

# A Geographic Trace on Meithei Descendants in Mandalay and Its Environ

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## Abstract

Scholars accepted that two major types of acculturation, *incorporation* and *directed change*, control cultural changes of any tribe or ethnic group. Meithei people in Myanmar have a different historical background and different origins with a different culture. They have two religious origins and the first one represents very ancient religious tradition of Manipuri (locally known as *GodMotherSpirit*) and the second one represents *GodMotherSpirit* mixing with Hinduism. In tracing the spatial distribution of Meithei, Systematic Stratified Sampling Method (SSSM) is used in this work. The study shows that Meithei of the first group has almost disappeared while those of second group are still growing. The striving of Meithei people is actually by virtue of the caste system of Hinduism and Meithei of Brahman caste are only the remains of former Meithei today. In reality, two forms of culture, tangible and intangible, have been gradually changed but intangible culture related to religious belief has firmly cultivated among present day Meithei descendants.

**Key words:** Meithei, culture heart, acculturation, caste system, tangible culture, intangible culture, Brahman

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars accepted that two major types of acculturation, incorporation and directed change, control cultural changes of any tribe or ethnic group. Meithei people (Meithei descendants) in Myanmar have different a historical background and different origins with a different culture. They have two religious origins. The first one represents very ancient religious tradition of Manipuri (locally known as *GodMotherSpirit*) and the second one represents *GodMotherSpirit* mixing with Hinduism. Meithei of the first group has almost disappeared while those of second group are still growing. The striving of Meithei people is related to caste system of Hinduism and Meithei of Brahman castes are found as the remains of former Meithei.

### The Study Area

The area under study, Mandalay and its environs encompasses the administrative areas of Mandalay City and Sagaing Town proper. Mandalay city is now composed of six townships namely Aungmyaythazan, Chanayethazan, Mahaaungmyay, Chanmyathazi, Pyigyitagon and Amarapura. Sagaing Town is separated from Mandalay by the Ayeyarwady River. Being based on the findings of former scholars, the domain of study area is adopted as Mandalay and its environs.

### Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this study is to find out the present spatial distribution of Meithei tribe (Meithei descendants) in Mandalay and its environs. Major objectives are: - to trace the spatial variation of Meithei people and to find out the factors that affect the distribution of Meithei people.

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## **Data and Methods**

Both primary and secondary data are used here. Primary data are collected by means of questionnaire survey and personal interview. Secondary data are collected from different sources including library, research papers, theses, records, reference books etc. In order to trace the past and present spatial distribution of Meithei, Systematic Stratified Sampling Method (SSSM) is used while qualitative method such as interviewing with Meithei people and questionnaire survey is made to assess the factors affecting the spatial distribution of Meithei descendants.

## **Problem**

Which factors control the past and present spatial distribution of Meithei descendants in Mandalay and its environs?

## **SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF MEITHEI DESCENDANTS**

### **Meithei and Meithei Descendants**

In practice, both Chin ethnic group and Manipuri are all mountain tribes. They lived along the present day border areas between India and Myanmar. Therefore, it can be assumed that the earliest settlements of Meithei can be expected on both sides of the present day border areas of India and Myanmar.

Initially, Meithei in Manipur were mostly paying respect to the God (i.e. Hinduism) as their tradition and then, after being settled in Myanmar, they are paying respect to both Hinduism and Buddhism. This change is really indistinct for most of them have a strong faith in Hinduism. Along the history, the Kings of Myanmar and those of Manipur often invaded the border areas whenever they possessed the power of supreme military might. When Myanmar Kings conquered, they got the people from Assam and Manipur as prisoners of war (POW). It is one major reason for settlement of Meithei in Myanmar.

