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ONE

Perception and World-view of Meetei Culture and Civilization

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I. MATRICES OF CIVILIZATION

I don't set up to be a prophet, I don't believe history can be used for telling the world's fortune, I think history can perhaps sometimes show one possibilities or even probabilities, but never certainties.

—*Arnold Toynbee*

The culture and civilization of the Meeteis and other ethnoses in the present state of Manipur, which dates back to two millennia of political organization, is a continuum of the grand South East Asian civilization. The civilization that had been constructed on the stone age and the following material culture of the autochthones in the South-East Asian region, as a result of the Meetei achievements in history, among others, through the ages belongs to all the original autochthones, early settlers in the land of the Meeteis notwithstanding the fact that Meeteis remained the *Herrenvolk*—the mainstream of the cultural complex. The achievements of the other early ethnoses than the *Herrenvolk* of the ancient *Poirei Meeteileipak* (*Kangleipak*) known in the modern period as Manipur, are given adequate treatment in a subsequent volume of the book under the same title.

As the broad sweep of Indology centres around certain cultural and racial parameters exclusively, the little civilization in Meeteileipak had

been placed in the lowest visibility zone for centuries together and as the things stand today, the possibility of bringing the little civilization to its rightful place in history based on Indological matrices is all the more remote. During the last a few decades, the Meetei intelligentsia had been making attempts to pull the civilization out of the dark shadows cast upon it by the Indological colossus, by way of rediscovering the message of the ancient civilization lying hidden in the ancient and medieval manuscripts, which were kept in the personal custody of the Meetei *maichous* (scholars of eminence), and by way of giving meanings and significance to the archaeological, palaeographic, philological, anthropological and folk evidences with the help of modern sciences and unbiased scientific analysis. At present, it is remarkable that the intelligentsia are in a position to pick up the loose end of the Meetei history due to their constant, voluntary and virtually non-official efforts. V. P. Menon who was partly instrumental in the merger of the Meetei country with the Indian union on October 15, 1949 regarded the history to be obscure: 'The early history of the State is obscure. During the closing years of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth, the country was constantly overrun by the Burmese. . . .' (The Story of the Integration of the Indian States, 1956). But the Burmese recorded the installation of monarchy in the country in 550 B.C.; the ancient Chinese called her as Hsiao-pô-lo-mein and the ancient Greeks, among others, had shown their knowledge about the region and the official who helped the merger of the ancient country to Indian Union had little knowledge of the history. Later historians also followed Menon legacy of historical obscurity.

Where the instrumentalities and parameters of Indology could not accommodate the Meetei civilization, the story should have ended there itself but for the skepticism and cynicism of the Indological motif by the Meetei intelligentsia and the historiographers, who at present have succeeded to trace the palaeolithic, the Hoanbinhian, the neolithic material culture of the autochthones of Meeteileipak, the achievements of the culture recorded in more than one thousand Meetei manuscripts through the ages, the numismatics as far back as 33 A.D., the epigraphy of the rich stone inscriptions, the palaeography of the old Meetei alphabets, and the indicia of South-East Asian personality among a host of others. The evidences so far rediscovered in terms of historiographic significance, the instrumentalities used by the investigators and the trend of the indications of the data sufficiently point towards the validity and need for developing an adequate discipline which may be termed as *Meeteilogy*. With the further development of the science of Meeteilogy, the obscurity of the Meetei civilization could be gradually illuminated and the exact typological framework of the antiquity of the civilization could also be identified with minimal errors of human judgement. At this stage of development, it is reasonably believed that other ethnocentric and neo-racial parameters would not succeed as much as Meeteilogy could in the discipline of

impartially identifying the true components of the early civilization in Meeteileipak and the trend shows that Meeteiology has come to stay.

The writer, in his efforts to map the terrain of antiquity, considers the general concepts and categories that envelope the contemporary categories 'culture' and 'civilization', without which any attempt to understand the past would appear to be less than adequate. The above mentioned categories are so rich in import and multifarious that disadvantages are also noted along with the advantages. Firstly, the tools of measuring culture are many and the meanings of civilization, all the more divergent. Secondly, 'Meeteiology' as an autonomous and adequate discipline remains at the teething stage and the problem of evolving the science have not been taken into account in the way it should be. Quite a good number of facts, revealed till date in the undefined territory of *Meeteiology* indicate that a literate civilization, supported by a self-sufficient, autonomous polity, the infrastructures of the nation state, the clearly defined cultural complex existed in Meeteileipak (Kangleipak), which was known by different names in different epochs of history by a number of countries. Considering the antiquity of the land, the author uses the early title of the land—*Meeteileipak*—in the article in order to give adequate expression of the past.

Before making an assessment of the statement that the Meeteis and her sister ethnoses in the early Meeteileipak which are found also outside the present state of Manipur in countries like Burma, Bangladesh and the Indian states—Assam and Tripura, had developed a culture and civilization of their own, the general meaning of culture and civilization of man in space and time has to be understood. English anthropologist E.B. Taylor laid down his meaning in 1871: 'Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which included knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'

Noted anthropologist A. L. Kroeber wrote about civilization. 'Civilizations resemble organic classes in being natural systems. That is, they can be said to possess both a structure and a content within this structure. . . . Civilizations in fact might be roughly defined as the residue of history when one abstracts the events in history.' (An Anthropologist looks at History):

Is the statement that 'the Meeteis and their sister ethnoses in Meeteileipak had a civilization of their own' valid can not be answered without understanding the meaning and significance of the term. The two terms 'culture' and 'civilization' are used alternately or even synonymously by social scientists. Kroeber and Kluckohn recorded that during the major part of the last century, more than 150 definitions of culture had been laid down by the anthropologists. More definitions may also be advanced by social scientists in future. The term 'civilization' was put into usage in the sixteenth century and the term 'culture', in 1805 A.D.

