Verbal arts like riddles and proverbs have very important and significant social functions among the Meitei of Manipur. They are performed in different situations. Riddles are the domain of children and young people. Riddling is done primarily as amusement during recreation time and happens in an organised situation between two or more participants. The performers have to be in the performance willingly. The riddle could be a traditional text or an improvised one. The verbal expression contains some descriptive elements that the listener has to guess and unravel the riddle. The listeners try to give the answer and each tries to be first.

Unlike the riddle, proverbs have an emergent quality and employment of a proverb in a given situation depends on the creativity of the performer. Just to know a proverb is not enough. One has to know how to apply it and also the timing when it could be most effective. Much more than the men, women folk are expert performers of proverbs. When they are in need of driving home some point and when the situation demands, it is not unusual to find women employing proverbs effectively. When it strikes the right chord, a proverb may trigger a fierce quarrel or may help in settling another. Family quarrels among women are generally replete with witty use of proverbs. The market place that is the domain of Meitei women vendors is another place where proverbs are employed profusely in all discussions or quarrels.

Proverb corresponds to the Manipuri word ‘paorou’ which means a term or a word that has some message locked in it. Proverbs are regarded as something that is always true and time-tested and a repository of ancient wisdom. Ordinary words for daily use are not enough to express some deeply felt ideas and sentiments. Sometimes, a speaker may use a proverb to provoke or to calm down a person he is speaking to. When the time and the situation demand, one resorts to the use of proverbs. For this, one has to keep a rich store of proverbs at his beck and call. When a proverb is successfully employed the performer gets the upper hand of the listener with some authority.

It is also used as an embellishment to show somebody’s oratorical skill.

In Meitei society using a proverb is, traditionally, not a young man’s job. Elderly people are fond of using proverbs with younger persons to give wise advice and to convince them of some point. When used among people belonging to the same age group, the speech act may hurt the ego of the person the performer is speaking to and may lead to an unhappy ending of the relationship.

When a young man uses as proverb to a person elder to him, this certainly amounts to provoking the person. This shows that in the Meitei society proverbs are taken as ancient wisdom that one has to learn through experience. A novice is not authorised by society to use proverbs. This has met with daring opposition from the younger generations. This is very clear when we look at the changing pattern of the texts of some proverbs.

One age-old proverb generally used by the elderly people is *ahan mathina chaphoo melli* which means ‘the excreta of an old man can patch up a crack in a pitcher’. This obviously is a proverb generated by the old to glorify themselves and to impose their will upon the young. Nowadays with so many proud youngsters coming up, they have added one more line to it which is just opposite to the earlier and that is *angang mathina rocket sai* which means ‘the excreta of the young man can make a rocket.’ So, now the proverb goes like this

- Ahan/ Mathina/ Chaphoo/ Melli; Angang/ Mathina/ Rocket/ Sai
- The old/ excreta/pitcher/patch up; the young/excreta/ rocket/made
- The excreta of old man can patch up a crack in a pitcher; (But) The excreta of young man can make a rocket.

The first phrase is subverted by the new one which was created by the younger people. But the second phrase cannot stand independently without the earlier phrase, while the first phrase can stand independently. So, proverb is the domain of elderly people in Meitei society.

There are hundreds of proverbs. Many are highly metaphorical and intimately related to traditional practices and views. Some proverbs stand as eloquent testimony to the experiences
the people had at some historical periods of time. A proverb like phiringi lam lou came to be born out of the British colonial experience. The proverb is like this

**Phiringi/ lam lou**  
European/style of grabbing lands

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This refers to the European, the British in particular, style of grabbing foreign lands ‘bit-by-bit’, very unassumingly. Manipur came to be under British rule after its defeat in a severe battle in 1891. But the British had already made inroads prior to this war and had already done its divisive politics to destabilise this otherwise peaceful princely state. Although the proverb came to be originated from the colonial experience with the British it is used in various contexts.

Meitei society is a patriarchal society and there is an accepted norm of division of labour between men and women. Hard work and activities that demand much physical involvement and courage like war and hunting expeditions were done by men. Work requiring less physical involvement like spinning, weaving, marketing and household chores are done by women. The unstable geo-political location of Manipur gave rise to frequent wars with neighbours, with the Burmese in particular. This necessitated the men folk to remain ever prepared for the eventuality of war. They mastered the martial art of thang-ta and were part of regular armies of the state that were at the beck and call of the king. It is not surprising that we come across a proverb like, nongmada pokpa machana nini siba hounade which testifies to the character of man in the early Meitei society. The proverb runs like this

**Nongmada/ pokpa/ machana**  
In a day/born/man  
Man is born in a day.  
Nini/ siba/ hounade  
In two days/die/never  
Never die two times in two days.

This means that death is only once and cannot occur two times in two days. This, in fact, is a call for courage in their fight for their mother Manipur. Another proverb which shows the chivalry of man is **Nupana yumdagi thokhrabadi sapham lanpham ngaktani**. This means:

**Nupana/ yumdagi /thokhrabadi/ sapham/ lanpham/ ngaktani**  
Man/from home/sets out/hunting/battle/ and all  
Once a man sets out of home he encounters war and wild animals.

The proverb attests the hardship a man usually confronts in life once he is in this society.

The relationship between mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law is not, in many cases, cordial in Meitei society except for a few. Frequent quarrels between the two lead to drifting apart of the joint family. In such quarrels it is not unusual to listen to the daughter-in-law hurling a proverb like

**Thangol/thoudabana/loidam/pumlamnei Sickle/blunt/months/to use**  
A blunt sickle is used for months together.

The mother-in-law is compared to a blunt sickle which cannot be thrown out but compelled to be used in spite of the inconveniences it creates.

There are few collections of Meitei proverbs available in book form. But these collections give only the texts and their meanings same as a dictionary does. In a way, dictionaries give much more information than simply the meaning, including information about grammatical aspects of words and their usage. Proverbs exist in performance. Performance that always has an emergent quality is their habitat. Meaning always cannot remain constant. Meaning always depends on the creativity of performer and the emergent quality of the performance situation or the context under which he is performing. So collections of proverbs also need to make mention of the performance situation, the actors involved, time and place.

To conclude we can say that study of proverbs of the Meiteis can lead us to a better understanding of the Meitei society and its multilayered structure. The proverbs represent a veritable tool for affecting and effecting desirable action and for projecting a particular cosmology. The study of proverbs from a linguistic and cultural point of view is valuable as they provide information on development of languages and ideas.

**References**