

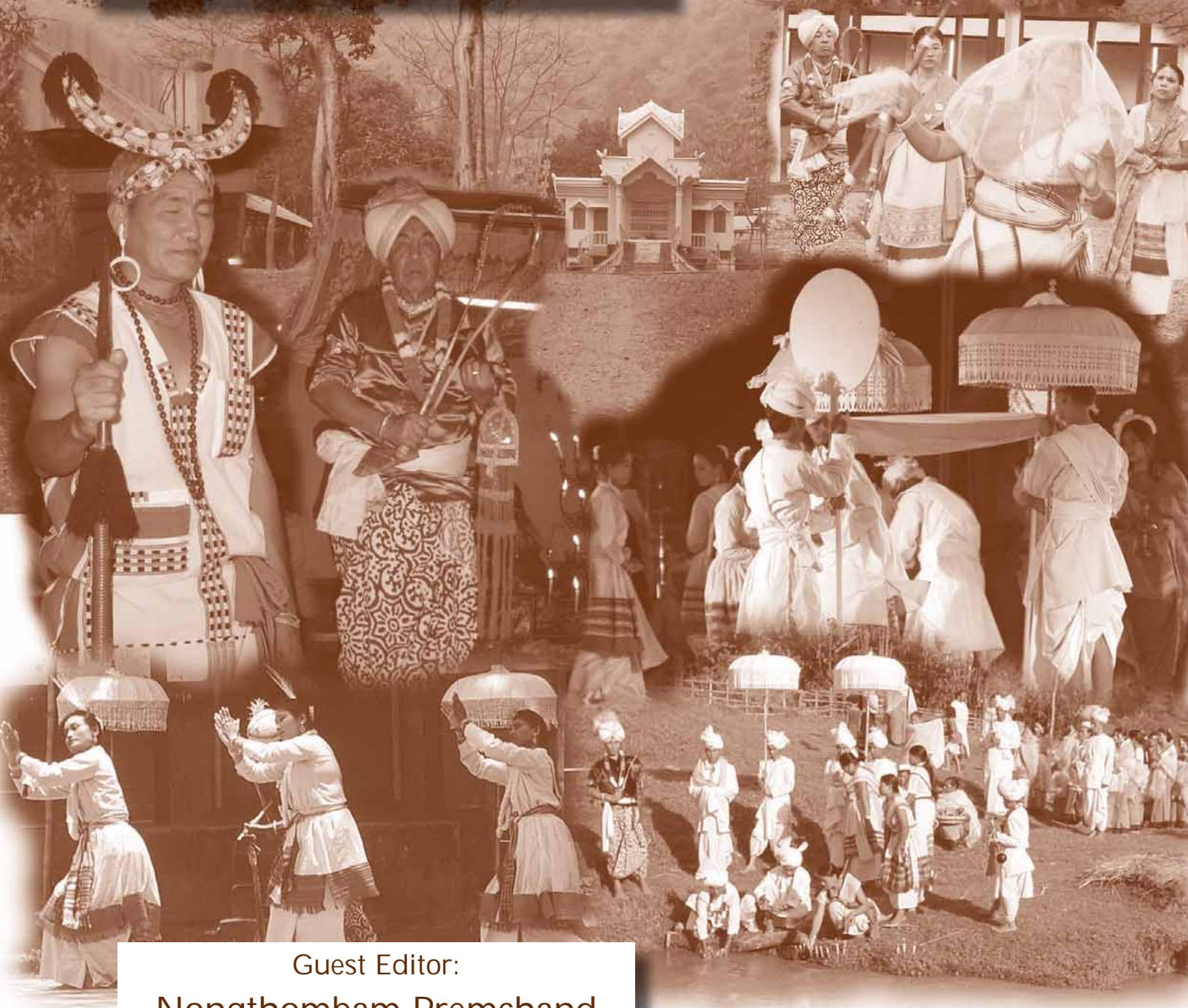
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“Manipuri Folklore: Towards a  
Performance Approach”



Guest Editor:  
Nongthombam Premchand



## NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai, dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking, and publications. The aim of the Centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues and folklore advocacy with public programming events. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and Tata Education Trust.

