

## **Taboo in Meiteiron**

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### **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.

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

1. *táwháydabə*  
*táw-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 *təhəydabə* 'forbidden to do'.
  
2. *sétháydabə*  
*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.  
  
*cīlháydabə*  
*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. *cətháydabə*  
*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. *táháyədbə*  
*táw-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. *háyháydabə*  
*háyu- háy- də- bə* lit. 'tell not to tell'

tell-tell-neg-inf  
'unutterable'. -or-

ṇáṇháyḁbə  
ṇáṇu-háy-ḁ-bə lit. 'tell not to speak  
speak-tell-neg-inf  
'unspeakable' -or-

pálhádəbə  
pəlu-háy-ḁ-bə lit. 'tell not to mention'  
mention-tell-neg-inf  
'unmentionable'

It is also forbidden utter the words for miscarriage, abortion, or for deadly diseases such as cholera and small pox.

6. cáháyḁbə  
cáw-háy-ḁ-bə lit. 'tell not to eat'  
eat-tell-neg-inf  
'forbidden to eat'. For example, the Mangang clan of Meitei community is prohibited from eating *sabot lin manbi* (a gourd which looks like a snake) 'snake gourd'. Pakhangba, the first king of the recorded history of Manipur, who ruled in 33 A.D. and who belonged the Mangang clan, was believed to be able to transform himself into a snake. And, in fact, a snake is a totem of this clan. Thus, by extension, the snake gourd, whose name has the word *lin* 'snake' in it, cannot be eaten by members of this clan.

7. yéhháyḁbə  
yéhu-háy-ḁ-bə lit. 'tell not (to) look'  
look-tell-neg-inf  
'forbidden to watch'. For example, it is forbidden to watch while a

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).

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

## 2. Prohibition against the use of the husband's name

Generally husbands and wives do not address one another by name, although husbands are at least permitted to. However, it is considered to be a sin for a wife even to pronounce the name of her husband, because in Hindu Meitei custom, a husband is believed to be "a visible god". In Hindu scriptures, a husband is always superior to his wife; "...among Hindus, the name of a husband is taboo to his wife" (Masani 1966:88). Therefore, as a rule the wife does not pronounce her husband's name but instead calls him by some phrasal expression or by a teknonym.<sup>3</sup> This holds true even among the Muslims of India, who are mostly converts from Hinduism (Masani 1966:88). Jain's doctoral dissertation (1973) presents a discussion of what he calls "no naming," the strategies by which Hindi speakers avoid having to say the first name their addressee or referent. Jain discusses several formal devices that can be used by a wife to avoid uttering the name of her husband (1973:137, 138). Normally, a wife will not utter the name of her husband or her father-in-law; in fact, sometimes this restriction may be expanded to include all of a wife's elder affines.

Amongst the Meiteis, wives use phrases instead of husband's personal name,<sup>4</sup> the equivalent to the first name of English. A wife, for example, may get her husband's attention by saying *tábiribrā* 'do you hear me (respectful)?' This is not an address term but instead is a way to get the husband's attention without using an address term, thus showing respect. However, in educated circles, westernization is bringing about change: Husbands are sometimes addressed by their personal

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3. The practice of giving to the parent the name of the child.

4. Among Meiteis if a person is addressed it is always by the first name, never by the second name.

names, despite the fact that such changes are viewed with disapproval by the society at large, especially by women.

### **3. Prohibition against using an older person's name**

In Meitei custom, it is forbidden to address people who are older than the speaker by their personal names, that is, a person is considered to be highly impolite and ill-mannered if he addresses his elders by name. It was believed that those who did not maintain this basic taboos might be attacked by wild animals. This restriction shows that seniority is valued in Meitei society, while helping to maintain the social hierarchy.

### **4. Taboos on the use of a secret name**

It is also believed that one should not disclose the name given when the horoscope was cast by an astrologer. It should be kept secret throughout one's life. The general belief is that to know one's secret horoscope name is to have control over the person. It is possible that the use of this secret name was introduced into Meitei society by the coming of Hinduism. Masani (1966:38) reports that among the orthodox Hindu population, there was a strict taboo against saying the ceremonial name. He also reports that, for a Brahmin boy, a secret name given at the time of birth was and is still a necessity.