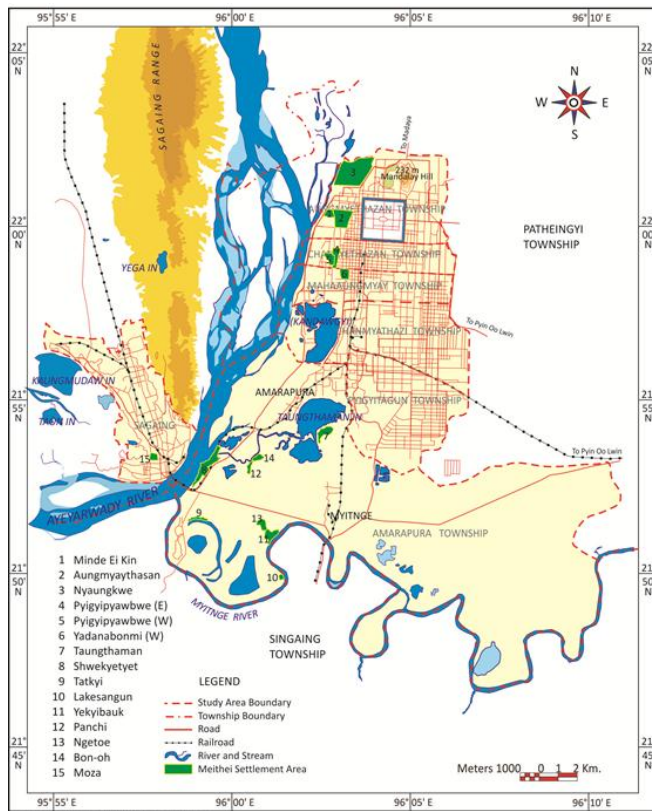
The spatial distribution pattern of Meithei was formerly recorded as 7 wards and 8 village tracts which are located within 5 townships namely Sagaing, Aungmyaythazan, Chanayethazan, Mahaaungmyay, and Amarapura. When taking a field survey to the above mentioned areas, Meithei people were not found in 8 areas of them. Instead of this, one new area is recorded as reside of Meithei and it is the ward of Pyigyianlon in Aungmyaythazan Township. Therefore, the present distribution of Meithei in this study area is now recorded as 6 wards and 2 village tracts. Past and present spatial distribution of Meithei in the study area is shown in the Table 1 and Map 1 and 2.

Table 1 Past and Present Spatial Distribution of Meithei in the Study Area

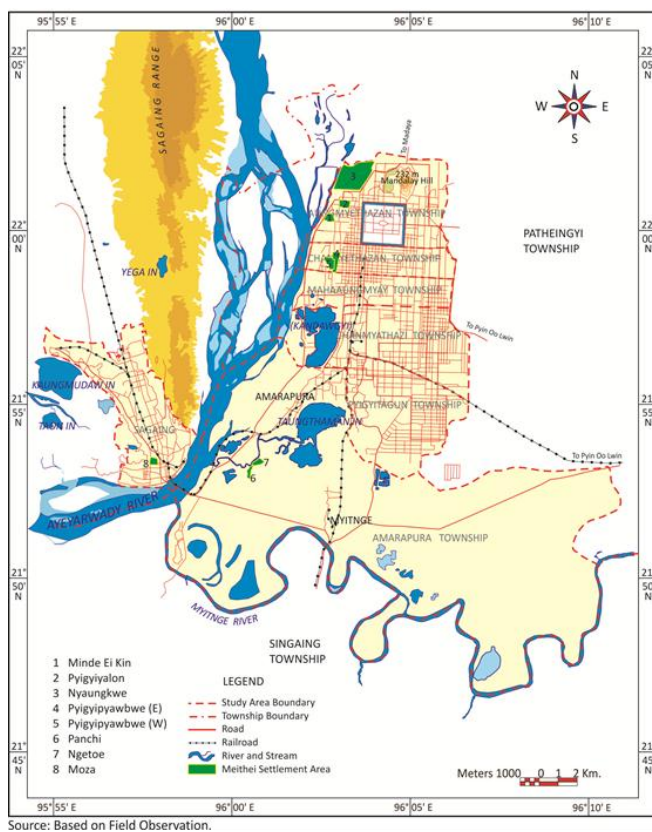
Sr.	Wards and Village Tracts		Future	Remarks
	Past (Date?)	Present (2019)		
1	Minde Eikin (w)	Minde Eikin	Good	Aungmyaythazan
2	Aungmyaythasan (w)			Aungmyaythazan
		Pyigyianlon	Better	Aungmyaythazan
3	Nyaungkwe (w)	Nyaungkwe	<i>Bad</i>	Aungmyaythazan
4	Pyigyipyawbwe East (w)	Pyigyipyawbwe (East)	Best	Chanayethazan
5	Pyigyipyawbwe West	Pyigyipyawbwe (West)	Best	Chanayethazan
6	Yadanabonmi (w)			Mahaaungmyay
7	Taungthaman (vt)			Amarapura
8	Shwekyetyet (vt)			Amarapura
9	Tatkyi (vt)			Amarapura
10	Lakesangun (vt)			Amarapura
11	Yekyibauk (vt)			Amarapura
12	Panchi (vt)	Panchi	Good	Amarapura
13	Ngetoe (vt)			Amarapura
14	Bon-oh (vt)	Bon-oh	<i>Bad</i>	Amarapura
15	Moza (w)	Moza	Good	Sagaing

Source: Awa: Kate and Paona, Mutua Bahadur (2014)

**Map 1 Past Distribution of Meithei Descendants Before 2000**



**Map 2 Present Distribution of Meithei Descendants After 2000**



## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Major Controlling Factors Affecting the Distribution of Meithei

The results of interview with some scholars and people of Meithei indicate that there are two major controlling factors affecting the spatial distribution of Meithei in this study area. They are 1) *temple custom*, and 2) *caste system*.