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# Folklore and Performance

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Theatrical model of communication has long fascinated social scientists including folklorists. They have applied theatre analogy in their study of patterns of social behaviour and expressive forms. But, theatre is too limiting and genre specific. It may be problematic when applied to non-theatrical forms of behaviour. So, a very wide encompassing term like 'performance' has been interchangeably used along with 'theatre' or 'drama'. Erving Goffman's 'performance in everyday life', Victor Turner's 'social drama' or Clifford Geertz's 'theatre state', Richard Bauman or Dan Ben-Amos, all have used theatre/drama framework beneficially. This, on the other hand, has benefited theatre directors and theoreticians of theatre like Richard Schechner, Jerzy Grotowski or Eugenio Barba in theorising their ideas of theatre and has helped in generating new academic disciplines like Performance Studies and Theatre Anthropology.

Performance approach to the study of folklore is inherently context-centred and it helps in ascertaining the meaning of a text, which is always illusive, in different ways according to the changes in performance context or situation. The locally-defined culture-specific-meaning is brought into an area of discussion along with the social, cultural, political and historical dimensions of the particular folk group. This is something easier said than done. But it always sets a beautiful target one may try to achieve.

The articles, included in this issue of *Indian Folklife* which is named 'Manipuri Folklore: Towards a Performance Approach', were hopefully designed to be written from the point of view of the performance each genre of folklore incorporates in different contexts. But, again, it is easier said than done. I, as the Guest-Editor of this issue, should admit that it is a modest attempt towards that line.

Proverb in performance is the most interesting area of speech act in folklore study. There are

quite a few collections of Manipuri proverbs available in book form. But, these are text-centred and highly literal. In her article, 'Manipuri Culture Seen Through Proverbs' included in this issue Dr. Betholia makes an attempt towards a text and contextual analysis of Manipuri proverbs. Arunkumar's article, 'The Head: Folktale that Reflects People with Disability' is an analysis of a Manipuri folktale. Using this text the writer explains how physically challenged people are being considered as some kind of untouchables, restricted from rituals and other public performances, in Manipuri society. Dr. Nongthombam Jiten's article 'Leishabi: An Appreciation' is altogether different. There are Meitei from Manipur settled in Myanmar who contributed a lot to the making of Burmese history and culture. But they are now culturally and politically marginalised and endangered as a nationality. The well known Burmese historian Professor Than Tun wrote an essay on their plight as a nationality and he mentioned that their contributions to Myanmar, although very great, are now forgotten. Than Tun's essay moves in an area between folklore and historiography. Dr. Jiten gives his response to Than Tun's article as a Meitei from Manipur. Nongthombam Premchand studies the liminality of the most important ritualistic performances of the Meitei using the framework of theatre in his article, 'Laiharaoba: A Theatre in Liminality'. Laishram Birendrakumar's 'Folk Music of the Ethnic Minorities of Manipur' is a survey of the constitutionally recognized thirty three tribes of Manipur.

The issue is given its title 'Manipuri Folklore: Towards a Performance Approach'. But considering the paucity of contents herein and the richness of folklore of Manipur on the one hand, the claim may sound somewhat absurd. However, I hope that this will certainly be able to make an opening however small in the international circuit of folklore study. I express my heartfelt gratitude to M.D. Muthukumaraswamy, the editor, for giving me the opportunity to do a little bit of exercise as its Guest Editor. ❁

# Manipuri Culture seen through Proverbs

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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 lamlou** came to be born out of the British colonial experience. The proverb is like this

**Phiringi/ lamlou**  
**European/style of grabbing lands**  
**The European style of grabbing lands.**

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.

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# The Head - Folktale that reflects people with disability

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The cultural image of People with Disability (PWD) in Meitei society is 'sub-human'. The image is deep-rooted in their belief system. Disability is believed to be the result of curses, lack of compliance with prescribed duties, incomplete rituals and many more. This cultural image restricts the PWD in their interaction with other members of society, their participation in community activities. It acts as a great barrier in their own endeavour, aspirations and love life.

The 'second class' citizen image might have been shaped due to the Meitei's historical experience in building a civilisation in Manipur valley. The frequent wars for defending the state against internal revolts and external aggressions needed strong and perfect manhood – brave and courageous, able and skillful. PWD is categorically excluded from the list of perfect men in the state/society.

The cultural image of PWD is reflected as well as counter-acted in a few folktales of the Meitei. Against the cultural practices and belief system that shape a negative attitude to PWD, the folktales assert PWD's pride and humanistic values. Among such folktales, 'The Head' is taken up here. The outline of the tale is given below:

"Once upon a time, a widow had a son. He was just a head and had no limbs and body but the head only. His mother took him out every morning and put him on a mat in the veranda. When his mother went to the market to sell vegetables, he would look after the house. He thought every day about means to set themselves free from their miserable life.