### **Taboos on the use of kin terms**

A strict avoidance relationship prevails between 'elder brother-in-law' (husband's elder brother) and 'younger sister-in-law' (younger brother's wife), a prohibition so strict that Meitei custom does not permit them to converse with one another. However, when circumstances require them to speak they do so indirectly, without looking at one another, and standing at a distance. Thus, the kin terms *itay* 'elder brother-in-law' and the personal name of the 'younger sister-in-law' are

only used reference, not for address. Freud (1950:13) regarded such rules of avoidance as protective measures against incest.

### Taboos on the use of certain names

During the monarchy of the past it forbidden for their subjects to use all the names of kings<sup>5</sup> as personal names. Even the words *nĩŋth éw* 'king' and *nĩŋth ém* 'king' were names. Children with kings' names as their personal names were asked to change them or to face the consequences. This restriction was apparently to keep a substantial social distance between kings and their subjects. It is worth noting that the kings were believed to possess extraordinary powers; for example, when they got angry they could cast a spell over wrong doers and, since kings were believed to be the re-incarnation of *pákh əŋbə* 'an ancestral deity,' no one could escape from such a spell.

China presents a parallel example (Folklore Record, Vol. IV. 73, cited in Masani 1966:105-106). In the third century B.C. an emperor named "Ching" who assumed the title "She Hwang-Ti" declared that his name was sacred and commanded the syllable "ching" be tabooed.

Royal descendants (namely, the RKs<sup>6</sup> and the *ləymə*<sup>7</sup>) had their personal names that were not permitted to be used as personal names by commoners. It was their special privilege to have those specific

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5. The prohibition against using kings' names is common knowledge. I knew an old man whose name was Ningthou 'king'; his class teacher made the old man change his name.

6. The descendants of male members of royal family are known as Rajkumars 'princes' and Rajkumaris 'princesses'. They are not the immediate children of Kings as the glosses indicate, but they are the kings' relatives in the male line. The words Rajkumar and Rajkumari are now used as surnames. The immediate children of kings are known as Maharajkumars 'princes' and Maharajkumaris 'princesses'.

7. The descendant of any Rajkumar, when she is married to a commoner. The descendants of Rajkumaris take their father's family name.

names (which referred to the respective groups they belonged to). It was possible that such names were restricted to them so as to protect and perpetuate their identity as royal descendants. It is tempting to agree with Adler (1978:4) that, over all, a taboo is dictated by the upper, ruling classes. In contemporary society, once tabooed royal names words are no longer considered taboo, undoubtedly due to the fact that the monarchy has been replaced by democracy. As a result names which were restricted to the royal descendants are widely in use. Many, particularly the young, are not even aware of the fact that such names were once tabooed.

In the pre-Hindu Meitei tradition, it appears that the names of the deities which were worshipped could not be used as personal names; it was blasphemous for a Meitei to adopt the sacred and revered names of the deities. In the past, there were hardly any Meitei names which contained the names of the native deities. However, apparently after the advent of Hinduism, we find Meiteis using the names of Hindu Gods, such as Krishna, Gopal, Brajakishore, Shyamkishore, etc. and goddesses such Radha, Radhe, Raseshwori etc. Masani (1966:51) reports that an analysis of Hindu names reveals a marked predilection for the names of family or village gods. It is a belief universally held that to pronounce constantly the holy name of god is to ensure health, happiness and good fortune in this world and salvation and spiritual bliss in the next. It is significant that even after embracing Hinduism, Meitei names were still not based on Meitei deities, an apparent reflection of the continued respect of Meiteis for earlier beliefs and philosophies. However, nowadays the taboos on using the names of native deities has disappeared due to factors like both education and the revival of Sanamahism.<sup>8</sup> Now the names of native female deities such as *panth<sup>h</sup>oybi* and *áyajlāymā* occur as Meitei personal names, a point where the revivalism fails to observe an older tradition of taboo. The revivalists

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8. Pre-Hindu indigenous religious practice of ancestor worship.



seem more unconcerned with the naming taboos and may themselves want to be identified with the older religion, while eschewing their association with Hindu religion and practices. Thus, the use of the deity names is simply a mark of their self-identity. They simply use the names of deities as names, either ignoring or without knowing the older socio-cultural values and beliefs. Old people still aware of the older prohibitions often comment that members of the younger generations want to turn the world upside down.