The phrase 'civilization', coined by A. Fergusson is currently used to explain and describe a number of phenomena. Firstly, Lewis Morgan in his 'Ancient Society' used it to mean a particular stage of social development. A few lines from Morgan's *Ancient Society*: 'Before man could have attained to the civilized state it was necessary that he should gain all the elements of civilization. . . . Modern civilization recovered and absorbed whatever was valuable in the ancient civilizations and although its contributions to the sum of human knowledge have been vast, brilliant and rapid, they are from being so disproportionately large as to overshadow the ancient civilizations and sink them into comparative insignificance. . . . The use of writing, or its equivalent in hieroglyphics upon stone, affords a fair test of the common cement of civilization. Without literary records neither history nor civilization can properly be said to exist.' Secondly, O. Spengler and H. Y. Danilevsky used the term to indicate spatial communities. Thirdly, Arnold Toynbee in his work 'Change and Habit: The Challenge of Our Time' and Pitrim Sorokin in his 'Social Philosophers of an Age of Crisis' placed the spiritual culture or universal religion as the basis of the term. Fourthly, W. F. Ogburn and Emil J. Walter meant by civilization, the human achievements in material culture and technology. Fifthly, Karl Marx and V. I. Lenin used the term to indicate the stage of human consciousness, derived from demonopolisation of the instruments of production and the stage that closes the chapter of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism. There is no finality to the meaning of the term, but certain expressions lend palpable significance to the term.

Karl Marx wrote: 'The very moment civilization begins, production begins to be founded on the antagonism of orders, estates, classes and finally on the antagonism of accumulated labour and immediate labour. No antagonism, no progress. This is the law that civilization has followed upto our days.' (The Poverty of Philosophy). The socialist morality advances a world-view of human civilization, which rely on an egalitarian material culture, spiritual advancement, collective human awareness that negates alienation of man from his environment, mutual interdependence free from colonial attitudes like ethnocentrism or racialism and common urges of the human race towards outlawing war and legitimizing all efforts to instal peace on the planet. In this context, the ideology of racialism, casteism, apartheid, ethnocentrism and theories that invite global or regional wars are far from being the postulates of civilization.

Multifarious approaches to the understanding of human civilizations were attempted to discern the human achievements from different perspectives—in part or in the entirety in the space-time continuum. The ethno-territorial formations through the periods of time and the achievements of the cultural man working within the ethnic and territorial matrices are undoubtedly, the vital ingredients of the total human civilization. Philip Bagby defined culture: "We can now complete our definition by saying that 'culture' is regularities in the behaviour, internal and external, of the members of a society, excluding those regularities which are clearly heredi-

tary in origin'. (Culture and History. Prolegomena to the Comparative Study of Civilizations).

George M. Foster approaches the determination of the meaning of culture: 'More specifically, culture can be thought of as the common, learned way of life shared by the members of a society, consisting of the totality of tools, techniques, social institutions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and systems of value known to the group, or, to put the distinction in a different way, society means people and culture means behaviour of people.' (Traditional Culture: and the Impact of Technological Change, 1962).

The material meaning of culture had been subscribed by David Davies: 'Culture: This word has two meanings: (i) A certain style of living with certain associated finds (or type tools) and material culture, for example, the laurel leaf and willow leaf types of flints found in association with the solutrean culture; (ii) A stage of development in a group of people; a certain style of refinement in association with civilization which is the mark that divides the civilized from the savage.' (A Dictionary of Anthropology).

Considering the above approaches to the finding of the significance of culture and civilization, it can be fairly stated that certain parameters had been laid down in the conceptual framework of the terms. Firstly, a group of people organised territorially through the bond of ethnicity or language or otherwise is presupposed. Secondly, the ethnic group or nationality should have an ethnic or national psyche that keeps them mentally and spiritually identified from other ethnoses or nationalities. Thirdly, the ethnos or nationality should have developed the tools of material culture and with the use of the tools of production, they should have exploited the nature. Fourthly, the ethnos or nationality should not remain stagnant and should incorporate progress in both their material and intellectual culture. The space and time would be the other parameters for the onward progress of culture and civilization; because by remaining in the cocoons of primitivity in outlook and approach, no society can justify that it is keeping pace with civilization.

In the search of cultural constants or the parameters of civilization, the experts extrapolate the above conditions of the human culture. The British poet, Thomas Eliot noted that culture is an original way of thinking, perception and conduct inherent in either individuals or social groups (Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, Faber and Faber). On the strength of his definition, Eliot observed the inherent inequality of culture among men. A spiritual approach to culture had been subscribed by German sociologist R. Demoll: 'Culture is a striving for development and perfection of all spiritual abilities; it is the loftiest cult of soul; it is the service to God in us'. Arnold Toynbee and other Western historians envisaged a universal church or religion as the constant of human civilization. However, this approach had placed the role of material culture in

E. Baller proposes that the materialist component of civilization has a preponderant place in the evolution of civilization and culture: 'In analyzing the dependence of spiritual culture on the processes occurring in the material life of society, and juxtaposing the materialist and idealist standpoints of spiritual culture, the founders of Marxism-Leninism trenchantly criticized various metaphysical vulgar sociological views of culture. They proved that culture is an historical phenomenon whose evolution is inseparable from the evolution of society; they revealed the dialectical interaction of spiritual and material cultures, inter-connection and mutual influence of all the components of culture; they made a profound analysis of the laws inherent in spiritual culture itself'. (Communism and Cultural Heritage).

The study of the culture and civilization in Meeteileipak in the olden days, does not lay much stress to the profound bipolarity of the communist and capitalist ideology and their impact on the perception of human civilization. In the contemporary approaches, while toning down the ideological bipolarity and dogmatism, the convergence of the opinions are also taken into consideration in order to explain the social phenomena. Unlike what the western or capitalist ideologues profess and propagate on the non-spiritual perspective of the socialist or communist civilization, the socialist and communist cultural enterprises endorse the spiritual dimension of culture, although they stress upon the materialist philosophy of human life. The western preachers of civilization also undoubtedly admit the material civilization that grew up through the use of their technology-creature.

The harmonious meaning of human civilization had, therefore, been found in both the materialist and the spiritualist attitudes of man. It is possible that societies in varying stages of development could have stressed upon one component rather than the other because of the differential societal need of the epoch. Considering the trend of human achievements in the cosmic backyard, the perception of human civilization is gradually enlarged so as to include man's experience in the galaxy and man's awareness of the attachment to the galactic parameters. For the time being, many of the parameters in the process of evolution should invariably appear to be foreign to our cognition and perception, but at the same time, we can not deny the *de ja vu* of our galactic umbilical cord. Naturally our ethno-territorial civilization would be the representative atomistic ingredients of the superior galactic order. Unless we are conditioned to the primary ethos of the galactic experience, the cognitive faculty may suffer from unexpected shock; and as much as we had progressed from the *homo erectus* to *homo sapiens*, so much we may be prepared to progress to the level and standard of galactic creature. . . . It is possible that during this intermediary stage of evolution, the total perspective of our species and achievements would undergo dramatic metamorphosis. Even then, many of our barbarian past still haunts our psyche even at the fag end of the twentieth century. Some of these destructured minds adhere to many

superstitions which build up roadblocks in our world-view and precise perception of human civilization located at different territorial areas.