One day, he asked his mother to go to his maternal uncles. He wanted to join them on a long-distance trade journey that his uncles usually undertook. Initially, his mother did not agree. But she went to her brothers as her son kept insisting.

On hearing her proposal, her elder brother said, "What good would he do on the journey? He would be an extra burden to us. He has no limb

and no body. How would he be able to join the journey?" Seeing her disappointment, her younger brother told her, "Sister, go and bring Head tomorrow. I will take him on the journey. I will convince our brother too". Next day, she brought Head and kept him in the boat.

While his two maternal uncles were rowing the boat, he sang songs to entertain them. Listening to his songs, people on the river bank appreciated him and gave many gifts. The gifts were kept separately for him by his younger maternal uncle.

After several weeks, the team came back. One day, the younger maternal uncle fell sick and took rest. The elder maternal uncle was rowing the boat alone. Seeing the hard work of his uncle, the Head tried to sing songs to entertain his uncle. But, the elder maternal uncle got angry. "Why are you so noisy? Keep quiet," said the uncle and beat him. Head fell into the river. He could not swim and sank to the bottom of the river.

When the younger maternal uncle woke up, he could not see Head and asked his brother, "Where is Head?" The elder brother replied, "Head is all meaningless. He made noise, so I beat him. He fell into the river." "Oh poor fellow!" said the younger brother, "What will we say to our sister when she asks for him." The arrogant elder brother said that he will take care of their sister.

Head's mother was waiting for her son to come back. When her brothers came back, she rushed to them. They gave her the gifts which were presented to Head. When she asked for her son, her elder brother replied, "He fell into the river. As the water was so deep, we could not help him." She cried and ran back to her home.

Meanwhile, Head fell into the river and reached its bottom. He saw a sleeping python down there. He thought of ways to get back up. An idea came to him. Then he bit the navel of the python. Python asked Head to set him free. "I will give you whatever you want" the python continued. Head, remembering stories he had listened to during his childhood, said, "I want your magical gem that fulfils any wish." The python gave the gem and said, "Let us not tell anyone we met each other. Don't tell anyone that I gave you the gem, lest the gem lose its magical power."

With the gem, Head returned home. He reached home at night. He called out to his mother. Hearing her son's voice, she ran out. She was happy to see her son alive. He narrated the whole story to his mother, except his meeting with the python.

Head and his mother became richer and richer using the magical power of the gem. One day, Head asked his mother to go to the king with his marriage proposal for the princess. Initially, his mother did not agree, thinking of his physical condition. As her son kept insisting, she went to the Palace. The mother put the proposal to the king. The king did not reply. Instead, he ordered his men to shove her out. She came back home weeping. Next day, again, she went to the palace with the same proposal and the king did not reply. The king's men held her by her nape and pushed her home.

Head did not give up easily. He told his mother next morning, "Mother dear, go once again to the palace. If he denies you this time too, I will dethrone him." Though she did not believe what he said, she went to the palace again. The king was very angry this time, and told the woman, "Alright, if your son wants to marry my daughter, we can arrange the wedding ceremony on the seventh day from today. But, you should build a palatial house and construct a golden road between the palace and your house. If you fail to comply with this condition, I shall kill your son." On hearing the condition, the mother wept and returned home. All the people in the state were sure that Head would be killed.

With the magical power of the gem, Head fulfilled all the conditions and married the princess. One night, the princess observed secretly how Head became a handsome man with the help of the magical gem. Out of joy, she tried to touch her husband's new body. Head asked her not to touch but she touched him. He could not retransform to the Head. By her touch, he remained a perfect man forever. With her love and the gem's power, the family lived happily ever after."

The story is one of the Meitei folktales. The tales are expected to be told and retold by grandparents and sometimes by parents. This tale is still being narrated in many rural areas of Manipur. There are various variants of the tales; there are different titles of the story e.g. Pumpkin Man, Sitting Pumpkin Man etc. in different villages. But, the plot and content of the story are the same.