Further, other naming taboos have also disappeared, such using the names of fruits and flowers (in Meitei words *həy-ləy gi məmɪŋ*). It was once thought, for example, that a person who has a name of flower is likely to have life span of life as short as the flower. Such beliefs are largely gone now.

### Taboos on the use of certain animal names

The names of dangerous animals namely, *káy* 'tiger' and *lin* 'snake' are should not be uttered, particularly at night. Nor should the word *sámú* 'elephant' be uttered when the speaker is within sight of the animal. Instead, one should substitute *ipúdhəw* for 'tiger' (lit. 'great-grandfather'), *napi* for 'snake' (lit. 'grass') and *awáŋbə* for 'elephant' (lit. 'the tall one'). Similar euphemisms for dangerous animals like 'tiger' are found in Marashtrian, which uses *mama* 'maternal uncle', 'grandfather' or 'lord'. Similar devices are used in mainland and insular Southeast Asia. For 'snake' the word means insect or worm in Kanara; Marathas call it 'the long thing' or merely 'animal' and Sindhi Muslim call it a 'rope' (Masani 1966:86).

If one refers to it by the word *káy* 'tiger' it may overhear or understand human speech and harm the person; if the euphemistic term is used, the speaker is less likely to be harmed. Emeneau (1948:202)

terms this a hunter's taboo. The fear is that the animal may hear its name and either attack or run away. In the Ukraine, for instance, the names of all potentially dangerous animals are replaced by circumlocutions and euphemisms (Smal-Stocki 1950:491).

Word		Euphemism	
1.	káy 'tiger'	ipúd'hw	'great-grandfather'
2.	lin 'snake'	napi	'grass'
3.	sámú 'elephant'	awánjbə	'the tall one'

Similarly, the word *lin* 'snake' is replaced by the word *napi* 'grass'; and, if somebody is bitten by a snake, people are advised to say that he was bitten by *napi* 'grass'.

One reason for word substitution is the fear of attracting the attention of such dangerous animals. "In the past, fear was a constant companion of those simple people who lived in direct contact with the forces of nature" (Emeneau, 1948). Nowadays such animals no longer dwell in the inhabited areas and the jungles of earlier days have become thickly populated residential areas. Fear of attack by such dangerous animals is no longer in the mind of people and once tabooed words are no more taboo in the present society.

### Taboos on naming certain diseases

The names of dreaded diseases as *pukətpə* 'cholera' *lájəwəth ókpə* 'small pox' *tibi* 'tuberculosis' were also avoided. It was believed that such diseases were charged with the power of evil spirits and the mere utterance of the word could lead to infection. Two diseases, namely *pukətpə* 'cholera' and *lájəwəth ókpə* 'smallpox', were referred to the euphemistic term *lájəwəth ókpə* 'the great disease'. Masani (1966:87) reports that "small pox" and "leprosy" are spoken of as *mata* (the god-

dess causing the disease) and “great disease”; the words for convulsions and consumption were also avoided.

Cursing or swearing using such words was also considered a bad omen. It was believed that the person who uttered the words would suffer the curse or he would suffer other consequences.

### **Taboo on certain words connected with evil spirits**

The interaction between superstition and language has turned many words associated with danger or bad luck into taboo words. Talk of unnatural death falls into this category: *ṭḥ áwri-yánbə* ‘hang’, *əjaj-yáyṭḥəbə* ‘abortion’ and *láyáy-cátpə* ‘miscarriage’ were tabooed, as such acts were believed to be associated with evil spirits. The words became so closely identified with the acts that even to utter the words themselves was almost seen as doing the act. In the past, such words were avoided to a great extent, but the new generation talks quite freely about such things, but often using English words. The native words are still not used more because they are considered to be impolite than because they are taboo.

It was also forbidden to tell ghost stories or any fearful stories relating to witches, spirits and the like. It is believed that if the ghosts, spirits, and so on overhear the stories about them they may get angry with the people and caste a spell on them. On the more practical side, the prohibition serves a purpose: usually children are frightened by such stories and may develop fears from them.

