



Martial Tradition of Manipur: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Manipuris have a longstanding martial tradition that dates back to ancient times. This tradition includes military skills, physical culture, traditional games and martial arts that emphasize combat skills and defensive strategies. Throughout Manipur's history, warfare was prevalent, leading to mandatory rigorous military training for all citizens. In ancient times, chivalry was a fundamental aspect of education. Manipur's military prowess ensured its sovereignty for over two millennia. The Lallup System played a crucial role in preparing the population for potential warfare. The fate of the kingdom depended on the king's strategic insight and the expertise of his military generals. Manipuri warriors intricately embedded their martial traditions into the history of Manipur, strengthening the kingdom's resilience. The paper aims to explore the rich martial tradition of Manipuris.

Introduction:

The people of Manipur have a rich history of well-developed martial traditions dating back to ancient times. Traditional games, martial arts and physical culture are integral parts of this martial tradition. Throughout Manipur's history, warfare and battles were common occurrences. The martial prowess of the Meetei people allowed Manipur to maintain a strong and independent kingdom for over two millennia. Traditional games served as a means of physical and military training and were integrated into daily life (Singh, 2014, p.115).

Discussion:

The Manipuris evolved into a martial race as a result of frequent conflicts with their traditional adversaries: the Awas (Burmese), Khahis (Chinese), Takhels (Tripuris), and Cacharis (Assamese). Recognizing the significance of physical education in human development, Manipuri ancestors emphasized the learning of traditional games from a young age to maintain physical fitness. Consequently, the martial culture became intertwined with traditional games and martial arts.

The expedition led by King Kyamba and the King of Pong Khekkomba in the 15th century A.D. to conquer the Kabaw Valley is considered the first successful campaign against the Burmese. This triumph was followed by a series of expeditions during the reign of King Mungyamba. King Kabomba (1524-1542) invaded the Takhels in 1533. King Khagemba achieved successful expeditions against the Chinese and the Cacharis. On the flip side, the Burmese launched repeated attacks against the Manipuris during the reigns of King Paikhomba, King Pamheiba, King Bheigyachandra, and King Marjit. The Manipuri armies, under the Manipur Levy of Gambhir Singh, freed Manipur from the clutches of Awas in 1826.

The recurring internal conflicts among the principalities also necessitated constant warfare and the use of weaponry. In his book "Chainarol" (1988), scholar N. Khelchandra notes that these adversities instilled a profound sense of patriotism and were marked by chivalrous acts and gallantry. Kings actively supported and directly oversaw the promotion of martial arts and traditional games.

Throughout history, ancient texts such as Khahi Ngamba, Awa Ngamba, and Takhel Ngamba have provided detailed accounts of the wars waged by the Meetei armies against neighboring kingdoms (Indramani, 2014, p.iv). To ensure the defense of the Kingdom, the kings of Manipur established a well-equipped army in the early times. The king served as the Commander-in-Chief of the Manipur Army and appointed generals to manage the enlistment of soldiers and maintain a strong military force. During wartime, the generals operated under the king's leadership, playing a crucial role in the fate of the Manipur kingdom. T.C. Hodson noted that the state of Manipur was primarily organized for military purposes. At the same time, King Punshiba (1404 A.D. - 1432 A.D.) was credited with establishing a permanent and separate military department, Singhchep Meira Haijouroi, which was dedicated to war preparations. The maintenance and organization of armies, including their deployment and

administration, were fundamental aspects of the military structure. Additionally, the Manipuris constructed forts and defense complexes at strategic locations as part of their military initiatives.

Military Units:

The military was divided into three main categories, each overseen by various military officers: Khongmi Lanmi (Infantry), Sagol Lanmi (Cavalry), and Hee Lanmi (Boat Army).

1. Khongmi Lanmi (Infantry):

The infantry, known as Khongmi Lanmi, engaged in direct combat with the enemy as part of the military organization. According to the Lallup System, every abled male citizen between 17 and 60 underwent training to become a skilled soldier and was obligated to serve the state for 10 out of 40 days. This system ensured a robust and well-prepared army at all times. Traditional weapons of the Khong Lanmi in Meiteilon included the Thang (Sword), Ta (Spear), Oblong Shield, Shield, Langshoi, Tapak (Broad-tipped Spear), Shingjang (Axe), and Naori (Sling). It was not until the late 18th century that there was evidence of artillery being used in Manipur. In 1825, Raja Gambhir Singh received 1500 muskets from the British Government (Singh, 2003, p. 131). The infantry was further divided into regiments known as Tuli, with each Tuli comprising 1000 soldiers.

2. Sagol Lanmi(cavalry):

Sagol Lanmi(cavalry) was the most effective unit of the military organization. Meetei has used horses for military purposes since the early days. The king depended on the strength of cavalry for successful military expeditions. The cavalrymen were trained to be acquainted with using the sword, Spear, Arambai, Lance, Hunnata (Spear to hurl), Taronta, etc. Sagol Lanmi was an expert in horse riding, and Sagol Kangjei. They were skillful in horse riding with the fight and counter-fights. The Manipur cavalrymen inflicted a 'reign' into the minds of armies of Awa soldiers during the reign of Maharaja Garibniwaz. The king had a well-organized military organization under the Lallup system, and historians praised his military exploits as the most inspiring saga of Manipur.

