With the gem, Head returned home. He reached home at night. He called out to his mother. Hearing her son’s voice, she ran out. She was happy to see her son alive. He narrated the whole story to his mother, except his meeting with the python.

Head and his mother became richer and richer using the magical power of the gem. One day, Head asked his mother to go to the king with his marriage proposal for the princess. Initially, his mother did not agree, thinking of his physical condition. As her son kept insisting, she went to the Palace. The mother put the proposal to the king. The king did not reply. Instead, he ordered his men to shove her out. She came back home weeping. Next day, again, she went to the palace with the same proposal and the king did not reply. The king’s men held her by her nape and pushed her home.

Head did not give up easily. He told his mother next morning, “Mother dear, go once again to the palace. If he denies you this time too, I will dethrone him.” Though she did not believe what he said, she went to the palace again. The king was very angry this time, and told the woman, “Alright, if your son wants to marry my daughter, we can arrange the wedding ceremony on the seventh day from today. But, you should build a palatial house and construct a golden road between the palace and your house. If you fail to comply with this condition, I shall kill your son.” On hearing the condition, the mother wept and returned home. All the people in the state were sure that Head would be killed.

With the magical power of the gem, Head fulfilled all the conditions and married the princess. One night, the princess observed secretly how Head became a handsome man with the help of the magical gem. Out of joy, she tried to touch her husband’s new body. Head asked her not to touch but she touched him. He could not retransform to the Head. By her touch, he remained a perfect man forever. With her love and the gem’s power, the family lived happily ever after.

The story is one of the Meitei folktales. The tales are expected to be told and retold by grandparents and sometimes by parents. This tale is still being narrated in many rural areas of Manipur. There are various variants of the tales; there are different titles of the story e.g. Pumpkin Man, Sitting Pumpkin Man etc. in different villages. But, the plot and content of the story are the same.

In the story, the PWD is looked down by all sections of society. All the twists and turns of the story are initiated by Head and are translated into action through his mother. Despite her own differences of opinion, she always stood for her son and behaved in accordance with his wishes. She followed all instructions given by Head. He gains more and more in his struggle with surroundings that are not friendly to PWDs. Though much is expected from his maternal uncles, the uncle turns out to be a fatal enemy. The widowed mother could not do anything except weep over the ill-fated son. Likewise, the King’s denial of his daughter is on the basis of his disability, both physical and financial. He overcame all obstacles with his secret moves.

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**LEISHABI: An Appreciation**

Re-discovering the Meitei in Burma (Myanmar) through Folklore

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**Introduction**

In this 21st century, oral history is becoming familiar in the world of academia. Oral history demonstrates the sense that can contribute to the recovery of histories that would otherwise remain hidden (Penny Summerfield: 47, Gabriele Griffin (ed.), 2007). There are many Meitei people in Myanmar who were compelled to settle in that country because of many historical circumstances. In the long course of history, they contributed many things to the Burmese society such as handloom and the use of horse in battle apart from others. Meitei cavalymen were notorious in Burma and the Burmese developed their own cavalry consisting of Meitei to invade Thailand. But, nowadays, the Meitei in Myanmar are on the verge of extinction as a nationality and their contributions are forgotten. This is, perhaps, all because of the Myanmarese government’s long standing policy of Burmanisation of minor ethnic nationalities.

Dr. Than Tun, a famous Burmese historian who was in the Mandalay University, recounts the contributions of the Meitei to Burmese society in...
one of his articles. It describes how they have come to be marginalised or forgotten in recent times. The article begins with a poem entitled ‘Leishabi,’ an oral poem that was very popular among the Burmese and written down by a Burmese poet called Ko Pyin. Picking up lines from this poem, Dr. Than Tun traces the origin of the word ‘Leishabi’ that is found as an alien word in a Burmese language poem. Leishabi is a Meitei word that means a young teenage girl. Beginning with this poem, Dr. Than Tun historically traces the relationship between the Meitei and the Burmese. With this point, the paper also tries to recapitulate the origin of the Meitei diaspora in Burma (Myanmar), whether it was ‘by choice’ or ‘by force’ that they came to be settled in Myanmar. Also, it takes a look at ensuing development in their cultural practice.