Some of the misconceptions are pointed out. Reputed astrophysicist Carl Sagan makes a point: 'With awesome ethnocentrism, tribes all over the Earth called themselves "the people" or "all men", relegating other groups of humans with comparable accomplishments to subhuman status. The high civilization of ancient Greece divided the human community into Hellenes and barbarians, the latter named after an uncharitable limitation of the languages of non-Greeks ("Bar Bar. . ."). That same classical civilization, which in so many respects is the antecedent of our own, called its small inland sea the Mediterranean—which means the middle of the Earth. For thousands of years China called itself the Middle kingdom, and the meaning was the same: China was the centre of the universe and the barbarians lived in outer darkness. . . . But we live in an extraordinary time, when technological advances and cultural relativism have made such ethnocentrism much more difficult to sustain. The view is emerging that we all share a common life raft in a cosmic ocean, that the Earth, is after all, a small place with limited resources, that our technology has now attained such powers that we are able to affect profoundly the environment of our tiny planet.' (Broca's Brain, 1979). Ethnocentrism is one disadvantage of mankind and how ethnocentrism had been legitimized could also understood from the beliefs of certain sections of humankind like the Brahmans of India. F. Korovkin in his bestseller 'History of the Ancient World, 1985' cites the laws of the above mentioned microscopic segment of human population: "Due to his springing from the best part of the body, the Brahman is the master of the whole world. What the Brahman likes must be given without regret. God ordained one duty for the Sudra—to serve the higher castes with patience. The warrior does not prosper without the Brahman, the Brahman does not prosper without the warrior. God created the king and warriors to guard the whole world. A red-hot iron rod must be put into the mouth of the Sudra who insults people of higher castes. Let the king order boiling oil to be poured into the mouth and ears of the Sudra who argues with a Brahman. Instead of the death penalty the Brahman shall head shaved." No wonder, there are Indologists who literally subscribe to this law of the god, despite the legal inhibitions and Aryans who still believe that they are the centre of the universe.

There are so many centres of universe—the Grecian centre, the Chinese centre, the Aryan centre which appear unchangeable even with their movements from Central Asia to near east and India. In the same vein, there are a couple of Meeteilogs who believe that Meeteileipak is the centre of the earth and man. In this sense, there are millions of centres of the earth. There are many more secondary disadvantages in perceiving and understanding human civilization as a result of these settled beliefs of man; and integrating these misnomers with the spiritual civilization of human species would be injudicious and history shall never forgive such

patronage under the name of spiritualism. Our attempt to perceive the Meetei achievements should also be placed far away from these methodological disadvantages, and there is hardly any reason to fortify the laws of god as mentioned by F. Korovkin in his 'History of the Ancient World'.

Arnold Toynbee made a classification of twenty two civilizations along with five arrested and three abortive civilizations—which Philip Bagby reduced to nine major and peripheral civilizations. Toynbee's classification barring the Sinic and the Far East Asian civilizations laid heavy stress upon the Western hemisphere which if one likes may even club into not more than three to four patterns. The South-East Asia and rest of the oriental hemisphere could have been extrapolated into a couple of civilizations. The main reason of this approach could be the Eurocentric or Western oriented attitude to value judgement. When one is attached inordinately to the above mentioned *my-centre-of-the-world* outlook, the knowledge have to be made more adequate with additional informations. William Romaine Paterson observed: 'When Oriental civilization was flourishing, Europe was peopled by Savages'. (An Encyclopaedia of Human Races All over the World Ed. J. A. Hammerton). Sometimes, the Orient is neglected and often times, the achievements of one race like the Mongoloids are conveniently bypassed by the historians who missed the advantage of looking the planet as a whole.

Dr. Sunitikumar Chatterjee wrote in his 'Kirata-Jana-Krti' that the historians had neglected the achievements of the Mongoloids in Indian historiography. Some decades back, the Dravidas of South India lamented that they had been sidetracked by the Aryan historians and the vicious circle has been completed when the Aryan and Dravidian historians are said to have underscored the historical achievements of the Mongoloids and the Australoids, which are the biological components of the peoples of India. Unfortunately, Indian history had been rendered to be excessively ethnocentric; there are good reasons when the Indian followers of prophet Mohammad grumble that Indian history had been so tailored that the Mohammadans would always be looked upon as merciless human minds, whereas equally merciless or even more ruthless Hindu rulers adored the thrones elsewhere. In this conditioning of the human mind for several thousands of years with the help of unscrupulous facts, irresponsible interpretation and exaltation of racial gods and deities under whom all dehumanizing activities are or had been carried out, the Mongoloids had been nearly submerged in the quicksand of time. The ethnoses and nationalities, which had considerably achieved certain degree of advancements in all the parameters of civilizations have to be placed to their rightful place and even those who are going to be extinct due to the perverted acts of ethnocentrism of other groups have to be given adequate notice; even the nearly extinct creatures are given adequate environment and special attention so that symbiosis may become a reality. Historians would find little pleasure in bogging the dead horse of Fascism.

The Mongoloid participation in either the ancient 'Hoang Ho civilization' or 'Funan civilization' or the 'Indus valley civilization' have been proved beyond reasonable doubt with the help of the evidences discovered year after year. It has been mentioned in 'A Cultural History of India' edited by A. L. Basham: 'The Indus population, particularly of the cities, was a cosmopolitan one. It included Mediterraneans, Proto-Australoids, Alpines and Mongoloids. Romila Thapar corroborates the fact. (A History of India Vol I, 1966). The subordination of the highly developed Indus civilization by the Chinese had also been mentioned by Goodrich L. Carrington: 'The Indian princes of the Indus valley likewise acknowledged Chinese suzerainty, and envoys from many other Asiatic courts thronged Ch'ang-an. (A Short History of the Chinese People, London, 1948). The superiority of the Indus civilization to that of the Aryans had been acknowledged by western and Indian scholars. Historian T. Burrow observed: 'It is clear from the material remains that the Indus civilization was in certain respects superior to that of the Aryans. In particular, it was a city civilization of a highly developed type, while by contrast city life was unfamiliar to the Aryans'. He continued to observe: 'The culture which we find in the R̥gveda was not developed in India, but in most essentials, imported, already from outside'. (Basham's book *op. cit.*).