3. Hee Lanmi (Boat Army).

At one time, Manipur was endowed with abundant water bodies. In the waterways, boats were a means of transportation. Manipur kings kept a strong naval force called Hee Lanmi (Boat Army) that was skillful in rowing boats, fighting boats, and using all types of weapons. To build a strong naval force, a boat race or Hiyang Tanaba was organized regularly under the patronage of kings. The Hiyang

Loishang department constructed boats. The Chronicle also records that King Khagemba had established Mayang Hishaba Loishang (department of boat makers).

All cavalymen wore dhoti, red jackets, and white turban in the uniforms. They wore Khadangchet, a piece of cloth that tied their chins with the turban. The general wore Khamenchatpa and a turban decorated with Pajeng Phiral (the champion's flag). There was no distinction in dress between the infantry and cavalry (Singh, 2003, p. 131). The ancient text Shang Panabagi Masil records the members of the Department of War and their activities of cutting trees and bamboo and clearing bushes (Manikchand, 2007, p. 36).

Weaponry

The Thang (sword) held significant importance as a weapon in the military. Historical records also reveal the presence of other weapons such as Ta (spears), Lirung-ten (bows and arrows), Naori (sling), Chung (shield), Arambai, and Singjang (axe). The departments of Khutheiba, Thangshanba, Thangjaba, and Nandeiba worked collectively in crafting bows, arrows, spears, and Arambais (darts).

In Meetei beliefs, the God Ibudhou Pakhangba was represented the sword as 'Tin Shidaba'. Under the Yek-Salai system, each of the seven Salai (clans) possessed a sword known as Salai Thang, which held essential significance as a ritual item in the Salai God's prayer. The ancient text Ningthourolgi Thang documents the swords utilized in the king's coronation. This coronation sword was employed in Phambal Lal (Coronation War), which occurred after the coronation of each king (Singh, 2023, p.95).

The spear, known as "Ta" in the archaic Meetei language, has been a crucial weapon since ancient times. It was wielded by Meetei warriors and was considered more dangerous than swords. Legend has it that God Khamlangba used a powerful spear to dig a large hole in the southwestern corner to drain water. In the Poireiton Khunthoklon (migration of Poireiton), Poireiton's team was armed with spears, along with daggers, axes, bows, and arrows. Meitei warriors used different types of war spears such as Hakthang Ta, Taronta Ta, Tapak Ta, Lambu Ta, and Langshoi Ta, each serving specific combat purposes. Additionally, the Royal Chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba records archery competitions during the reign of King Khagemba, and it is noted that each Salai had its own spear.

The Arambai was the most dreaded weapon among the Manipuri armies. The weapon was first introduced during the reign of King Punshiba (1404 A.D. - 1432 A.D.). It was extensively used by the

Meetei cavalymen against the Awas (Burmese), Takhels (Tripuris), Khagi (Chinese), and Thongnang Mayang (Cacharis). This unique dart was used by the cavalymen to attack and retreat from the enemies. The saying 'Awa Mityeng' (Gaze of Awas) still reflects the Awa soldiers' efforts to avoid the dreaded Arambai of the Meetei army. This demonstrates the terror that the Manipuri cavalry inflicted on their enemies with their distinctive weapon, the Arambai. The Chungoi is a round-shaped shield, while the Chung is an elongated shield.

Manipur has a rich tradition of Ten-Kappa (archery) dating back to ancient times. The ancient text Numit Kappa mentions archery, and the kings maintained an arrow brigade known as 'Telloi,' which was led by the Tenaohanjaba. The art of archery played a crucial role in the defense of the kingdom and the expansion of the empire. Even today, Ten Kappa remains an important ritual item in the Epan-Thaba rituals of Meetei. Additionally, there was a Shamutongba (elephant corps) in the Lalmi Loishang (Military Department).

The state of Manipur, known for its meticulous organization for military purposes, maintained armies and constructed strategic defensive complexes as a testament to its people's strategic foresight and fortitude. Throughout history, several Lal-pan (war fortresses) were recorded in various strategic areas and administrative units in the valley of Manipur. Forts from the reign of King Khagemba were built with bricks and mortar, known as Chekpal (brick fortress). Some significant ramparts include Sagolpan (present-day Sagolband), Khaempalli, Thangwai-pan (present-day Thangmeiband), Moirangpalli, Ayangpalli, Yubaraj Palli, Kharam Pallen, Pallel, and others. The Kangla Palace is surrounded by two moats - an inner and an outer moat, and the Imphal River from the eastern side, which were treated as water forts. King Khunjaoba excavated the outer and inner moat of King Chourajit, as recorded by Cheitharol Kumbaba. A mud wall between the moats surrounds the Palace. Most Thangapat(moats) in the valley, such as Manung Thangapat at Kangla, Leishang Hiden at Langthabal, and Bijoygovinda Thangapat, were dug as the fortress. Kings honored the warriors with rewards and incentives such as Manaphi, Ningthouphi Mayek Suba, Khamenchatpa, and Wanphak Phurit (Singh, 2015, p.203). Sometimes princesses and paddy fields were given as rewards of the battles. Rewards were also given for capturing animals. If the capture is the seventh time, the warrior was given a hornbill feather. If the animal's capture saved the king's life, the warrior was honoured by awarding Tangballoi and permitted to Chingon Then Kaba (performing of Akham Thenggou on Chingon Hill). This act was equivalent to capturing 100 animals and 100 enemies.

Conclusion:

The history of Manipur is intricately intertwined with the art of warfare, traditional games, and martial arts, resulting in a deeply-rooted and diverse cultural heritage. The physical culture of the region was pivotal in safeguarding the kingdom and engaging in conflicts both within its borders and beyond. Preserving and honouring these age-old martial traditions is crucial for the present generation.

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