In the story, the PWD is looked down by all sections of society. All the twists and turns of the story are initiated by Head and are translated into action through his mother. Despite her own differences of opinion, she always stood for her son and behaved in accordance with his wishes. She followed all instructions given by Head. He gains more and more in his struggle with surroundings that are not friendly to PWDs. Though much is expected from his maternal uncles, the uncle turns out to be a fatal enemy. The widowed mother could not do anything except weep over the ill-fated son. Likewise, the King's denial of his daughter is on the basis of his disability, both physical and financial. He overcame all obstacles with his secret moves. ❁

## *LEISHABI: An Appreciation*

### Re-discovering the Meitei in Burma (Myanmar) through Folklore

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#### Introduction

In this 21st century, oral history is becoming familiar in the world of academia. Oral history demonstrates the sense that can contribute to the recovery of histories that would otherwise remain hidden (Penny Summerfield: 47, Gabriele Griffin (ed.), 2007). There are many Meitei people in Myanmar who were compelled to settle in that country because of many historical circumstances. In the long course of history, they contributed

many things to the Burmese society such as handloom and the use of horse in battle apart from others. Meitei cavalymen were notorious in Burma and the Burmese developed their own cavalry consisting of Meitei to invade Thailand. But, nowadays, the Meitei in Myanmar are on the verge of extinction as a nationality and their contributions are forgotten. This is, perhaps, all because of the Myanmar government's long standing policy of Burmanisation of minor ethnic nationalities.

Dr. Than Tun, a famous Burmese historian who was in the Mandalay University, recounts the contributions of the Meitei to Burmese society in

one of his articles. It describes how they have come to be marginalised or forgotten in recent times. The article begins with a poem entitled 'Leishabi,' an oral poem that was very popular among the Burmese and written down by a Burmese poet called Ko Pyin. Picking up lines from this poem, Dr. Than Tun traces the origin of the word 'Leishabi' that is found as an alien word in a Burmese language poem. Leishabi is a Meitei word that means a young teenage girl. Beginning with this poem, Dr. Than Tun historically traces the relationship between the Meitei and the Burmese. With this point, the paper also tries to recapitulate the origin of the Meitei diaspora in Burma (Myanmar), whether it was 'by choice' or 'by force' that they came to be settled in Myanmar. Also, it takes a look at ensuing development in their cultural practice.

### Background

Records have been found in the Royal Chronicles that the Meitei shared a long history with the Shans (Pong) and also with the Burmans of Burma (Myanmar). Since the 15th century, the Meitei and Burmese had regular contact through trade and social relations like matrimonial alliances after the conquest of Kabaw valley by the Meitei (Gangmumei K, 1991:236). A large number of Meitei accompanied the Princess as her retinue as a part of the marriage. It was in the first half of the 18th century, during the reign of Garibniwaza, that battles were fought between the Meitei and the Burmese. 'The tide of invasion flowed to the very gates of the Kaung-hmu-daw, where, to this day, the marks of the Manipuri swordsmen are pointed out upon the lintel' (V.C. Scott O'Connor, 1996:118). Several military expeditions had been conducted to Burma and crossed the Chindwin River to invade the kingdom of Ava (op cit: 247). In the second half of the 18th century, Alaungpaya, the founder of Konbaung Dynasty invaded Manipur and returned with a large number of captives consisting of boatmen, smiths, weavers and artisans and they were later engaged as domestic servants, menial and agricultural workers for the Burmese king. They were also used as cavalry and few were famous as polo-players (Thant Myint U, 2001:15).

Fratricidal conflict among the Princes continued after the death of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra and resulted in the defeat of Manipur by the Burmese. Bigyidaw, the grandson of Emperor Bawdawpaya, sent his greatest general, Maha Bandula, to invade Manipur and occupied it for seven years – a period (1819-26) that is known as 'Chahi Taret Khuntakpa' (Seven Years Devastation) in the history of Manipur. With this situation, an exodus occurred. Thousands of Manipuris were carried away as war prisoners to

Burma and many were burnt alive. By the mid-19th century, out of the total population of the Burmese kingdom, perhaps as much as a quarter of the population or at least 25,000 people were Manipuris who had been brought as war captives or were their immediate descendants (ibid: 55). Post-World War II, the population of the Meitei in Burma has been decreasing through the process of Burmanization and the low birth rate (M. Kriti Singh: 97, Naorem Sanajaoba (ed.), 2005). As time goes by, there seems to be ambiguity in the mind of the Meitei in Burma. Due to the influences of historical reality and practicability of life, they are more inclined to stay in the 'host nation' than return to 'homeland'. '...their [Meitei's] exile in Burma is more permanent.....therefore entertain no false hopes of a return to their 'Sana Leibak' [Manipur]'. (Resistance, Tuesday, April 25, 1978)