Another interesting example is when a person considered to be possessed by a deity there is a rite performed at dusk by a Meitei *maybə* ‘holymán; priest’. During the rite if the *maybə* hears any kind of noise or sound, for example, a person loudly calling his friend’s name in the distance, the priest may say to the spirit ‘go to the person who is shout-

ing since we have given you an offering'; this is known as *t<sup>h</sup>áw-táwbá*. It is believed that the spirit will leave the person and go to the other person. So, people are afraid to make any sort of noise at dusk.

It is also a taboo to answer *hàw* 'yes' at night when somebody is called by name. Ghosts and the like supposedly move around freely, becoming stronger and more powerful at night. If they want to possess a human, they will call that particular person by name. If the person answers *hàw* 'yes', the ghost or spirit possesses them and they will die soon. Therefore, instead of *hàw* 'yes', circumlocutions such as *kəri háyge* 'what are you saying or *kənanə* 'who are you' are used.

### **Taboo on the use of specific words at night**

Finally, it was also forbidden to mention the words *yetum* 'needle' and *yàyyəŋ* 'turmeric' at night. The apparent reason for this prohibition is interesting. The word *yetum* 'needle' is not to be uttered at night, because that needles are dangerous because when they are misplaced they are difficult to see at night. More practically, it is also said that one is not supposed to stitch at night as it may spoil one's eyes. In place of needle euphemism *p<sup>h</sup>igi maybə* 'physician of cloth' (lit) is found to be in use if it is to be mentioned at all'.

In the past, the word *yàyyəŋ* 'turmeric' was used in place of *səna* 'gold' in rituals as gold was too expensive to be used (probably because the two things have the same colour and the latter became synonymous and therefore it was not to be uttered at night as thieves are nocturnal in their habits). Now the word 'turmeric' is not to be uttered at night either; instead, one is to use the word *məcu* 'colour'. One might speculate that the prohibition developed out of a fear of thieves hearing someone talk about 'gold'. Even in contemporary society, gold can be replaced by turmeric or its powder in ceremonies (where gold is to be offered to deities). Bloomfield (1935, reprinted 1985:401) remarks that the problem with euphemisms is that in time euphemisms themselves gradually become strongly associated with the taboo and thus become

taboo themselves. In the contemporary society, the euphemistic word *mæcu* 'colour' is preferred in place of tumeric even during the day.

### Taboos due to religious restrictions

We find that some words are banned in some religious ceremonial contexts. The word *ĩ-rónbə* 'a kind of mashed up dish'<sup>9</sup> is tabooed particularly during feasts in which offerings are given to Hindu gods such as Krishna, Vishnu, and Jagannath. The literal meaning of this dish is 'water mashed up' (that is, some ingredients are mashed up with water after boiling). However, the initial word *i-* 'water' (seen in other examples too, *ĩ-rúbə* 'to bath', *ĩ-róybə* 'to swim' *ĩ-rúppə* 'to dive' *ĩ-cél* 'the flow of water', is homophonous with the word *i* 'blood'. This might be the reason why *ĩ-rónbə* is forbidden in Hindu ceremonial feasts. In place of this word, the quite different word *ənoybə* 'a kind of mashed up dish' is used in such contexts. However the word *ĩ-rónbə* is still used when an offering is made to a Meitei deity.

Similarly, another word, probably used by Brahmin priests, is Meitei native word *ĩ-rátpə*<sup>10</sup> 'to worship' (lit. 'to worship water'). As the initial word *i* 'water' is homophonous with *i* 'blood', the word *ĩ-rátpə* 'to worship' is forbidden in Hindu ceremonies. Instead a different word borrowed from Sanskrit *puja-táwbə* 'to perform *puja* (or rites)' is used by Brahmin priests. It is clear that the taboo is on words beginning with *i-* because of the homophony with 'blood'. Nowadays *ĩrát-puja táwbə* 'to perform rites' a compound expression of the two is being

9. The *ironbə* is either the stems or modified stems or of other vegetables which are not roots.

10. *i-ratpə* (water-worship) and also *latpə* (god-worship), as in *lay-latpə*.

used irrespective of whether one follows Hinduism or indigenous religions.