Unfortunately, the Aryan heritage had been over-emphasized and over-exalted beyond what they rightfully deserve at the cost of other ethnoses and nationalities or racial groups, which had been progressively pushed out to the abysmal edge of human history. This wild exaltation had resulted to hysterical brand of ethnocentrism too. Any achievement of any ethnos or race in any part of the world constitute a feat of mankind and in this age of human deprovincialization, myths and taboos should not be given legitimacy in preference to the evidence of natural and historical or social sciences. When the genetic engineers had revealed the secrets of human genes and modern man stresses upon the 'one-world' concept, the myths lawfully or unlawfully selling out superiority of one human race over another or a segment of people over the mass with the help of perverted or covert racist histories—the methodology of processing of such racist myths and histories are being too well known to one and all—appear to be sheer wastage of time and other human resources. The historiography about the Meeteis and the associated ethnoses in the land should also be well informed of the world outlook, evolved out of man's experience with the galaxy, the sciences and many more epistemological materials. H. D. Sankalia wrote: "What we have to remember is that even the critical editions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata do not represent the original epics but their redactions in about the 5th century A.D". (The Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan, 1974).

A civilization already took roots much before the Aryans reached India. Sunitikumar Chatterjee wrote: 'When the Aryans came into India, the country was not a no-man's land—it was already populated by some races or peoples which had risen to a high level of civilization (Indo-

Aryan and Hindi, 1960). R. C. Majumdar who openly preached that 'The People of Free India must make a determined effort to resume the process of Aryanisation and make it a complete success all over the country' accepted that pre-Aryan people of Punjab and Eastern India 'possessed a highly developed material culture'. (Expansion of Aryanism; pp. 50-51). Dr. Chatterjee also noted that the beliefs and institutions like 'Karma', 'Transmigration', 'Practice of Yoga', 'Siva', 'Devi', 'Vishnu', 'Puja' etc. appeared to be non-Aryan and also that the 'Puranic and Epic myth', 'Legend', 'Semi-History', 'Material culture', 'Social usages', 'Culture of rice', 'Coconut', 'Tamarind', 'Betel leaf', 'Folk', 'Nautical crafts', use of 'Vermillion', 'Turmeric' etc. appeared to be pre-Aryan culture. He wrote about the scripts and alphabets: 'It was probably in the 10th century B.C. that the Ancient Sindh-Punjab script of the non-Aryans was adopted for the Aryan speech; and the development of this script down to the Maurya Brahmi of the 4th-3rd centuries B.C. may well have taken six or seven hundred years; and even then Brahmi orthography was not perfect. The perfect orthography of Brahmi as applied to Sanskrit may thus have taken 800 to 1,000 years to develop'. (Indo-Aryan and Hindi, 1960). Al Kroeber wrote about the alphabet: 'For instance, there is the alphabet, invented once only, by 1500, from the Ireland and Morocco to Korea and Luzon, in a hundred styles and scripts, but all connected in origin and traceable derivation—and by 1951 extended over the globe.' The myth behind the divine origin of the human alphabet is naked lie; the probable reason behind imputation of any major human achievement like the invention of the alphabet to the unknown lies in the strong will of the ethnos concerned, designed to be thrust upon themselves and others without accommodating any room for dissent; and by analogy, it could be stated that all the human institutions had also been similarly imposed by a determined minority elite upon the innocuous mind of the mass. In this context, the Meeteis who had their alphabets in the early times also claimed that those scripts were divine legacy. But it had been revealed that alphabets were evolved out of human need for communication and preservation of informations.

Had the Meetei civilization developed affinity with or originated from another grand civilization or was it an autonomous exercise in the labyrinth of space and time? Was there any civilization at all in the Meeteileipak or had some form of intermediate civilization not been planted in the land? Many more fundamental queries could be raised in this light. The parameters which would be described subsequently would be able to clear the pertinent issues. The Vaishnav scholars and scholars of Aryan origin in Manipur attempted to trace the Meetei civilization to the Aryan myths and beliefs by stating that Manipur at the present time was the Manipur of the Mahabharata; but the main difficulty is that there is little evidence to substantiate the proposition, (See Manipur: Past & Present, volume I, 1987).

The statement regarding the civilization of the Meeteis and the sister ethnoses could transcend above *a priori* deduction, specially when empirical evidence and their validity may be put to rigorous test. Following the widest possible meaning of culture and civilization, one can conveniently infer that since the human ethnoses acquire cultural patterns. Meeteis should also have a definite pattern—advanced or less than advanced—which again reverts back to cultural relativism. *A posteriori* inferences could be drawn from the evidences that could be gathered following the rigorous tests of empiricism and the observations made on the basis of modern sciences like—ethnology, anthropology, historiography, philology, epigraphy, numismatics, palaeontology, archaeology and the folk heritage among a host of others. Following observations in the relevant part of this analysis will help one to infer accordingly.

Coming to the issue of cultural congruence, parallelism or affinity of the Meetei culture with any other species of human cultural complex or civilization, a couple of assumptions could be advanced before any sensible conclusion could be derived. Firstly, as mentioned above, some scholars would boldly advance the argument that Meetei alphabets are derived from Devanagari or Bengali, that Meetei language incorporates a high degree of Sanskrit vocabulary, that the Meeteis profess Hindusim, that the Manipur of the present age was the Manipur of the Mahabharata, that the Sakyas or the Mauryas might have ruled in the pre-Christian era and that Meeteis nurture Hindu ethos among others. The Sanskritization in language, religion, beliefs, ethos, myths and superstitions are the dramatic events that thoroughly overturned the rich Meetei cultural heritage in the 18th century and there are enough evidences for the process. Regarding the probable rule of the Sakyas or Scythians or the Mauryas, no worthwhile evidence had so far been obtained and it is an unverified statement. The Scythians are generally accepted to be people from central Asia closer to present Tibet and the issue whether they were Mongoloids or otherwise also requires some more research work to settle the issue. But the present South-East Asia with which Meeteileipak is culturally closer than anyone else is undoubtedly the land of the Mongoloids with admixture of Australoids and traces of other racial categories. After examination of the folk and cultural heritage among others, there is hardly any ground to assume that Meeteis of the past could have been under Aryan influence, despite the fact that civilizations derive their inner vitality as a result of minimal mutual influences.