**Temple custom:** According to the religious tradition of Hindu, temple custom is really influent on the settlement pattern of the respective area particularly cluster pattern. That is why; Meithei usually use the temple as the central place for both their social and religious festivals and other events. Traditionally, the temple area with its compound is preserved by the related leader with his family, their relatives and the persons who are accepted as the leader of temple as their Guru. Therefore, most of Meithei families live their relative locations not far from their common temple and thus they do not move to other place.

**Caste system:** According to the social tradition of Hindu, people are classified under four distinct classes hierarchically such as *Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Sudra*. Of these four classes, Brahman stands as the highest hierarchy and Sudra stands the lowest. Some scholars add one lower class and it is known as *out of caste* or *untouchables*. As the caste system is still being practiced among Meithei people, discrimination problem is still occurring.

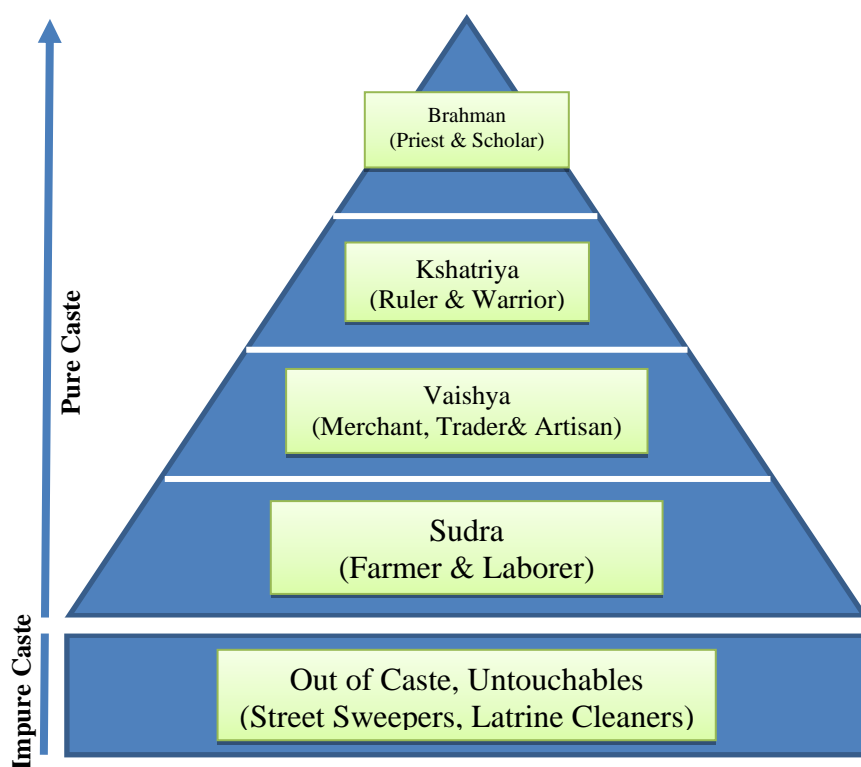
In reality, the classification of caste is based on the types of occupation such as Brahman (Priest and Scholars), Kshatriya (Ruler & Warrior), Vaishya (Merchant, Trader & Artisan) and Sudra (Farmer & Laborer). The street sweepers and latrine cleaners are classified as out of caste today. In a similar way, the former classifications of four classes are noted as *pure caste* and the later additional class of untouchable one is also noted as *impure caste* (See figure 1).

The study shows that caste system affects the distribution of Meithei in *two ways*. The first is related to *pull factor* and the second one is also related to *push factor*. Meithei from the highest caste of Brahman wish to stay together and they are united for their role of highest position. Therefore, the caste of Brahman possesses pull factor.

In contrast, people from the third and fourth classes such as Vaishya, and Sudra have no right to stay together with Brahman and thus they usually live away from Brahman. This situation is noted as push factor. People from the second class of Kshatriya have dual roles and they can mix with upper or lower classes as they wish.