Furthermore, due to the Hindu influence, Meiteis they were prohibited to eat meat such as *oksa* 'pork' and *sansa* 'beef'. The Hindu prohibition against eating meat led to these words becoming taboo. However, most of young people eat meat and the prohibition against using these words has narrowed to older people and staunch Hindus.

### **Taboo items connected with sex**

Word connected to sex, body parts, and bodily functions are forbidden in public places. In Meitei culture sex is considered secret, private, and even unclean because of the great traditional emphasis placed on sexual morality. Most people feel that words describing such topics are not fit for public mention. The words themselves are almost exclusively spoken and most are not found in dictionaries; only euphemisms and circumlocations are found in dictionaries. For example, *ph̄əmdīnəb̄ə* 'sexual intercourse' (the literal meaning is sharing a bed) is the indirect way to mention this act of this affair (if it is to be mentioned at all). To avoid direct mention, a large group of euphemisms and metaphors related to sex, sex organs, and sexual behavior has been created, including literary allusions such as *th̄àgi láy satp̄ə* 'menses' (literally 'monthly blooming flower').

Euphemisms exist for the male and female sex organs: for the male sex organ is *nupagi isij th̄óη* (literally, the male's water outlet) and for the female organ, it is *nupigi isij th̄óη* (literally the female's water outlet). In daily conversation, almost every family has its own euphemisms for these two taboo words. The influence of these strong linguistic taboos has been extended to related things making them taboo in turn. Thus, *puk-kəŋb̄ə* 'pregnant' is often replaced by *m̄ronb̄ə*, *əŋàŋ-pók̄p̄ə* 'to give birth' is usually changed to *əŋàŋ unəb̄ə* 'to meet a child', and *maāŋb̄ə* 'menses or period' is nearly always euphemismized as *thagi kh̄óŋkap* 'monthly routine' or *th̄àgi láy satp̄ə* 'monthly blooming

flower'. Although these taboos are less strictly observed than they once were, the direct use of these words in inappropriate contexts still provoke violent reactions from some listeners and lead to public shame for the speakers.

As in most cultures, Meiteis consider bodily functions and excrement unclean and their direct mention inappropriate. The taboo words *thi pháybā* 'to shit' and *yui hánbā* 'to piss' are recast in many less offensive ways in Meiteiron. For *thi pháybā* 'to shit', the euphemism is *kʰóŋ hám bā* 'to wash one's feet'. Not surprisingly this euphemism confuses speakers of other dialects as they tend to be confused by the literal meaning of this phrase. For non-native speakers of Meiteiron, more directness is needed to avoid confusion. It is interesting to note that 'to wash one's feet' might have developed from the traditional Meiteiron custom of washing one's own feet after relieving oneself as emptying one's bowel as it is considered unclean. And, for the expression *yui hánbā* 'to piss' the euphemism is *māpan thók pā* 'to go out'. In a similar manner, the replacements used for *thi* 'shit' and *yui* 'urine' are *āmāŋ bā* 'unclean thing' and *həkki-isiŋ* 'bodily water' although the more direct words with intimate friends on very informal occasions.

Generally, the lower classes and the less cultured use these vulgar speech forms directly, while the upper classes and or the more educated and cultured prefer to use euphemisms. In fact, the use of euphemisms is considered more cultured and sophisticated. In a highly stratified society not only does the manifestation of taboo correlate with the class structure but it also functions to help reinforce these differences (Sagarine 1962:34f). Although the words relating to sex are forbidden under normal circumstances the use of banned language is allowed in worshipping the pre-Hindu deities. In the Lai Haraoba 'to appease the deity' ritual, the priests and priestesses perform dances depicting how human beings are formed, using the otherwise forbidden language con-

nected with the child birth. According to Evans-Pritchard (1929), tribes and groups used explicit language in ceremonies that was tabooed in other contexts.