Keeping the Mongoloid background in mind, it had been noted that Meeteis possess a number of characteristics, which are also found among the peoples of Far-Eastern Asia like Japan and China. It is not impossible that deeper the racial characteristics of the early Meeteis, certain Sinic features could have been handed over from generation to generation—knowingly or unknowingly. The temperament, the ethos, the mental attitude, the behaviour, the practices on the social institutions and quite a good number of cultural matrices are found in common between and

among the Meeteis and the people of the Far-East. The affinity between the South-East Asians and the Meeteis is all the more still very close. More investigations could be promoted in this line in future. (Details in mimeographed paper of the writer 'High Tides of Meetei History in South-East Asian canvass', Guwahati, August 13, 1987).

What constitutes the broad South-East Asian personality could be tentatively known from the writings of some of the leading South-East Asian specialists. G. Coedes observed some of the material and social parameters of South East Asia: 'Wet rice cultivation, domestication of ox and buffalo, elementary use of metals like bronze and iron, matriarchy, high social status of women, navigational skills, complex of beliefs like animism, ancestor worship and reverence of high places'. A remarkable point to be noted is that maintenance of the genealogical records are rigidly done by the Meeteis, the Thais and the Chinese. Carl Sauer had attributed to the Mesolithic people of South-East Asia, the credit of evolving one of the most decisive advances in the progress of mankind i.e. the earliest agricultural system ever practised by man. While conceding the reality of mutual influences of every civilization, the possibility of marginal Hindu and Chinese influences on the Meetei civilization without affecting the inner core of the Meeteis can not be ruled out. The Chinese, the Hindus and the Buddhists influenced the elites of the South-East Asian ethnoses in varying degrees, but these influences remained marginal or superficial since the ethnoses and particularly, the masses were in the olden days at considerable distance from the ruling elites. The external influences remained elitist. Taking the Japanese case, they follow their traditional religion Sintoism along with the state religion—Buddhism and when the Meeteis were proselytised into Hinduism in the 18th century, they never abandoned their traditional religion and worship of Lord Sanamahi; the external religion did not succeed to permeate into the inner core of the Meetei mind, although the ceremonies and rituals were considerably compromised. Even today and at the peak of proselytization, every Meetei household worships Lord Sanamahi in the South Western corner of every house.

An appropriate assessment of the Meetei civilization could not be done without finding minimal access to the movement in and philosophy of history. The query—had the Meetei culture and civilization followed some kind of historical pattern—or historical laws during the two millenia old political organisation—may constitute a significant issue for the future historiographers. Unilinear pattern of movement of history in terms of progress and in consideration of the human production relations had been advanced by the Marxists. On very rare occasions, the possible influence of elements of chance on history had been mentioned by Karl Marx. In that case, Meetei civilization does not depart from the unilinear progress of human history and onward advancements are gradually integrated in the body politic of Meetei civilization. Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee professed that the movement of human history had been

cyclic—beginning with a certain stage, growing up to the peak and then declining to be once born again. Some other historians advanced historical laws which are intermediate between the unilinear theory and cyclic theory of human history. It is an indisputable fact that many a great civilizations like the Babylonian, the Egyptian, the Mesopotamian, the Indus Valley, the Roman, the Greek, the Phunan and the Hoang Ho undertook the laws of growth, rise and decline; the question as to why they declined would call for many more appropriate answers in future.

There were occasions when the Meetei culture and civilization might have followed the cyclical laws of Oswald Spengler and why it did not follow the Spengler law calls for more alternative propositions. It is also true that Meetei civilizations survived many occasions of highly probable disasters and Arnold Toynbee already mentioned that civilizations come up while the people tried to overcome the obstacles. Law of decay and the dialectical process are even followed by the stellar bodies, not to speak of our tiny terrestrial units of civilizations; in this process, no human system ever devised till date, can transcend the stellar laws. For our limited historiographical purposes, civilizations occupy rightful place for a considerable period of time in space time continuum. Looking from this pragmatic and limited perspective, human civilizations have to flourish, and our perception of civilization would remain. A. L. Kroeber observed: "At any rate, every civilization must be accepted as more than the sum of its component items—as a wall is more than a thousand bricks."

II. A GLIMPSE OF MEETEI CIVILIZATION

It is not the consciousness of man that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

—Karl Marx

Meeteileipak (Kangleipak) which has been known in the Sanskritized nomenclature as 'Manipur' during the last three centuries had been the cradle of the autochthones which evolved the stone age culture, the earliest settlers and the other ethnoses in the early period of history. This process of assimilation of the ethnoses was completed in the pre-Christian era with the intergation of seven major principalities, which ultimately emerged into a confederate nationality—the Meeteis. The confederate Meetei nationality included the autochthones of the ancient land. The medieval immigrants viz., the Muslims, the *Brahmins*, the *Meeyangs* after passing through the process of intermarriage with the native Meeteis and cultural assimilation joined the Meetei mainstream. In the highlands, the sister ethnoses of the Meeteis which number about twentynine at present, which are believed to have very close racial affinity with the Meeteis, developed their own cultural pattern without in any way affecting their age-old

harmonious and intimate relationship with the Meeteis. Many of the highlander ethnoses still nurture the folk stories about their having the same ancestor with the Meeteis in the past, although the cultural distance had considerably been widened for many reasons. The seven clan organisation of the Meeteis are also found in the social organization of nearly all the highlander ethnoses except a few. Many of the sacred cultural usage and symbols of the highlanders are still found in the cultural fabric of the Meeteis. The highlanders and the Meeteis contributed their cultural attainments towards enriching the total cultural mosaic of Meeteileipak and conversely, the Meetei cultural achievements belong to both the highlanders and the Meeteis; the achievements of the twenty-nine ethnoses nonetheless enrich the total cultural heritage of the land.