### Interface

The poem 'Leishabi' is about a Meitei girl praying for her lover, that no untoward incident should befall him while crossing a river in the service of the Burmese king to supply fodder for his elephants in the palace. The setting of the poem is Amarapura, the new Capital of the then-Ava Kingdom. Among various communities, Meitei is a minority community in Burma performing low-status jobs and acting as soldiers of kings. The poem reflects the socio-economic conditions of the Meitei in Burma. The poem also highlights the beautiful landscape of the realm and the simplicity of their lives.

Dr. Than Tun, on the other hand, depicts the historical accounts of the Meitei in Burma, their cultural practices, traditions and religious life. Through his article, we find his sympathy for the alarming condition of the Meitei, which is becoming one of the vanishing communities in Burma. The community has been very important in the history and culture of Burmese society. Dr. Than Tun further narrates the skills of the Meitei, such as weaving (still surviving in Amarapura) and their preparation of different dishes that attracted the Burmese. The writer also narrates the knowledge of Manipuri language among Burmese. In short, the work is the narration of the relation between a work of literature and the prevailing social, cultural, historical and ideological conditions of the time.

### A free translation of the poem:

#### LEISHABI

A leishabi from Sandai  
Tying the hay in bundles  
A message passes on-  
While in search of fodder,

In an old boat,  
 If the sun goes down  
 Do not turn back home.  
 At the foothills of Kyatninao  
 Towards the port of Miduidai  
 For the elephants to feed,  
 Everyday they carried the fodder.  
 If a strong wave blows,  
 The old boat may capsize,  
 And you could be drowned,  
 With none to come to thy rescue.

### The Translated Text

Amarapura was divided into East Sandai and South Sandai. Near Sandai, there was a village called 'Sinhmu'. The profession of these villagers who were mostly Meitei was to collect fodder and take it to the palace for the elephants and horses kept there. In the southern part of Sandai were Shwekyat and Shwekyatkya Pagodas, where there was the port of Miduidai. These people carried fodder for the elephants and horses of the Ava King along the river Chindwin. This is the fact that can be deduced out of reading the poem along with all the tender feelings of a beloved who is longing for the return of her lover. But the very meaning of the word 'Leishabi' mentioned in the poem was not known to anyone. Dr. Than Tun went searching for the meaning of the word. He found the word 'Leishabi' mentioned in the book Manipuri Self Taught written by William L. Barreto B.A. This particular word "Leishabi" was also found mentioned in a poem written by Minister U Sa of Mayawati.

Dr. Than Tun also narrates another story which was very popular and which he had heard in his boyhood days. One day, two Meitei girls came to sell mangoes at the royal palace in Amrapura. At one moment, the Princess was bargaining over the price of the mangoes and it happened to be overheard by the king. The Princess was articulate in Manipuri language. But, unfortunately she could not understand the meaning of the word 'Leishabi'.

In the Sandai village there was a Meitei priest (maiba). One day Ko Pyin recited his poem 'Leishabi' in front of the priest. The priest rejoiced and said, "Onthokna phajakhareda" (What a wonderful poem!). At that moment, KoPyin asked the priest the meaning of the word 'Leishabi' and the priest explained that the word 'Leishabi' in Manipuri language meant 'apyogyi' in Burmese. In the literature of those days of the Ava Kingdom, a few Manipuri words were also amalgamated with the Burmese language. Shwegekyau monks used to tease Meitei girls by

using the words 'Leishabi' like 'you are sweet', 'do you love me', etc. Not only were words amalgamated with the Burmese language, the culture and traditions of the Meitei of Manipur were also found interwoven with Burmese culture.

After the Meitei settlement in Amarapura, there came improvements in the technique of weaving clothes and other handloom products. The Badaw King used to hire every Meitei in a family for making clothes. During those days in Amarapura, handloom was produced only by the Meitei and their products were considered the finest works of art. During the British rule, a market in Mandalay called 'Zaygyo market' was constructed mainly for the Meitei, where handloom products were sold. Whoever visited the market frequently often could speak Manipuri. The Ava people appreciated the beauty of the handloom products and often said, "Phi shingshi phajakhreda" (These clothes are so beautiful) or 'balaole' in Burmese language and the Meitei replied, "But it costs only rupees fifteen."