### **Taboo words due similarities with taboo words**

Some Meiteiron words are tabooed because they are phonetically similar to tabooed words. The phrase *ok-e* 'it is enough' is tabooed for Meiteiron speaking Muslims because *okpə* 'enough' is phonetically similar to *ok* 'pig'. Instead they use a word which has a somewhat different meaning, *oy-re* 'it has become'. For the animal *ok* 'pig', Muslims use *namuhsa* 'the tabooed animal'. A similar case is reported by Masani (1966:87), who notes that Jews, who are forbidden to eat pork sometimes use *dabehar achur* 'the other thing'.

Still another example: *nanəw* 'new leaf' is phonetically similar to the expression of '(you are) cohabiting with someone'.xxx meaning? As a result, this word is often avoided by people. However, it does occur in the speech of those women who intend to show sexual desire overtly. In ancient Meiteiron, the kin term used for 'paternal' aunt was *inu* (Singh 1964:30), phonetically similar to the word *inu* 'male sex organ'. Not only was this kin term undoubtedly avoided but it is possible that the present day kin term, *ine* 'paternal aunt' might be a modified form of the earlier kin term *inu* under the pressure of taboo.

### **Semi-taboo words**

Non-taboo words sometimes behave like taboo words in certain contexts. Speakers try to monitor the listener's age, sex, occupation, status, and so on. Depending on such factors a word may be avoided by a speaker. One example of this is *cətləge* 'I am going', an expression used by people when they take leave of others. However, it is also used when one desires to die after prolonged illness or by a dying person on his death bed. As a result, this expression is taboo for people leaving



their home. Instead, they are advised to say *cətluk<sup>h</sup>ige* ‘I am going and I will be back’. The reason for this is the first phrase carries the implication that the person concerned might encounter misfortune during the journey. Thus, the reluctance to use the phrase when departing.

TABLE 1. Examples of euphemisms

word	gloss	word	gloss
1. <i>ná-pəŋbə</i> <i>ear-numb</i>	deaf	<i>ná-tárh̄iəbə</i> <i>ear-hear-ugly</i>	hard of hearing
2. <i>lón-r̄h̄ óktəbə</i> <i>language-out-not</i>	mute; dumb	<i>wə ɲəŋbəŋəmdəbə</i> <i>word-speak-unable</i>	difficulty in speaking
3. <i>k<sup>h</sup> óŋtəkpa</i> <i>leg-break</i>	lame	<i>k<sup>h</sup> óŋ cátpəŋəmdəbə</i> <i>leg-go-unable</i>	unable to walk
4. <i>mít táŋbə</i> <i>eye-blind</i>	blind	<i>mít údəbə</i> <i>eye-see-not</i>	unable to see
5. <i>kók táŋbə</i> <i>head-bald</i>	bald headed	<i>sám hāwdəbə</i> <i>hair-grow-unable</i>	bald headed
6. <i>sībə</i> <i>die</i>	die	<i>láytabə</i> <i>live-not</i>	no longer exist
7. <i>hənubə</i> <i>old-become</i>	old	<i>əhəl óyrəbə</i> <i>old-become</i>	become old
8. <i>r̄h̄ ibon lāwbə</i> <i>food-greedy</i>	greedy	<i>cágənbə</i> <i>eat-strong</i>	robust eating
9. <i>tukəcəbə</i> <i>hatred</i>	hatred	<i>həynədəbə</i> <i>used to-not</i>	not used to

If not taboo, words that might disgust or embarrassment the listener are at least avoided. This can be best illustrated with the help of an example, where a caring sister teaches her brothers and sisters not to use the word *ɲáwbə* ‘mad’ because her mother is literally mad. Instead they use the phrase *wak<sup>h</sup>əl cóyrəbə* ‘schizophrenic person; scatter-

minded'. Similar situations exist in schools, colleges and universities. Instead of terming dull students *láyrik háytəbə* 'blockheads' (book-know-neg-inf), such students are labelled slow learners. It even more sensitive when one talks of a teacher with a weak academic record as *láyrik háytəbə oja* 'a teacher who is not learned'. Direct use of such expressions is generally avoided for obvious reasons; there are no such inhibitions when one speaks of bright students or teachers.