**Background**

Records have been found in the Royal Chronicles that the Meitei shared a long history with the Shans (Pong) and also with the Burmans of Burma (Myanmar). Since the 15th century, the Meitei and Burmese had regular contact through trade and social relations like matrimonial alliances after the conquest of Kabaw valley by the Meitei (Gangmumei K, 1991:236). A large number of Meitei accompanied the Princess as her retinue as a part of the marriage. It was in the first half of the 18th century, during the reign of Garbniwaza, that battles were fought between the Meitei and the Burmese. ‘The tide of invasion flowed to the very gates of the Kaung-hmu-daw, where, to this day, the marks of the Manipuri swordsmen are pointed out upon the lintel’ (V.C. Scott O’Connor, 1996:118). Several military expeditions had been conducted to Burma and crossed the Chindwin River to invade the kingdom of Ava (op cit: 247). In the second half of the 18th century, Alaungpaya, the founder of Konbaung Dynasty invaded Manipur and returned with a large number of captives consisting of boatmen, smiths, weavers and artisans and they were later engaged as domestic servants, menial and agricultural workers for the Burmese king. They were also used as cavalry and few were famous as polo-players (Thant Myint U, 2001:15).

Fratricidal conflict among the Princes continued after the death of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra and resulted in the defeat of Manipur by the Burmese. Bigyidaw, the grandson of Emperor Bawdawpaya, sent his greatest general, Maha Bandula, to invade Manipur and occupied it for seven years – a period (1819-26) that is known as ‘Chahi Taret Khuntakpa’ (Seven Years Devastation) in the history of Manipur. With this situation, an exodus occurred. Thousands of Manipuris were carried away as war prisoners to Burma and many were burnt alive. By the mid-19th century, out of the total population of the Burmese kingdom, perhaps as much as a quarter of the population or at least 25,000 people were Manipuris who had been brought as war captives or were their immediate descendants (ibid: 55). Post-World War II, the population of the Meitei in Burma has been decreasing through the process of Burmanization and the low birth rate (M. Krit Singh: 97, Naorem Sanajaoba (ed.), 2005). As time goes by, there seems to be ambiguity in the mind of the Meitei in Burma. Due to the influences of historical reality and practicability of life, they are more inclined to stay in the ‘host nation’ than return to ‘homeland’. ‘...their [Meitei’s] exile in Burma is more permanent.......therefore entertain no false hopes of a return to their ‘Sana Leibak’ [Manipur]’. (Resistance, Tuesday, April 25, 1978)

**Interface**

The poem ‘Leishabi’ is about a Meitei girl praying for her lover, that no untoward incident should befall him while crossing a river in the service of the Burmese king to supply fodder for his elephants in the palace. The setting of the poem is Amarapura, the new capital of the then-Ava Kingdom. Among various communities, Meitei is a minority community in Burma performing low-status jobs and acting as soldiers of kings. The poem reflects the socio-economic conditions of the Meitei in Burma. The poem also highlights the beautiful landscape of the realm and the simplicity of their lives.

Dr. Than Tun, on the other hand, depicts the historical accounts of the Meitei in Burma, their cultural practices, traditions and religious life. Through his article, we find his sympathy for the alarming condition of the Meitei, which is becoming one of the vanishing communities in Burma. The community has been very important in the history and culture of Burmese society. Dr. Than Tun further narrates the skills of the Meitei, such as weaving (still surviving in Amarapura) and their preparation of different dishes that attracted the Burmese. The writer also narrates the knowledge of Manipuri language among Burmese. In short, the work is the narration of the relation between a work of literature and the prevailing social, cultural, historical and ideological conditions of the time.

**A free translation of the poem:**

**LEISHABI**

A leishabi from Sandai
Tying the hay in bundles
A message passes on-
While in search of fodder,
In an old boat,
If the sun goes down
Do not turn back home.
At the foothills of Kyatninao
Towards the port of Miduidai
For the elephants to feed,
Everyday they carried the fodder.
If a strong wave blows,
The old boat may capsize,
And you could be drowned,
With none to come to thy rescue.

The Translated Text

Amarapura was divided into East Sandai and South Sandai. Near Sandai, there was a village called ‘Sinhmu’. The profession of these villagers who were mostly Meitei was to collect fodder and take it to the palace for the elephants and horses kept there. In the southern part of Sandai were Shwekyat and Shwekyatkya Pagodas, where there was the port of Miduidai. These people carried fodder for the elephants and horses of the Ava King along the river Chindwin. This is the fact that can be deduced out of reading the poem along with all the tender feelings of a beloved who is longing for the return of her lover. But the very meaning of the word ‘Leishabi’ mentioned in the poem was not known to anyone. Dr. Than Tun went searching for the meaning of the word. He found the word ‘Leishabi’ mentioned in the book Manipuri Self Taught written by William L. Barreto B.A. This particular word “Leishabi” was also found mentioned in a poem written by Minister U Sa of Mayawati.

