The secret that enabled Manipur to survive through many wars that have punctuated its history was its martial tradition of Thang-ta, an art mastered and applied by the Meiteis through many wars, especially with the Burmese. Thang-ta is a combination of the two words: Thang and ta. Thang literally means sword and Ta means the spear. In old Meitei language thang is also known as Kajeng and ta as timen. Another term closely associated with thang-ta is Huyen Lallong in old Meitei language. Huyen means war and lallong means strategy of war. Generally, the term huyen-lallong connotes a definitive idea of the art of war and weaponry. The power struggle that gave rise to incessant wars among the feudal clans within Manipur and frequent wars with Burma and other neighbouring kingdoms quite often brought Manipur almost to the brink of devastation. However, the desire of the people to remain independent in the face of all odds and the martial tradition of thang-ta could work miracles in the struggle for survival. A noted thang-ta guru, Rajkumar Sanahal Singh, once said, “Foreign aggressors cannot be sent away by pious talks or sweet and reasonable words but by physical force only.” They had to be fought in battle. All the Meitei had to be an army, and the surroundings that was traditionally geo-political in nature compelled them to possess this kind of armed martial art and keep it preserved, protected and honed for all time. They had to keep practicing and enriching it, or refining it through regular performances and related exercises. Successive kings institutionalised regular training of thang-ta for their citizens and successfully made thang-ta an inevitable component of the Meitei way of life. Those who could show merit in war, a good martial artist, a brave man who could kill tigers or catch elephants were heavily rewarded.

Thus, knowledge or skill possessed in the field of thang-ta was considered to be of highest social and cultural importance. Meitei did not have the official system of having a regular army to fight invaders. But, it was customary for every male person above the age of sixteen to serve the kingdom as and when the state demanded. They had to discharge their duties for ten days out of forty, according to the decision of the authority. The system of allotting duties was called Lalup. During wartime or periods of national importance, people had to be grouped into batches to proceed to the battlefields.

In the historical past, when Manipur was still under the division of many principalities like Meitei, Moirang, Khuman, Heirem Khunja, Khende, Chairen, etc., there was a strong tradition of organizing bouts of mutual fights among individuals or chiefs. These were organised to ascertain or accept either defeat or victory in the time of conflict or to show political dominance over each other. These bouts were also organised for ascertaining ‘truths’ as and when challenges arose between two heroes. Before each bout, combatants used to take vows in the name of sky-father and earth-mother and they had the faith that their ancestral forefathers would endow them with justice. To begin the bout they first measured out a distance acceptable to the two combatants. They stood at the two ends and threw spears or shot arrows at the other. One who was killed or injured was considered to be the wrong-doer or sinner and they believed that the ancestral gods had so decided to punish him. The victor would take the head of the vanquished as his trophy. In case one was not killed but injured, the injured combatant was taken as defeated and he had to give his life to the victor. This kind of fight is called Chainaba and the lore is called Chainarol. There is a very old manuscript written in Meitei script called Chainarol. The manuscript chronicles records of seventeen such bouts of mutual fight.

Two forms of sword play are traditionally practiced by the Meitei. They are:- 1. Leiteng Thang and 2. Yanaba Thang. Leiteng Thang is a pre-arranged or formulaic kind of sword play designed for exhibition in front of the king and the nobles or in front of the general audience. It is presented during festivals like Kwak Tanba and Laharaoba. The demonstration shows and staged performances organised for tourist attraction and also presented elsewhere as a part
of cultural tourism are included here. This is not a game but a pre-determined performance, the course of which is charted and the ending fixed beforehand. Traditionally, for Leiteng Thang, an artiste wielded two swords or a sword and a shield in such a way that the entire body of the performer is protected from all sides. The footwork also should be of fixed order. To get proficiency in Leiteng Thang, supple wrist work is necessary. The movement of the sword should co-ordinate with the body posture and footwork of the artiste. Yet thang and oi thang which mean right-hand and left-hand sword technique are significant methods of handling with the blade of the sword.