Before the merger of Manipur with the Indian Union on October 15, 1949 following the merger instrument signed on September 15, 1949, some people from outside were granted Foreigners' pass by the Foreigners Department of the Government of Manipur and they were allowed to stay subject to the laws of the country and many of them joined the Meetei mainstream by speaking and writing the Meetei language. After the merger, the floodgate was opened to all people, who were once aliens under the laws of the land and they alienate themselves from the Meetei mainstream. The daisporia people like the traders community constituted by Sikhs, Marwaris and the early Bengalis got themselves culturally assimilated with the Meeteis by accepting the *lingua franca* of the age old Meeteileipak while the unlawful immigrants from Nepal and Bangladesh which now constitute a substantial portion of the population of the state make small pockets of unauthorised settlements in many parts of the state; on many occasions, they resist themselves from being assimilated with the mainstream thereby indicating certain designs of their own making. It is not at all impossible that after half a century or so, the illegal immigrants may articulate cultural division of the state, possibly on linguistic, ethnic or cultural grounds.

The Meeteis at present include Meetei Sanamahis, Meetei Vaishnavites, Meetei Christians, Meetei Buddhists, Meetei Atheists, Meetei Mohammadans among others. Since there are innumerable books and literatures on Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, the space in this piece is used for the exposition of the traditional Meetei cultural pattern, which are little known to the outside world and there is little wisdom in repeating the over flooded materials of the non-traditional patterns. It is noteworthy to record that the Meetei cultural matrices and parameters of civilization had been free from the acute forms of human degradations like racialism, casteism, wild ethnocentrism, sexual discrimination specially degradation of women and above all, the dreaded fundamentalism and obscurantism that divide mankind permanently into irreconcilable zones of war. It is also noted that many of the egalitarian Meetei values had also been eroded due to the intellectual pollution from cultural patterns, which evolved out of beliefs based on human degradation. At the same time, Meetei cultural

revivalist movement which was started before the Second World War is taking roots and spreads with the aim of restoring the egalitarian Meetei cultural pattern in its rightful place. By coincidence, the traditional Meetei values and 'world-outlook' have been found to be in close resemblance with the new socialist morality on the one hand and some of the important maxims of human rights, enunciated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 on the other. The revivalist movements of the Meeteis, therefore, unlike the fundamentalist or obscurantist movement elsewhere would not throw the present culture in the dust-bin of the past, but would strengthen the solemn declaration of mankind towards reaching the goal of human equality, equality of sexes, non-discrimination, elimination of the wild superstitions like racial superiority or superiority by birth. Traces of unequalitarianism may be found in every institution of the past and the Meetei cultural pattern would not be an exception and modern 'world-view' demands that even the traces which act as slur on the progress of mankind deserve the necessary rule of elimination. With a brief statement on the cultural pattern in Meeteileipak at the fag end of the twentieth century, the Meetei 'world-view' of the ancient period may be analysed. The quintessence of early Meetei values and attitude conform, on many points, to the present day Human Rights.

Meetei 'world-view' incorporates the theory of creation and in equal measure, the theory of evolution as well. Meetei early manuscripts like 'Pakhangba Phambal', 'Leithak Leikharon', 'Sanamahi Laikan', among others, describe the theory of creation. Along with the theory of creation, Meeteis still carry forward the message of their folk story regarding their early settlements at the Koubru hill and the Langmaiching hill.

The Koubru hill is adored in the following words:

"Awang Koubru Asuppa!
Iyel Khunda Ahanba!"

[North Koubru the Primacy!
The priemeval place of settlement!"]

An old flame is still burning at Andro village, on the other side of the Langmaiching hill, a few miles away from Imphal. The Andro flame is believed to have been kept burning for centuries together by the Meeteis. A Meetei poet, Ashangbam Minaketan chanted about the flame:

"Yumdil—Meini—Mutphade,
Yaipha—Meini—Mangphade,
Leishem—Meini—Kamphade," (Nganggoi Pareng, 1949)

[It's a fire of family—union,
It shouldn't put out,

It's a fire of prosperity,
It should not die out,
It's a fire of creation,
It shouldn't burn out.]

Eminent Meetei scholar, Oinam Bhogeshwar wrote in verse 'Ningthourol Sheireng' (1967) by incorporating the materials from the classical Meetei manuscripts, viz., 'Ningthourel Lambuba', 'Moirang Ningthourel Lambuba', 'Sana Puya Piba Naodaloi', 'Cheithrol Kumbaba', 'Miyad Shingkak', 'Irengba Puwari'. 'Leithak Leikharol', 'Sanamahi Laihui', 'Pakhangba Naoyom', 'Khunuglol', 'Shakok Lamlen Ahanba', 'Kangle-iron', 'Nungban Ponbi Luwaoba', 'Numitkappa' and 'Khagemba Langjei'. Meetei 'world-view' states that the Almighty Supersoul had two sons—Sanamahi, the elder one who is worshipped in every Meetei household even today and Pakhangba, the younger one who, in the past took over the reins of mundane power in Meeteileipak. The separation of the spiritual power, represented by Lord Sanamahi from the earthly and human power, represented by Pakhangba was realised in the remote past. Maichou Oinam Bhogeshwar's Ningthourol Sheireng' which is a classic *par excellence* makes a clear exposition of the Meetei world-view. The extracts:

Yaibireldi Shidaba Khoiyum Matikchaobana
Taibangpanba Shemlage Unabi Nungda
Nungkhalle

[The immortal supersoul willed
to generate the universe.]

...

Tengban Shemge Neengbaba
Huum Haina Kanjaore

[As the generation of the universe
was intended, the cosmic sound Huum was emitted.]

...

Yaibireldi Shidaba
Khoiyum Unabi Pukthungda
Atingkokpu Koubaga Amamba Kouba
Khoiyum Chingu Ani Puthokle

(The immortal super soul released from
within, two deities—Atingkok, the Skygod
and Ammamba, The god of darkness)

...

Atingkokti Shidaba Amambabu
Naoyomna Khoiyum Ahum Liyetna
Khamkol Malang Thokkhare

[As the immortal sky enveloped the darkness
and the three gods blended together, the
atmosphere has been discharged.]

...