During the reign of Alaungpaya, Meitei already lived on the bank of the river Doukhtawadi. The village near the river called Leishangkhong was inhabited by the Meitei only. They requested land for cultivation from the king and he gave them the Ladowin Lake which is near their village. During the reign of the Badaw king, the Meiteis were also given a piece of land for cultivation.

In the chronicles of Amarapura, the professions of the Meitei are mentioned as blacksmith, weaver, carpenter, etc. There was also a market in Amarapura for the Meitei and a cremation ground for them nearby. When the Meitei came to Amarapura, they came with the local deities 'Thangjing Lai' and 'Umang Lai'. Lai Haraoba, the ritualistic observance which every Meitei had to perform every year when the season comes, were also performed in Amarapura in those days.

Due to several social and political factors, the Meitei in Myanmar have now, it seems, forgotten their roots, tradition and culture and this has led them to the brink of their vanishing as a nationality. Dr. Than Tun also makes mention of the food habits of the Meitei and that of the Burmese that have been amalgamated now, both in the mode of preparation and the taste itself. Till today some of the Meitei's common dishes like – eromba, fried curry, etc. are still prepared by the Burmese, he says.

When harvest was completed, curries were offered to the village deity. The villagers collected money from each family, bought vegetables and were offered to the deity in the eastern side of the village. These vegetables such as green chillies

and tomatoes and the fish-shareng were also offered to deity. After that, shareng was fried. The cooked fish-shareng and other vegetables were put on a plantain leaf and were offered to deity. After that, the curry was distributed to every family of the locality. Today, this tradition is no longer practised, Dr. Than Tun continues.

Worshipping deified ancestors or gods and goddesses and organizing of rituals have now discontinued. Their own methods of preparing dishes that are favoured by many, including the Burmese, and famous as 'Kathe hin' (Meitei cuisine) is no more. In this way, the Meitei have been forgotten and hardly known to the new generation in Burma. However, Meitei culture is still followed by a few Meitei in Burma.

### Conclusion

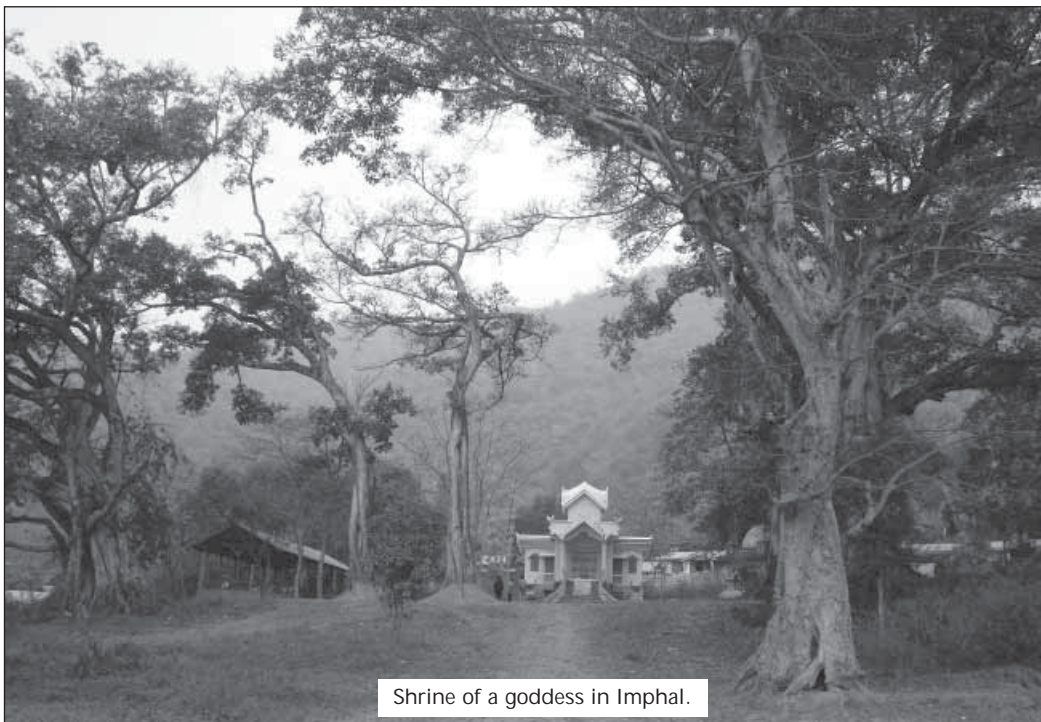
Dr. Than Tun's article moves towards historiography, a new approach towards writing history by walking the line between the adjoining areas of history and folklore. He avoids narrow compartmentalisation of disciplines and, instead, touches upon oral tradition, literature, his own past experiences, reports given by others, and the already-known parts of the history that relate Myanmar and Manipur as his sources. It is all about his concern for the Meitei in Myanmar, who are very important in the history and culture of Myanmar but are now marginalised either by themselves or by political forces. It is ethnography of the Meitei written with romantic feeling. But it has a multicultural underpinning that goes beyond the geographical and political boundary of Burma (Myanmar). It is a good sound piece of work, authentic and creative.

