

Physical Culture of Manipuris: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

The Manipuris have rich tradition of physical culture dating back to ancient times, featuring traditional games and martial arts that emphasizes combating skills and defensive strategies. Throughout the Manipur's history, warfare has been prioritised, with all citizens mandated to undergo military training, learn weaponry, and martial arts during the monarchy. Chivalry was a form of education in ancient times. Manipur's military expertise enabled it to maintain independent kingdom for two thousand years. Physical training was incorporated into daily life through traditional games. The military campaign of Manipuri kings played a crucial role in securing victories. Military education system including the Lallup System, was essential in preparing the population for potential conflicts. The organisation of Manipur state was heavily focus on military objectives, and the kingdom's fate relied on the skills, leadership, and military organisation of the king and his generals. Different types traditional weapons were used by the warriors. The Manipuri's physical culture and martial traditions are deeply intertwined with the history of Manipur which were deeply intertwined with the history of Manipur, significantly contributing to the kingdom ability to defend itself partake in conflicts within and beyond borders.

Key words: Manipuris, Physical, Martial arts, Traditional Games, Military.

Introduction:

The Manipuris have a long history of well-developed physical culture since ancient times. Traditional games and martial arts are the most important aspects of the physical culture. Martial arts may be defined as those combative skills of individual attack and defense used with or without weapons against a rival or group of rivals. The history of Manipur was a history of wars and battles. In the days of the kingship, it was the obligatory duty of every subject of the land to be on military duty and get knowledge and training in weaponry and martial arts.

The martial skills of the Meetei enabled Manipur to sustain a strong and independent Kingdom of more than two thousand years. In this, one finds a variety of traditional games that have existed since time immemorial as a means of physical and military training. Traditional games served as a means of physical and military training and were integrated into daily life (Singh, 2014:115).

Discussion:

The martial race Meetei developed due to the frequent wars with the traditional enemies: Awas (Burmese), Khahis (Chinese), Takhels (Tripuris), and Cacharis (Assamese). Manipuri ancestors realised the importance of physical education towards the overall development of mankind (Devi, 1981:16). This compelled reason that Manipuris to learn the athletic games such as Mukna, Sagol Kangjei, Mukna Kangjei, Horse Riding, Mangjong (High jump), Chenjong(Long Jump), Lamjel (Race), Nunghunba (Discuss Throw), Ta Hunba (Javelin throw) from the young age to keep their bodies fit. Therefore, the warfare culture moved alongside traditional games and martial arts.

The expedition of King Kyamba with the King of Pong Khekkomba in the 15th century A.D. to conquer the Kabaw Valley could be cited as the first successful expedition against the Burmese. It was followed by numerous expeditions during the reign of King Mungyamba. King Kabomba (1524-1542) invaded the Takhels in 1533 and ordered the war captives to dig the Takhel Khong at present, Bamon Leikai, commemorating the victory of the expedition. King Khagemba made successful expeditions against the Chinese and the Cacharis. From the opposite angle, the Burmese, too, made repeated attacks against the Manipuris during the reign of King Paikhomba, King Pamheiba, King Bheigyachandra, and King Marjit. The Burmese invasion 1819 devastated the Kingdom for seven years (1819 A.D.-1826 A.D.), popularly called Chahi Taret Khuntakpa. Later, the Manipuri armies under the Manipur Levy of Gambhir Singh liberated Manipur from the clutches of Awas in 1826.

The frequent internecine wars among the principalities also contributed to the need for constant warfare and weaponry usage. Scholar N. Khelchandra, in his book Chainarol (1988), observes this argument that all these crises made people highly patriotic and noted for chivalrous activities and gallantry. Kings were instructed to play Sagol Kangjei and Mukna before a war expedition as a war practice. Kings patronized and directly dealt with the promotion of martial arts and traditional games.

Ancient texts on war commentaries like Khahi Ngamba, Awa Ngamba, and Takhel Ngamba give detailed information about the war fought by the Meetei armies against neighboring kings. In the Moirang Kangleirol, the legendary hero

Khamba received military training from Thonglen, a close friend of his late father, Puremba. King Loyumba instituted the Lallup system for military education. By himself, Khwai Nongcheng Piba practiced archery, aiming at the water pitcher that was resting on his wife's head.

Since the early days, the Meitei kings established a well-equipped army to defend the Kingdom. The king was the Commander-in-Chief of the Manipur Army. Under him, generals were appointed to enlist the list of soldiers and keep the army solid. During wartime, generals took the lead under the king. The fate of the Manipur kingdom depended upon the skills, leadership, and ability of the king and his military organization (Singh, 2003:126)

T.C. Hodson remarks that the state of Manipur was organized solely for military purposes (Hodson,1908:93). King Punshiba (1404 A.D.- 1432 A.D.) was credited with establishing a permanent and separate military department, Singhchep Meira Haijouroi. This war department was engaged in the war preparations. Maintaining armies was an important aspect of military organization. Armies were organized into units for proper administration, control, and deployment. Manipuris built forts and defence complexes as strategic sites.