Humlel Hamlen Ketnangei
Tarang Laija Pokkhare
Khamkol Laija Anida
Khoiyum Mangal Shanbada
Khambi Mana Pokpabu
Nongthang Haina Mingtholle//
Chingu Matik Nagannaiba
Ahanba Machi Thoklakpa
Anji Haina Kouduna
Nongthagthakta Tongkhare//

[With the union of the element 'Humlen' with the element 'Hamlen',
water had been born. When the halo of the supersoul shone over the
water, the heat of fire namely Rainbow had been emanated. The
Almighty—the haloed supersoul—on seeing the emergence of the first
horn rode back the rainbow by proclaiming the sound 'Anji'.]

...

Chingu Ahum Tinbada
Nongthang Mabu Kaikhare/
Yaibirelna Phamliba
Nongthang Mana Khaikhiba
Yetki Sharuk Oibada
Sentreng Tanou Koukhare/
Oigi Sharuk Oibada
Nungtarangbidi Koukhare/

[As the trinity of gods synthesised, the rainbow suffered destruction.
As the rainbow, on which rode the supersoul, disintegrated the right
portion constituted 'Sentreng Tanou' while the left portion turned
out to become 'Nungtrempi'.]

...

Atiyadi Shidaba
Malem Karam Shemshiba
Khongdaphamshu Leitena
Ashum Haina Nungbangngei
Yaibireldi Shidaba

Chingu Magi Linphuda
Nongthou Thakta Hunkatle
Makuu Oina Pokkhare

[While the immortal sky was puzzled as to how to create the earth and without finding any space to stand on, the immortal supersoul threw itself above the sky at its *Linphu* so as to be born as a crust.]

Subsequently, 'Kangpik' and 'Kanjao' (may be the prototype of radiation or stellar stuff) was released. Later, the fish and the tortoise were evolved and seven charming nymphs were also born. Without having the sophisticated knowledge of the present day science, the speculative image of the evolution of life from cosmic dust and the subsequent evolutionary process could have permeated into the psyche of the early Meeteis. Immanuel Kant also highlighted without the help of any scientific tool—crude or developed—the concept of the universe within and universe outside. The ancient Greeks too developed their speculative image of the cosmos and the subsequent evolutionary process.

Atiyadi Shidaba Yaibirelgi Khoibungdei
Malem Leisha Oingamda
Langluk Marum Loukhare

[The immortal sky took with itself, a maiden capable of becoming the earth stuff, from out of its naval.]

Thus, the earth came into existence after the dialectical union of the space and the centre of the supersoul in the same way as the cyclic process of stellar stuff being reduced the ultimate singularity (back hole) and the release of the stellar stuff out of the singularity in the domain of space. In Meetei cosmogony, a destructive force 'Haraba' destroyed the earth once and the earth was recreated. If any scientific meaning could at all be applied to this loss of earth mass and regeneration into its earth stuff, it seems plausible to bring in the theory of mass-energy reconvertibility and the singularity of astrophysics. It is a question of explaining the early Meetei cosmogony with the help of modern science and the interpretation is not intended to imply that Meeteis entered into science age when science had not even seen the light. The advancements of speculative philosophy of the ancient civilizations and their coincidental contemporary relevance in some aspects are not refuted by many. We are taking a few more verses from the Meetei classic:

Harabana Tathina Malem Hanna Thugaige
Mahou Mahou Hotnaba Yaibireldi Shidaba
Nongdam Nongkhai Tambana Thorongdubu Ukhare/
Yaibirelgi Khoibungnung Khoinou
Kouna Kouthokle

[The immortal supersoul had discerned the recurrent designs of Haraba towards destroying the earth. A maiden, Mityengshel by name had been beckoned from inside the naval of the supersoul). As the story continues, while Mityengshel was captivating Haraba with her beauty, the formation of the earth was completed.]

...

Leirol Mapal Shunaba
Nongthol Marol Mapalbu
Shemlu haina Thousille
Laiming Shuna Takpire

[The design for making nine crusts of the earth, nine layers of atmosphere had been made and all the hymns had been taught.]

...

Toklen Lishing Pallaba
Paphal Mabu Kourakyi
Paphal Nangna Teen pok O
Khoyum Yathang Pikhare

[One thousand headed Paphal had been beckoned. The supersoul had commanded Paphal to give birth to insects and worms.]

...

Laiyingthoudi Ashiba
Paringyaida Thunglare
Mahikshangbu Chaikhare
Mapuk Nongthou Oiduna
Manam Leipak Oikhare

[Lord Ashiba had arrived, dispersed its body—the lower abdomen part-turning to the sky and the back being integrated with the earth crust.]

As the Meetei cosmogony stated, Lord *Ashiba* eventually disintegrated itself into star-stuff like the Sun, the Moon, the Earth crust; and life forms were eventually synthesized out of the fragmented grains of Lord *Ashiba*. Modern astrophysics by and large concede the theory that the star stuff and the random molecules in the space coalesced in terms of geological years, thereby forming macro-molecules, which later on reached the organic life forms—primary and complex—in course of time. Maichou Oinam Bhogeswar compiled the verse on the basis of the Meetei classical manuscripts. Interestingly, speculative classics on cosmogony turned out to be closer to modern empirical sciences and in this perspective, Meetei 'world-view' deserves careful notice and further comprehensive inquiries.

The 'world-view' of the Meeteis is not merely frozen into the classics and archaic manuscripts, but is given adequate respectability in the form and festival of the traditional *Laiharaoba*, which is celebrated all over the land annually in the places, where the traditional Meetei sylvan deities are worshipped. Meetei 'world-view' is transmitted from the olden days till now and the world outlook of the people of Meeteileibak is also influenced by these cosmological considerations year after year; the beliefs and attitudes are also formed within this wider framework. When the Meeteis happen to hear the racialist degradation of man, humiliation and degradation of women, mythical attachment to heredity, the typical Meetei psyche is unable simply to imagine those exotic exercises. Prof. Chongtham Manihar of Manipur University, while explaining the philosophy behind 'Laiharaoba' commented: 'Eekouba which forms the preliminary parts of a Laiharaoba festival describes in belief the first act of creation. It begins with the immersion of the *khyoma* in which three upper halves of plantain leaves placed in layers wrap grained rice and an egg. According to traditional belief the egg represents the universal Lord, the grains, the heavenly bodies which remain constantly surrounding Him and the three leaves fire, water and air again enveloping the heavenly objects.' Eminent Meetei scholars Moirangthem Chandra Singh and Kulachandra explained that the Laiharaoba festival celebrates and reminds man of the creation and evolution in stages.