### Acknowledgements

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Shrine of a goddess in Imphal.

# *Laiharaoba: A Theatre in Liminality*

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In his book, *Rites de Passage*, Arnold van Gennep does not mention only the rites of passage an individual goes through in life. He also mentions that there are rites of passage a "cohort of individuals" or the whole of society should go through. He calls these rituals "life-crisis" rituals. There are liminal periods an individual or the whole of society go through. Life is something that is not static but which keeps moving. It is a movement that started at some point in time and keeps moving towards an end. It is a journey or a passage that begins somewhere and ends at some point in time and space.

In the Meitei belief system, there is a cosmic unity that binds an individual Meitei and his society. This unity is regulated by the ritualistic performance of Laiharaoba. But after Hinduization, the Meitei have incorporated many Hindu elements in their rites of passage, both in religious content and form of performance. However, they have tried to keep Laiharaoba as authentic and original, as they thought it to be beyond any Hindu framework.

Van Gennep's scheme of three phases like separation, transition and incorporation is applicable in the study of the Laiharaoba. What is interesting here is that Laiharaoba is concerned more with an extended phase of transition which is some kind of in-between or betwixt, a temporary phase of being in a threshold just before reaching a plateau, which again will not be a final. So, life is a matter of journeying endlessly like the mythical python coil with its tail in the mouth symbolising the endless mystic journey of life force. This is the reason why Laiharaoba is processual in most parts of its performance.

In the true sense of the term, a performance of any kind, be it a speech act done on a minimal scale between two individuals or a large scale performance, is always liminal, in-between or betwixt, and after that the performer and the audience will become richer or graduate to a new phase of life or awareness. So, through performance, human beings grow from one phase to another phase. And, liminal performances are governed by their specific laws that give approval both to performer and participating audience for a kind of freedom from social norms to get carried away or possessed by the performance. However,

in all cases, the central understanding is that it is a performance and there is always a line, maybe very thin, between life and performance. This must be the reason why Laiharaoba is not simply a ritualistic performance which centers on an ideology of enhancing fertility at all levels, both societal and individual, but is highly symbolic and theatrical, and hence enjoyable. Perhaps this is why Laiharaoba has been able to instill a basic theatrical structure as a subterranean force to all the Hindu forms of theatres, rituals and performances which came to exist after Hinduization of the Meitei society.

For the general readers, let me give a brief introduction of Laiharaoba. It is basically a fertility rite that enacts the Meitei myth of creation of the universe, making of human being and giving birth and creation or invention of most important things for a civilisation like boat, making of cloth, construction of a house, engaging in agricultural activities etc. Meitei believed that the performance could bring fertility to the members of the society, the domestic animals and bring a rich harvest of crops. They also believed that it could bring about a healthy communal life, free from diseases, epidemics and the atrocities of war and wild animals. The performances generally start around the time when winter has abated. But the valley area the Meitei inhabit is in the thick of hectic activity of Laiharaoba performances during summer time, which falls around April, May and June. The performances gradually thin out along with the arrival of the rainy season and the people gradually begin engaging in agricultural activities in the paddy field.

It is performed at the shrines of deified ancestors that are traditionally 364 in number. But, it is believed, there are more than 400 shrines distributed across the 700 square mile valley that is part of the state of Manipur and some in the hills. There are some who are not ancestors but who are of alien origin but respected by dedicating shrines in his or her honour. There are shrines where Laiharaoba is not organised for some reasons specific to the ritual laws of the particular shrine. But most shrines organise Laiharaoba when the season comes and this could be for one day or any odd number of days, perhaps nearly a month to the maximum if the organisers can afford the expenses. I have mentioned odd number particularly because it is a ritual number considered propitious by the Meitei. So, the performance period could be only

for one day, three days, five days or for any number of days, but it should be an odd number of days and not even.