Dr. Than Tun also narrates another story which was very popular and which he had heard in his boyhood days. One day, two Meitei girls came to sell mangoes at the royal palace in Amrapura. At one moment, the Princess was bargaining over the price of the mangoes and it happened to be overheard by the king. The Princess was articulate in Manipuri language. But, unfortunately she could not understand the meaning of the word ‘Leishabi’.

In the Sandai village there was a Meitei priest (maiba). One day Ko Pyin recited his poem ‘Leishabi’ in front of the priest. The priest rejoiced and said, “Onthokna phajakhreda” (What a wonderful poem!). At that moment, KoPyin asked the priest the meaning of the word ‘Leishabi’ and the priest explained that the word ‘Leishabi’ in Manipuri language meant ‘apyogyi’ in Burmese. In the literature of those days of the Ava Kingdom, a few Manipuri words were also amalgamated with the Burmese language. Shwegekyaun monks used to tease Meitei girls by using the words ‘Leishabi’ like ‘you are sweet’, ‘do you love me’, etc. Not only were words amalgamated with the Burmese language, the culture and traditions of the Meitei of Manipur were also found interwoven with Burmese culture.

After the Meitei settlement in Amarapura, there came improvements in the technique of weaving clothes and other handloom products. The Badaw King used to hire every Meitei in a family for making clothes. During those days in Amarapura, handloom was produced only by the Meitei and their products were considered the finest works of art. During the British rule, a market in Mandalay called ‘Zaygyo market’ was constructed mainly for the Meitei, where handloom products were sold. Whoever visited the market frequently often could speak Manipuri. The Ava people appreciated the beauty of the handloom products and often said, “Phi shingshi phajakhreda” (These clothes are so beautiful) or ‘balaole’ in Burmese language and the Meitei replied, “But it costs only rupees fifteen.”

During the reign of Alaungpaya, Meitei already lived on the bank of the river Doukhtawadi. The village near the river called Leishangkhong was inhabited by the Meitei only. They requested land for cultivation from the king and he gave them the Ladowin Lake which is near their village. During the reign of the Badaw king, the Meiteis were also given a piece of land for cultivation.

In the chronicles of Amarapura, the professions of the Meitei are mentioned as blacksmith, weaver, carpenter, etc. There was also a market in Amarapura for the Meitei and a cremation ground for them nearby. When the Meitei came to Amarapura, they came with the local deities ‘Thangjing Lai’ and ‘Umang Lai’. Lai Haraoba, the ritualistic observance which every Meitei had to perform every year when the season comes, were also performed in Amarapura in those days.

Due to several social and political factors, the Meitei in Myanmar have now, it seems, forgotten their roots, tradition and culture and this has led them to the brink of their vanishing as a nationality. Dr. Than Tun also makes mention of the food habits of the Meitei and that of the Burmese that have been amalgamated now, both in the mode of preparation and the taste itself. Till today some of the Meitei’s common dishes like – eromba, fried curry, etc. are still prepared by the Burmese, he says.

When harvest was completed, curries were offered to the village deity. The villagers collected money from each family, bought vegetables and were offered to the deity in the eastern side of the village. These vegetables such as green chilies
and tomatoes and the fish-shareng were also offered to deity. After that, shareng was fried. The cooked fish-shareng and other vegetables were put on a plantain leaf and were offered to deity. After that, the curry was distributed to every family of the locality. Today, this tradition is no longer practised, Dr. Than Tun continues.

Worshipping deified ancestors or gods and goddesses and organizing of rituals have now discontinued. Their own methods of preparing dishes that are favoured by many, including the Burmese, and famous as ‘Kathe hin’ (Meitei cuisine) is no more. In this way, the Meitei have been forgotten and hardly known to the new generation in Burma. However, Meitei culture is still followed by a few Meitei in Burma.

Conclusion
Dr. Than Tun’s article moves towards historiography, a new approach towards writing history by walking the line between the adjoining areas of history and folklore. He avoids narrow compartmentalisation of disciplines and, instead, touches upon oral tradition, literature, his own past experiences, reports given by others, and the already-known parts of the history that relate Myanmar and Manipur as his sources. It is all about his concern for the Meitei in Myanmar, who are very important in the history and culture of Myanmar but are now marginalised either by themselves or by political forces. It is ethnography of the Meitei written with romantic feeling. But it has a multicultural underpinning that goes beyond the geographical and political boundary of Burma (Myanmar). It is a good sound piece of work, authentic and creative.

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References

Shrine of a goddess in Imphal.