Military Units:

The military was organized into three categories under various military officers. The military tripods are set up in Khongmi Lanmi (Infantry), Sagol Lanmi (Cavalry), and Hee Lanmi (Boat Army). In the military organization, Khongmi Lanmi (infantry) fought directly against the enemies. Under the Lallup System, every male citizen between 17-60 years was trained to become an accomplished soldier and worked 10 of 40 days compulsorily for the state. The Lallup system could maintain a strong army that was always prepared for the war. The traditional weapons of Khong Lanmi in Meiteilon were Thang (Sword), Ta (Spear), Oblong Shield, Shield, Langshoi, Tapak (Broad tipped Spear), Shingjang(axe), Naori (Sling). Until the last part of the eighteenth century, there was no evidence of artillery being used in Manipur. In 1825, Raja Gambhir Singh got aid of 1500 muskets from the British Government (Singh, 2003:131). The infantry was again divided into several regiments called Tuli. One Tuli has 1000 soldiers.

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 cavalymen 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 cavalymen inflicted a 'reign' into the minds of armies of Awa soldiers during the reign of Maharaja Garibniwaz. Maharaja Garibniwaza had a well organised military organisation under the lallup system and historians praised his military exploits as the most inspiring saga of Manipur.

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 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 (a flag of champion). There was no distinction of dress between the infantry and cavalry (Singh, 2003:131). 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: 36).

Weaponry

Thang(sword) was the most important weapon of the military set-up. In addition, there was an abundance of records showing other weapons, namely Ta (spears), Lirung-ten (Bows and Arrow), Naori(sling), Chung (Shield), Arambai, and Singjang(axe). Khutheiba, Thangshanba, Thangjaba, and Nandeiba were departments that worked collaboratively in making bows, arrows, spears, and Arambais (darts).

In the Meetei belief, the God Ibudhou Pakhangba symbolized the sword as 'Tin Shidaba'. In the Yek-Salai system, each of the seven Salai(clan) had a sword called Salai Thang. The Salai Thang was used as an essential ritual item in the prayer of the Salai God. The ancient text Ningthourolgi Thang records the swords used in the king's coronation. This coronation sword was used in Phambal Lal (Coronation War), a war after the coronation of each king. Lairenbung was the coronation sword of Meidingu Kyamba.

Ta (Spear) has been a vital weapon since the ancient past. Ta (Spear), in the archaic Meetei language, is known as Timen or Marong. It was one of the oldest weapons used by the Meetei warriors. Spears were more dangerous weapons than swords. It is believed that God Khamlangba used a powerful spear to dig a big hole in the southwestern corner known as Chingnunghut to drain the logged water. In the Poireiton Khunthokpa (migration of Poireiton), the team led by Poireitonwas armed with a spear as an important weapon along with daggers, axes, bows, and arrows when they migrated to Manipur.

Meitei warriors used different types of war spears: Hakthang Ta was bigger and used to attack enemies instantly. Taronta Ta was shorter and smaller and used by the cavalryman for Throw. Tapak Ta was used to attack both men and animals.

Lambu Ta was used to combat dangerous animals like tigers. Langshoi Ta was used for hunting Elephant. The Chronicle records the conduct of archery competitions during the reign of King Khagemba. Each Salai has its own Ta (Spear). Among the weapons used by Manipuri armies, Arambai was the most dreaded weapon. The name Arambai may have derived from the corrupted form of the Manipuri word Arappai; Arap means far, and pai means flying to a far place. The Meetei cavalymen extensively used this weapon against the Awas (Burmese), Takhels (Tripuris), Khagi (Chinese), and Thongnang Mayang (Cacharis). It was a peculiar dart used by the cavalymen to follow and retreat the enemies. 'Awa Mityeng' (Gaze of Awas) is still a popular saying expressing the Awa soldier's attempt to avoid the dreaded Arambai of the Meetei army. This signifies the sense of terror inflicted into the minds of enemies by the Manipuri cavalry with their unique weapon, Arambai. The weapon was introduced during the reign of King Punshiba (1404 A.D.- 1432 A.D.). The weapon was used by Queen Linthoingambi in the subjugation of tribal rebels when her husband, King Ningthoukhomba, went on an expedition. Chungoi is a round-shape shield, whereas Chung is another elongated shield. Maharaja Garibniwaz was Manipur's king and endowed with great political insights. He had a well-organized military organization under the Lallup system. Historians praised the military exploits of King Garibniwaza as the most inspiring saga of Manipur.