Therefore, with the exception of Brahman, Meithei people from the remaining classes are gradually mixing with different castes and tribes. Therefore, the caste system of the remaining three possess push factor. Due to the effects of push and pull factors their distribution patterns are different from one locality to another.

Figure 1 Caste System of Hindu Practiced by Meithei



Source: Early World History. Blogspot.com

### Acculturation

Acculturation is the processes of change in artifacts, customs, and beliefs that result from the contact of two or more cultures. The term is also used to refer to the results of such changes. Two major types of acculturation, *incorporation* and *directed change*, may be distinguished on the basis of the conditions under which cultural contact and change take place.

*Incorporation* refers to the free borrowing and modification of cultural elements and occurs when people of different cultures maintain contact as well as political and social self-determination. It may involve *syncretism*, a process through which people create a new synthesis of phenomena that differs from either original culture.

In contrast, *directed change* occurs when one group establishes dominance over another through military conquest or political control; thus, *imperialism* is the most common precursor to direct change. Like incorporation, directed change involves the selection and modification of cultural characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

According to the above mentioned definition of acculturation, Meithei people in the study area have experienced two major types of acculturation such as *incorporation* and *directed change*. The study shows that type of incorporation has been occurring throughout the time and it was mainly due to very close social relations between Myanmar and Meithei people.

In contrast, direct change was also recorded and it was mainly due to the military conquest of Myanmar over Meithei. With a reference to some records, some

<sup>2</sup> "Acculturation" Encyclopedia Britannica, Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014

Myanmar Kings brought them from Manipur as captives and settled them within this study area. The following facts serve as the concrete evidence for *directed change* of acculturation process (See table 2).

Table 2 Military Conquest of Myanmar over Meithei (1757-1826)

Sr.	Year	Action
1	1757	King Alungpaya brought some Manipuris from Manipur as captives and settled them at Sagaing and various parts of Amarapura district. He established a Manipuri cavalry.
2	1764	Hasingbushin invaded Manipur in December and took some Manipuris as captives to increase the Myanmar population.
3	1819 to 1826	Ava (Myanmar) invaded Manipur and the Seven Year Devastation followed. They (Myanmar) took skilled Manipuri workers like weavers, carpenters, goldsmiths, rowers, indigenous doctors, astrologers, Purohits (priest) etc. to Myanmar and settled them there according to their occupations.
4	1820	Bagyidaw brought many Manipuris to Myanmar and settled them there after assuring them of secure jobs.
5	1821	Bagyidaw brought another group of Manipuris to Myanmar and settled them there.

Source: extracted from Awa: Kate and Paona, Mutua Bahadur (2014)

*One important finding* is that the process of acculturation takes an important role in cultural changes and the related spatial distribution of Meithei in this study area.

*The second finding* is that Meithei people in Myanmar have different historical background and different origins. With regard to this concept, following facts can be noted as concrete evidences and they are:

- a) Geopolitically, it can be accepted that the origin of Meithei is Manipur (present day a State of India) and it was once controlled by Myanmar Kings and thus it is also involved in Myanmar Sovereignty.
- b) Anthropologically, it has been accepted that Meithei (called Meithei Chin) is one ethnic group of Chin National and it has long been settled in Chin State since very ancient days.
- c) Human geographically, it can be recognized that Meithei represents one mountain tribe who settled on mountainous areas occupying the present day Manipur Plateau of India and Chin Hill and Naga Hill of Myanmar.
- d) Historically, it has been accepted that the various wars between Manipur and Myanmar have been recorded throughout history and Manipuri were brought from Manipur as captives and settled them in Myanmar especially in upper Myanmar.
- e) Culturally, it is true that the process of diffusion has been taken a critical role in settlement history of Meithei in Myanmar and later the process of acculturation overwhelming the whole process. The artifacts related to the former settlement of Meithei with their belief are shown in the photo (1).

### CONCLUSION

Spatial distribution of Meithei people in this study area is changing with time. It can be accepted that future spatial distribution of Meithei is more and more related to strong faith in their religion with caste, Brahman. Therefore, it is confirmed that two urban wards of Pyigyipyawbwe (E) and Pyigyipyawbwe (W) in Chanayethazan Township will become an important nodal point of Meithei descendants in future for their strong cultural belief and Brahman caste system.

Photo (1) Artifacts Related to Former Settlement of Meithei with Their Belief



Two Shrines of Manipur God Mother Spirit Located in Sadaw Village



Shrine and Statue of Holy Person Located in Yekyipauk Village



Artifacts of Holy Person and Ornaments offered by Meithei Descendants



Researcher with Meithei Descendants at Yekyipauk and Sadaw Villages



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