#### SOURCES OF CHANGES

##### **Decline of the monarchy**

A number of changes in the language have come with the decline of the monarchy. People were once forbidden even utter king's names; now they are now being used freely as personal names: Gambhir, Chandrakirti, Surchandra, etc. At one time only aristocrats were allowed to use certain social titles (Raj Kumars and Raj Kumaris); for example, titles containing the word *səna* 'gold' as in *səna-tombi* 'Sana Tombi' and *maypak-səna* 'Maipaksana', although once restricted, are now found in all sections of society. The titles *ibuŋo* 'sir' and *ibemə* 'madam' are, once restricted to *ləymə*, are being extended to commoners of higher status.

##### **Changes due to education and outside contact**

Education and outside contact have brought about change. People are less superstitious. Gone is the avoidance custom of names of the dreaded diseases and animals. Gone are taboos against the names of the dreaded diseases; in the course of time the diseases have become curable and comprehensible.

## Euphemism

Euphemism is the other side of taboo; they are two sides of the same coin. Euphemism serves two purposes: to make words more polite and acceptable and to mark one's social group. Taboo and avoidance to show respect and politeness have resulted in the expansion of not just euphemism and circumlocution but also substitution of a general term for a specific one (synecdoche), the use of borrowings, the dropping of words (aposipesis), and the use of teknonyms.

### The use of a general term for specific ones

People used the general term *sa* 'animal' instead of the words *káy* 'tiger' or *sámú* 'elephant.' Similarly, the general term *layna-əcəwbə* 'the great disease' was used instead of the names of the dreaded diseases *pukətpə* 'cholera' and *layjawthokpə* 'small pox'. And general word *layphətabə* 'evil spirits' is used for all kinds of evil spirits.

### The use of foreign words

Borrowed English words substitute for the taboo words connected with sex and also words connected with dreaded diseases. The words *pregnant*, *abortion* and *miscarriage* are being used instead of the native words *puk-kəŋbə*, *əŋəŋ-yáythəbə* and *láyýáy-cətpə*, respectively. As the native words sound quite vulgar and impolite, among the educated, the borrowed words are usually used. The words *cholera* and *smallpox* are used in place of the native words.

### The elimination of part of a word (aposipesis)

In some cases the impolite parts of compound words are being eliminated. For example, in the phrase *əŋəŋ-pokpə* 'to give birth' the

word *pokpə* 'to give birth' is eliminated and in its place of the word *nub* 'to meet' is used (*əjəj unnəbə* 'to give birth').

### Teknonyms

As in Hindu custom, a wife is not allowed to address her husband by his personal name. Instead, for example, she may address her husband by taking her eldest son's or daughter's name or the name of a person closely related to him (for example, his sister's or his brother's name) if they are childless (for instance, *may pabuŋ* 'his father'; *məkʰoy tacəw* 'their eldest brother', both teknonyms). She may also use certain phrasal expressions completely lacking address terms, for example, *tabiribrə* 'do you hear?' *yəjəy* 'look' and *əduburo* 'that is so'.

Use of euphemism indicates the social class of the speaker. Avoidance of impolite taboo words is a mark of being cultured and sophisticated. The more direct expressions and designations are being replaced by less direct ones. Words like *əjəj-pókəpə* 'to give birth' *púk-kəjəbə* 'pregnant' are usually replaced by the circumlocutions, *əjəj unnəbə* and *m්රှုnbə*, respectively. However, those from the lower classes tend to use more direct expressions.

### Conclusion

As a socio-cultural phenomenon, verbal taboos change along with society and culture, as is evident from the differences between modern taboos and earlier ones. Ancient taboos arose mainly from a sense of danger and fear of punishment, while modern verbal taboos are chiefly matters of social etiquette and propriety in behaviour; they reflect an interest in maintaining one's public image and the desire not to offend others. Inhibition, rather than prohibition, is the key to the understanding the very intricate nature of the verbal restrictions of modern times. Present-day society is far more concerned with social decorum, political creeds, and communicative appropriateness than with outdated

superstitious beliefs. Also taboo observance manifests itself more often in formal, public occasions than in informal, everyday situations. In short, taboos reflect the forms and concerns of society. According to Wundt (1906, cited in Freud 1950), taboos reflect social institutions and social life. And, conversely, taboo helps regulate social life. Thus, "the whole area of verbal taboo and semi-taboo language merits serious research attention" (Hudson 1980).

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