There should be solid and effective stances and postures all the time. Both in cases of attack and defense positions stances and body postures should be firmly maintained to enable protection of the body along with keen eyesight. This means that footwork, handwork and position of the eyes should have effective coordination. To attain perfection, various forms of systems of exercise are given to beginners to develop agility, flexibility, balance and co-ordination of the body. Meibul Haibi (fireball swinging), Cheitup Haibi (club swinging) etc. are practiced. One important feature of Leiteng Thang is that the two swords handled by the artiste or the sword and shield should never clash.

Leiteng thang has fixed stepping orders which is a system in its own right. Some steps are Phunga Nungdum Saba which is a triangular stepping. Tha Machet Saba is a semi circle stepping, Khongpham Manga, a five stepping way. Pallandabi is a star shaped stepping motif believed to be attributed with psychic powers. Some other postures and movements are Thang Khawon, which is swinging of the sword in the crossed curvilinear pattern of movement on all sides of the body. Hangmei Kokthong Onba is a front roll, liiba is the turn and chongba is the jump. Included in Leiteng thang is also a duel known as Thang Yanaba and Thang Ta Chainaba, which is a fight between two opponents, one holding a sword and another holding a spear. These compositions of dramatic and electrifying shows have attracted national and international interest since the early part of the 1960’s. Leiteng Thang is not only useful for exhibition alone. It also helps a martial artiste ensure correct postural pattern and develop reflex actions.

The grammar of the actual fighting system was always kept secret by the Meitei. The actual fighting system is called Yannaba Thang. It is for real application in combat situations. But, at the same time, the artiste has the freedom to move beyond the formula and apply strokes and thrusts in his own creative way. So, it is a kind of free style combat technique. There are two basic principles here. First, the artiste should be protecting himself from all modes of attack from the enemy, defending his body from whatever angles of cut, thrusts or blows. Second, the person should have the ability to make a counter attack i.e. effective cut or thrust to the enemy at any moment he chooses. In brief, the principle is ‘not to get oneself hurt, but to hurt the opponent at will.’

Yannaba Thang is learnt through repeated and rigorous training. The basis of Yannaba Thang is Thangbi Taranithoi, which is a twelve count system of striking. The meaning and implication of Thangbi is vast and related with innumerable portions of the human body considered vulnerable by traditional masters of Thang-ta. These are the areas that should be protected or attacked and the entire Yannaba Thang was structured with a vocabulary to attacking and at the same time protecting these vulnerable portions of the body. It is the technique of delivering hits, cuts or thrusts by the swordsman to the vital spots of his adversary along with the use of footwork. So, it has two systems incorporated in it. They are:- 1. Yanbagi Thang, which is attacking formula, and 2. Ngakpagi Thang, which is defensive formula. Some vital spots the sword marks to strike are, 1. Kok (head) 2. Yet Chuba (right temple) 3. Oi Chuba (left temple), 4. Yet Ngak (right neck), 5. Oi Ngak (left neck), 6. Yet Lengjum (right shoulder), 7. Oi Lengjum (left shoulder), 8. Khouri (throat), 9. Yet Khujeng (right wrist), 10. Oi Khujeng (left wrist), 11. Yet Sega (right armpit), 12. Oi Sega (left armpit), 13. Thajin (heart), 14. Khoidou (navel), 15. Chaning (pelvic), 16. Karang (scrotum) etc.

