to engage with both the scripts.

Questions	Age Group (20-25)	Age Group (25-35)	Interpretation
I have faced difficulties accessing Manipuri literature due to the change in script.	2.99	3.18	Moderately Difficult
Do you find it difficult to use Meetei Mayek due to technological limitations (e.g., lack of fonts, keyboards)	3.64	4.06	Highly Difficult
Do you think the lack of trained educators is a major barrier to adopting Meetei Mayek?	3.92	4.42	Strong Agreement
The government should provide resources for Bengali script learners transitioning to Meetei Mayek.	3.75	3.91	General Agreement
Sample Size (N)	78	62	

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics Summary of Objective 3

**Accessibility and challenges to knowledge sustainability:**

The mean score for both the age groups hint towards a moderate difficulty in accessing Manipuri literature due to the transition. The data also reflects high concern across age groups in terms of technological barrier and the lack of trained educators to teach Meetei Mayek, which may deter learning. Older respondents are perhaps more aware of the lack of institutional and government support. Thus, the findings point towards an urgent need for digital support in terms of developing specific fonts and keyboards, curricular development and teacher training to improve script adoption.

Questions	Age Group (20-25)	Age Group (25-35)	Interpretation
Would you be willing to learn Meetei Mayek if provided with resources and training?	4.77	4.77	A strong willingness to learn
More efforts should be made to teach Meetei Mayek to those who learned using Bengali script.	4.62	4.94	A stronger demand for teaching initiatives
Do you think Meetei Mayek should completely replace Bengali script in literature and official documents?	4.10	3.97	High support
The transition from Bengali script to Meetei Mayek was necessary for preserving Meitei language and culture.	4.79	4.68	Strongly agree
Sample Size (N)	78	62	

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics Summary of Objective 4

### **Willingness to Learn and Promote can amplify Indigenous Knowledge System:**

Based on the data, both groups scored very high on willingness and motivation to learn the script. The age group 20-25 shows a slightly more enthusiastic response for full replacement of the Bengali script. Extremely high scores above 4.7 reveal a near universal agreement that acknowledges the importance of the transition, thereby suggesting a strong cultural shift towards Meetei Mayek.

### **DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the statistical data, recognition of the historical and cultural importance of the script is becoming more evident, though it only comes in moderate awareness among the public, suggesting the respondents are only slightly to somewhat aware of the script's historical significance

(Mean = 3.4 to 3.7). However, when asked about the impact of replacing Meetei Mayek with the Bengali script, there was strong agreement among the respondents that such a transition halted the intergenerational passing down of indigenous knowledge. The perception of Meetei Mayek as the original and rightful script is widely held, with high support expressed for its revitalisation (Mean=4.5 to 4.8). Respondents strongly believe that revival of Meetei Mayek is crucial to indigenous knowledge systems preservation and cultural identity in the state. The respondents squarely concur (Mean=4.6) that restoration of the script is not just a linguistic initiative but also a symbolic reawakening of ethnic pride and Meitei identity.

In spite of this cultural interest, the literacy and use of Meetei Mayek differ drastically between generations. The survey indicates that the gap between generations plays a role in script promotion, with the older (25–35) age groups expressing their concerns over how the script remains largely incomprehensible to them as they have been taught primarily in the Bengali script. Interestingly, older age group respondents showed more eagerness toward learning alternative scripts (Mean = 3.48) compared to the younger generation (Mean = 2.72), implying less effort or perhaps more difficulty in learning the alternate script.

Accessibility to Manipuri literature is another serious challenge, especially with the script change. Moderate to high difficulty in accessing literature initially written in the Bengali script was reported by the age group 20–25 respondents, indicating a generational gap created by the transition. Also, various technological challenges persist, such as lack of fonts, keyboards or software support for the Meetei Mayek Script, indicating how the script has technologically been neglected. Furthermore, there is a unanimous opinion from the respondent on the lack of trained educators or instructors to promote large-scale usage of the script. Such findings point towards an urgent need for investment in digital infrastructure and teacher training if attempts towards revitalisation are to succeed.

Encouragingly, both age groups (20–25 and 25–35) show a strong desire to learn Meetei Mayek, provided proper resources and training are made available. Most feel that bilingual or dual-script literacy in both Bengali and Meetei Mayek scripts is one transitional strategy to safeguard indigenous knowledge and literacy during culture reawakening. This can also help narrow generational and literary divides. The respondents also indicated a

consensus regarding the necessity of government initiatives in facilitating learners of Bengali script to shift to Meetei Mayek.

Thus, the overall statistical data indicate keen interest and support across all demographics that the revitalisation of the Meetei Mayek script indicates cultural reawakening deeply rooted in Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Some strategic implementations that can be employed are:

1. School, college, and community awareness programs to educate young generations about the historical importance of the script.
2. Create bilingual instructional materials to facilitate the switch from Bengali to Meetei Mayek for both students and educators.
3. Implement dual-script pedagogy in literature and history courses to maintain access to older texts while encouraging the indigenous script.
4. Set up certified teacher training programs in Meetei Mayek literacy and pedagogy.
5. Design a central portal of digital resources for lesson plans, worksheets, and multimedia utilities in Meetei Mayek.
6. Create and market standardised digital fonts, Unicode support, and keyboard applications for Meetei Mayek.
7. Organise intergenerational conversation programs under which elderly people tell stories, myths, and wisdom in Meetei Mayek to youngsters.

#### CONCLUSION:

Revitalisation of the Meetei Mayek script and the Meitei language movement are the most important part of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and to the cultural identity of the Manipuri people. As shown in this research, the Meetei Mayek revival is more than a language or education reform but a testimony to the efficacy of community as well as educational-based initiatives in revitalizing and saving indigenous traditions amid modern challenges. The Meitei community has achieved this through education reforms, and claiming linguistic rights. The results are that the contemporary revival is part of a broader cultural reawakening based on the reclaiming of historical identity, reconnection to ancestral knowledge, and countering the cultural erosion due to colonial and postcolonial language impositions.

The re-emergence of Meitei Mayek is an expression of a common desire to reclaim indigenous heritage, but it faces challenges from inter-generational gaps, technology constraints, and lack of institutional support. Even so, there is a perceptible eagerness among generations to work with the script—provided appropriate educational resources, digital platforms, and government-sponsored programs are made available. It is closely embedded within larger cultural, social, and political ambitions of the Meitei people. It represents an aspiration to reassert linguistic sovereignty, safeguard oral and written practices, and transmit indigenous knowledge to later generations. Above all, it demands a multifaceted solution—combining policy reformulation, educational intervention, community involvement, and technological empowerment. In essence, the revival of Meitei Mayek is not merely script literacy but a sign of resistance, identity, and cultural reawakening.

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