

## **Taboo in Meiteiron**

**N. Pramodini**  
Manipur University, India

### **INTRODUCTION**

Meiteiron taboo words reflect the values and beliefs of Meitei<sup>1</sup> society. Which words become taboo is determined by various religious, social, and psychological factors. This study classifies Meitei taboos into those on using personal names, on using kin terms, on the use of certain names, on naming certain animals, on naming certain diseases, on using certain words connected with spirits, on using certain terms at night, on religious constraints on using certain words, and on using words connected with sex. Some words are taboo because of their phonetic similarity to taboo words. Taboo on words which are phonetically similar to the tabooed words. And, finally there are semi-taboo words. The understanding of taboo requires examining these taboos not only in terms of how they are presently viewed but also in terms of the way they were at earlier times and how they have changed, due to factors like education and outside contact.

Taboo, *namun̄bə*, in Meiteiron, is embedded in Meitei society. Taboo is a socio-cultural phenomenon, with linguistic taboos the result of earlier social taboos. Therefore linguistic taboos vary with social changes. Thus, our study of linguistic taboos will be examined in a wider contextual framework. First, however, some examples of taboos are given below (*à* = low tone; *á* = high tone). Note that some of these are taboos; others are more superstitions.

---

1. Meiteis are the inhabitants of Manipur valley; their mother tongue is Meiteiron

1. *tāwháyðabə*  
*tāw-háy- də-bə* lit. 'tell not to do'  
do -tell- neg-inf  
'forbidden to do'. Killing an animal or even a fly without reason is *təháyðabə* 'forbidden to do'.
  
2. *sétháyðabə*  
*sét-lu háy - də - bə* lit. 'tell not to wear'  
wear-tell-neg-inf  
'forbidden to wear'. It was forbidden for a commoner to wear a phanek (Sarong type; *thəmbal məcu* 'colour of lotus') striped horizontally with pink (the more dominant colour), red and black. Only queens and their immediate kin had the privilege of wearing it.  
  
*cīlháyðabə*  
*cīlu-háy -də - bə* lit. 'tell not to wear'  
wear-tell-neg-inf  
'forbidden to wear'. A girl should not wear a flower in the morning out of the fear that she will get an old man for her life partner.
  
3. *cətháyðabə*  
*cətlu- háy - də - bə* lit. 'tell not to go'  
go-tell-neg-inf  
'forbidden to go'. It would be inauspicious for one to go south on Thursdays.
  
4. *táháyðabə*  
*tāw-háy- də-bə* lit. 'tell not (to) listen'  
listen-tell-neg-inf  
'forbidden to hear'. It is forbidden to hear about unwanted or negatively sanctioned acts such as abortion and some abusive expressions referring to sex are forbidden.
  
5. *háyháyðabə*  
*háyu- háy- də- bə* lit. 'tell not to tell'



Brahmin priest changes the clothes of, for instance, Vishnu.

### **Taboos on the use of personal names**

There are four different personal names with prohibitions on their use: a deceased person's name, one's husband's name, an older person's name, and a secret name.

#### **1. Prohibition of deceased person's name**

Under normal circumstances, uttering a dead person's name is prohibited in the presence of relatives of the deceased. If it is necessary to refer to a deceased person, a circumlocution is used such as *láykh idrábā* 'the person (male) who is no more alive' along with appropriate kin term (if the deceased person is older than the speaker); if the deceased person is younger than the speaker, then the phrases used are *láykh idrábā ibunjo* for 'males' and *láykh idrábi ibemā* for 'females'. Both are respectful terms 'my dear' to refer to the dead.

To refer to dead people who were around seventy or more, the terms used are *bāysənābā* (borrowed from the Sanskrit word *vaysenav*) for 'males' and *bāysənābi* for 'females'.<sup>2</sup> These circumlocutions show not only respect to the deceased but also to the relatives. Similar prohibitions are widespread. Such prohibitions are found amongst the Australians and Polynesians, the Samoyedh of Siberia, the Todas of Southern India, the Mongols of Tartary, the Tuareg of the Sahara, the Ainu of Japan, the Akamba and Nandi of central Africa, the Tinguians of the Philippines and the inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands, of Borneo, of Madagascar and of Tasmania (Frazer, 1911b:353).

---

2. The use of these terms indicates that the Meiteis are followers of the Vaisanvite faith.