To gain an effective control of the sword and ensure exact delivery of cuts or thrusts to the vulnerable portions of the body, Thangbi is organised in a numerical series of 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 count system. The special emphasis is on delivering each stroke along with a coordinated movement of the body and feet. Each Thanglon or delivery of the stroke should go simultaneously with the Khution (movement of the hand) and Khonglon(movement of the foot). Thanglon means vocabulary of the movement of the sword. Also implied here is the multiple use of the sword. Not simply the blade, the back edge of the sword and its tip are also used to deliver strokes. One special feature is the ability to deliver multiple strokes in a single foot step and another is the cut-pull principle of the sword. There are more than forty formulae in the Manipuri martial arts system.
Memorizing or mastering Thangbi is not enough to be a good martial artiste. A swordsman must have the ability to improvise his own talent in delivering strokes, thrusts, cuts and counter-plays with speed, rhythm and control. The swordsman should have an extraordinary knowledge of sensing or discovering the weaknesses in the opponent, to strike from the areas which were not anticipated and to make sudden inroads into the system of the opponent at his own will. Coordination of the body and mind to have better control of the weapon, extra sensitivity, strength, skill and speed, and above all spontaneity are vital to the development of a true martial artiste of thang-ta.

Ta or spear has been a very useful weapon throughout history. Tas are of different lengths and are classified into various categories according to usage and given different names. The majority of ta that have survived are between seven and nine feet in length. While bigger and longer spears were meant for the killing of wild animals, the shorter varieties were used by the cavalry as well as by foot soldiers. The chief techniques were based on thrusts and cuts made from oblique angles with the tips on both ends of the spear. The primary targets were the groin, stomach, chest and throat regions. To acquire proficiency in the use of ta, a martial artiste practices a kind of somatic exercise called Ta Khousaba. It is an exercise form that is preset and the movements of which are considered inviolable. The performer wields a Chung (buckler) in his left hand and a spear in his right hand. This is a very old exercise that has developed through the ages and historical epochs. It aims at attaining dexterity of hands and legs. It helps in developing pose and strengthens the lower extremities of the body. It also helps in developing endurance, control, agility and a sturdy body.

Ta-Khousaba has many essential sequences which are preset and considered inviolable. They are 1. Salami (salutation), 2. Hotpa (scratching the ground), 3. Setpa (tearing apart), 4. Sou Kaiba (removing stakes), 5. Lam Yengba (looking around), 7. Sha Thatpa (blocking of animal/foe), 8. Sha Thinha (thrusting the animal/foe) and 9. Aroiba Salami (final salutation). There are nine forms of Ta-Khousaba.

Physical prowess and intelligence were not enough for a Meitei warrior. He had to strictly follow a world of moral codes of conduct all bound to a belief system. They believed that any breach of traditional laws could bring a harmful aftermath to the warrior or to his near and dear ones, or to the entire community. Saturol Lanturol Sapharol Lanpharol, an ancient manuscript of the Meiteis, elaborates the rules and laws a warrior had to follow when he is in a combative situation. Valiant heroes and warriors of the past who had successfully fought many battles and captured or killed ferocious wild animals were strict disciplinarians who followed the traditional laws and codes of conduct without any breach. Another ancient manuscript called Takhel Ngamba details the kind of foes who should not be killed although fallen at the hands of the victor. It records that a foe who has fled from the battlefield or who has disarmed himself should not be killed. A foe who has taken refuge on the top a tree or who has dipped and taken refuge under water shall not killed. Further, a foe who pleads for life biting a handful of grass or one who pleads with folded hands shall not be killed. Again, one who is stripped of his clothes or one who is apparently scared of confrontation shall not be killed.

Thang-Ta was meant for direct application in battlefield in ancient times. It had to be rigorously practiced or performed everyday to attain proficiency and kept alive among the warriors for any eventuality of war. The culture of Thang-ta was so important for the Meitei that it became a part of life for them, and its grammar and principles of movement came to serve as the basic foundation for other forms of traditional performances like the Nata Sankirtana*, especially the drum player. Now, the art of Thang-Ta is restricted to organised performances for the purposes of show and entertainment.

References
4. Saturol Lanturol Sapharol Lanpharol, an unpublished ancient manuscript in the custody of Shri Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra Singh.
5. Takhel Ngamba, an ancient manuscript transferred into modern Manipuri language and published by late Pundit Shri Oinam Bhogeshwor Singh in 1986.

Notes
* Nata Sankirtana is a classical theatrical art of singing originated by the Hindu Meiteis during the eighteenth century and subsequent periods.
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