Meetei theory of creation has been advanced by Maichou Chandra Singh in 'Panthoipee Khongkul' (1963), Maichou W. Madhava Ram Singh in 'Langlol' (1924) and Dr. L. Kulachandra in 'Malem Houpham' (1972), which traced the early human settlements at Langmaiching and Koubru hills.

The pattern of the early civilization of Meeteileipak had been succinctly stated in two early Meetei manuscripts; published in non-Meetei scripts viz., 'Numit Kappa' and 'Poireiton Khunthok', which command holiness and respectability among the remaining one thousand manuscripts—ancient and medieval. The early Meetei civilization may be reconstructed on the pages of the above mentioned Meetei classic to some extent.

Arnold Toynbee noted that agriculture and domestication of animals were the greatest revolutions in the past 9,000 years of human story. He also felt that metallurgy and writing indicated the dawn of civilization in the old world and also noted that Sumerian scripts, which were used by Sumerian and Kkkadian businessmen for maintenance of accounts and records were adapted for conveying some of the Indo-European languages (Change and Habit, 1966).

'Numit Kappa' (Ed. Oinam Bhogeswar, 1977), believed to be the earliest Meetei classic depicted the early culture and civilization of the Meeteileipak. The theme of the classic centred around the presence of uneasiness in Meeteileipak under the dual regime of two brothers—and Tauhuireng Ahanba, the elder one and Yoimayai Lairel Tautanba alias Numit Sana Khommaton Aton, the younger one; it narrated the assassina-

tion of Tauhuireng Ahanba by the arrow of a servant—Khwai Nongjeng Piba and the restoration of peace under the rule of one king, Lairen Tautanba.

The classic, written in Meetei language, unpolluted by Sanskrit and its derivative languages or any other languages had its significance in terms of the polity, economy, history, culture and language of the Meeteis of the past. The autochthones, mentioned in the work are: Selloi, Langmai, Chakpa, Khaba, six clans, Maring among others (pages 6, 16, 25, 41, 22, 15). The name Kangla is also mentioned (pp. 6, 39).

It highlighted that the major role played by woman. There was woman leader of all the priestess and the princess was regarded to be one who could control the cruel and ferocious mind. The ministers holding different portfolios, who could dictate terms to the king were also mentioned. The division of labour in professional lines was followed. The obligation and authority of the king was mentioned:

Soykhong Patlai Wuna Nongsapa Meiti //
Sana Khommahanki //
Angan Kongpuroi //

The idea was that the king learnt the mind of his subjects and consulted his high dignitaries in policy making.

Khaicha Mitam Wakampapu //
Luwai Koyrenthakta //
Miren Tongna Khaitharakle //

...

Poirei Kangleikon //

...

Thapa Machup Sapu Sapipa //

The idea was that the works having been distributed in terms of obligations, the people started obeying the orders of the king in Poirei Kangleikon (Meeteileipak); the people and the king had reached agreements.

'Numit Kappa' mentioned the ethical categories and values like excellence, truth, goodness, honesty and modesty among others. The term 'Genius' was also mentioned. The role of the minorities, the leaders and the geniuses in the human history had been considered to be indispensable in the initiation, growth and development of human civilizations. In modern sub altern history, the role and significance of the proletariat or the mass of people in bringing in civilization have also been given a rightful place. In this context too, Meeteis not only trusted the geniuses but also accepted the role of mass or public participation in modern terminology.

Despite all the qualities of arbitrariness imputed to monarchy elsewhere, the Meetei king was not the sole authority in the statecraft and administration, as he had to function on the aid and advice of the ministers and lords. He at the same time heard the public, particularly the appeal of the Meetei women in congregation and in ceremonial white attire.

The classic in relevant places mentioned the construction of public hall, knowledge of the use of metals like Iron, Gold, Silver, the use of horse and staple foods like rice and wine among others. 'Numit Kappa' gives adequate testimony to the level of the culture and civilization attained by the early Meeteis and to that extent, the classic remains an invaluable document of the land.

Another Meetei classic of equal significance is 'Poireiton Khunthok' (Ed. Moirangthem Chandra Singh, 1979; another version of the same classic is 'Poireiton Khunthokpa' Ed. Khumallambam Yaima Singh, 1971). 'Poireiton Khunthokpa', written in Meetei is free from pollution of alien languages or use of other derivative languages, whereas 'Poireiton Khunthok', the later version of the same classic uses of course, very sparingly—two Sanskritized terms 'Yama' and 'Satyajug', which as the present writer understands, could have been used by the compiler at the time of supplanting the archaic Meetei language by modern ones. Should Sanskrit words have penetrated into Meetei vocabulary, many other words than the lone two, would have found place in the archaic text of the classic. Considering the use of Meetei language in the same classic published before eight years by another editor, it is highly probable that the classic was written in pure Meetei language. From this construction, it may also be inferred that Sanskritization of Meetei language happened not during the early Meetei regimes, but possibly in the later periods. Another contextual inference is that the Aryan migration even in trickles should also have been in later period.

The above mentioned classic is important in the sense that it cited the rule of 'Moriya' king, about whom not many facts have been revealed, in the Meetei inhabited areas, which in the past, could have been touched upon the Kachin areas of present Burma. The classic centres its theme on the journey of Poireiton and his sister-in-law, later his companion, Leima Leinaotabi from the underworld to the Meeteileipak in their search for elixir. It mentioned the journey of Poireiton in Kabaw (Burma), his passage to the settlements of the autochthones like Khuman, Selloi- Langmai, Tangkhul, Maring, Tarau, Anan and his arrival at Kabo, Tumu, Karong, Koubru and Keithelmanbi, among others. The use of metals like Gold, Silver, and use of fire, the knowledge of weaving clothes, cremation, paddy, bow, metal rod, megaliths had also been mentioned in the account. The material aspect of culture and civilization of that age available with them indicated that they were not at least in the primitive stage of human evolution. The social institutions of that era included polyandry, frequent divorces, sacrifice of animals, cremation of Chakpa people and offer of wine for friendship.