Manipur has had a rich tradition of Ten-Kappa (archery) since immemorial times. The ancient text Numit Kappa mentions about archery. The kings maintained an arrow brigade traditionally called 'Telloi' (an excellent archer's brigade). Telloi Hanjaba, whereas Tenaohanjaba is the commander. The art of archery and its armaments took a commendable role in the Kingdom's defense and the empire's expansion and consolidation. Manipuris embraced the Ten Kappa tradition. In wartime, Meetei warriors used it as a lethal weapon of attack. Even today, Ten Kappa is an important ritual item of the Epan-Thaba rituals of Meetei, in which the maternal uncle of a newborn child performs Ten Kappa in all important directions. Moreover, there was a Shamutongba (elephant corps) in the Lalmi Loishang (Military Department). The state of Manipur, meticulously organised for military purposes, maintained armies and constructed strategic defensive complexes as a testament to the strategic foresight and fortitude of its people. Since the early days, history has recorded several Lal-pan (war fortress) in numerous strategic areas and administrative units in the valley of Manipur. Forts of a later period, from the reign of King Khagemba, were built with bricks and mortar, with the arrival of bricks known as Chekpal (brick fortress). Some significant ramparts are Sagolpan (present-day Sagolband), Khaempalli, Thangwai-pan (present-day Thangmeiband), Moirangpalli, Ayangpalli, Yubaraj Palli, Kharam Pallen, Palle and so on. The Kangla Palace is encircled by two moats- an inner and an outer moat and the Imphal River from the eastern side. These 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 in the valley, such as Manung Thangapat at Kangla, Leishang Hiden at Langthabal, and Bijoygovinda Thangapat, were dug for the fortress.

Rituals

Rituals were carried out about the martial affairs. Lukkha Thaba, or Head Hunting, is a widely known tradition in which severed heads of enemies were collected as trophies. According to Cheitharol Kumbaba chronicle, this tradition followed at Nunggoibi, Kangla was first started by King Loyumba (1074 A.D.-1122 A.D.). (Sharma, 1998:1). 'Yenbum Huiroi Chanba' was done for absorption from evil consequences on account of improper capturing of victims (enlisting of hen and dog as captives). If not performed this ritual, another ritual called Lanchak Thakpa had to be performed by their descendants. In olden days, when kings returned from war with severed heads of enemies, a ritual known as Nungoibi Lallu Chanba (enlistment of skulls at the Nunggoibi site at Kangla) was performed. The ritual of burial of the beheaded heads of the war captives was done at Nunggoibi. It was a ritual of offering food to the female deity, Chaisna, who lived at Nunggoibi, Kangla (Singh, 2015:199). Lanmi Yanba (felling of the warrior) is another ritual of beheading the commander of the invading army, imaginarily one day before the battle fight. Kangla Pungjao, a big drum, was used to declare war by beating the drum five times. Sagol Pao was a message sent by horse riders throughout the Kingdom informing the public about the declaration of the war. The war department and Panas gathered all the non-disabled men in preparation for war. From the early seventeenth century, gun fire began to be used as a war signal.

Kings performed the 'Keiyang Thekpa ritual. It was also termed as 'Keiren Khanglenba/Khegenba' in ancient archaic language (Sharma, 1998:42). Keiyang Thekpa (Kei means Tiger, Yang/Yanglen means spine, Thekpa means breaking, thus breaking the spine of the tiger), was a ritual related to the capturing of tigers. The ferocious tiger, Keijao was, is abundantly found in early Manipur. The tiger was a menace. Hunting and capturing of tigers were matters of state administration. According to the ancient text Keipharol (account of the catching of Tigers), Keiyang Thekpa was performed to eliminate the sin and guilt of killing a tiger. Killing a tiger, as it believed, was a sin. The ritual is performed not to repeat unnatural death.

An ordinary man was not permitted to perform the ritual of Keiyang Thekpa. King, Jubaraj, heir of the throne or person entrusted by the king, and those warriors who had captured 100 animals and 100 warriors and recipients of 'Tangballoi' were permitted to perform the ritual. Keiyang Thekpa ritual was done only in the case of catching Keijao. The ritual was a big platform to show the brave and gallant warriors to the public. It encourages fellow warriors to give their talents and skills in hunting and warfare. The event exhibited the gallant act of warriors to catch the tigers. To protect from the surprise attack of the tiger and other animals, Akhom Thenggou was performed. A Keiyang Thekpa performer wore the items: Ningkham Shamjin, Khudangyai (gauntlets), Khubomyai (greaves), hornbill plume, Leikham, Pajeng Phiral (a

small flag with a bamboo pin), Ningthouphi Tajin (a robe of honor), Shayangand Tanchap (bangles and bracelets). If any of these ornaments were excluded, belief runs that the performer would not last long.

Kings honored the warriors with rewards and incentives such as Manaphi, Ningthouphi Mayek Suba, Khamenchatpa, and Wanphak Phurit (Singh, 2015:203). 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:

In summary, the history of Manipur is deeply intertwined with warfare, traditional games and martial arts, making it a fascinating of its cultural heritage. The physical culture played a significant role in the kingdom's ability to defend itself and engage in conflicts both within and beyond its borders.

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