Meitei society is kinship and lineage-based, and members have their own clan that they are traditionally associated with. The deified ancestors could be progenitors of a particular clan or lineage group. There are also guardian deities. There are also some ancestors, male or female, who, through some extraordinary achievements in his or her life, left some unforgettable imprints in the memory of generations of people to come, are also honoured by the society by dedicating a shrine in his or her honour and organising the Laiharaoba ritual performance.

Maibi, the priestess, is the chief ritual functionary. Maiba, the priest, is the second in command. Penakhongba is the player of the traditional musical instrument called 'pena'. He provides

musical accompaniment to the performance. They are the three ritual functionaries leading the performance.

Laiharaoba begins with a ritual of invoking the spirits of the lais from water. This ritual is called Lai Ikouba, which means calling up the lai from water. On the day of Lai Ikouba, a ritual procession consisting of males and females of the locality led by the Maibi go to the site of a water body. This could be a river, a pond or any waterhole. The maibi calls up the spirit of the deities from the water using cotton threads. The spirit

is considered brought back to the shrine and a ritual performance is done inside the temple which represents infusing of soul to the iconic brass masks of the deities placed in the temple. This is the important beginning without which we cannot begin a Laiharaoba. It marks the beginning of the liminal stage of the performance and this phase will continue till the spirits are sent off to their primordial world. Laiharaoba is all about the performances done in-between or betwixt.

Once the Ikouba is done, the shrine, the performers and the lineage group or the whole village are now governed by certain ritual laws. These laws are in accordance with the network of symbols which cut across time and space. The water from which the spirits are called up

symbolically represents the primordial water from which life grew up, and, for the Meitei, the sacred event of creation including the characters involved are still alive in another world. It is a very creative world which has got all the powers of healing their society. Once the connection is established with this world either through the ritual of Laiharaoba or other ritual processes they believe they can heal an individual, a family or the whole of society and make it move forward. When the infusion of spirits has been done the deities in the temple are considered enlivened, and along with this it is considered that all the principal gods and goddesses involved in the creation of the universe including evil spirits are believed to have gathered and occupied their respective sites in the shrine. So, Maibi perform all the necessary rites according to the laws and try not to breach them by all means. If any body happens to breach the laws out of ignorance or willfully, which rarely happens, the Maibi has another rite to mend the breach. The idea is that anything unfortunate should not befall the individual or the society.

After a successful organisation of Laiharaoba, the society, the village, the lineage group and its every member are believed to have graduated to an 'enhanced status', to use Victor Turner's phrase, or at least they are ritually prepared for the next term of agricultural season.

The shrine after Ikouba is now a zone of mediation or an area of productive interaction or integration between various levels of consciousness, a kind of liminal zone where the cosmic time and space coexist with worldly time and space. The healthy interaction is possible only within the framework of a dramatic logic which is sacred and serious. Laiharaoba, because of its liminality, has all the world-creating propositions. Liminality is the dramatic logic. It is counter-factual like any dramatic logic that could be sacred or secular. But it is sacred and serious for the bearers of that tradition like the Meitei of Manipur in the context of the Laiharaoba, because it concerns their society and the state.

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Maibi, the priestess.

# Folk Music of the Ethnic Minorities of Manipur

LAISHRAM BIRENDRAKUMAR SINGH

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Considering its ethnic plurality, Manipur could be termed the prototype of the whole of Northeast India which has more than two hundred ethnic nationalities. Despite its small size, Manipur has thirty-three constitutionally recognized ethnic nationalities and many more unrecognized groups or 'tribals' as they are officially known. Each of the communities has its own distinctive characteristics of folk-life, customs, dialects, beliefs and practices that they consider to be their own and that help shape an identity of their own amidst a mosaic of other identities.

Music of the ethnic nationalities of Manipur constitutes a major component of their folklife. It is here that no-one can look at their music as independent of their life. In their music, one will find their hopes, aspirations and frustrations as well. The ups and downs of their voices and their tonal variations draw, in the listeners' mind, the beautiful landscape of the hilly terrains. They also reflect the hardship of their agricultural activities. Music does not stand on its own. It accompanies dance movements or physical movements they perform while engaging in cultivation activities or ritualistic performances. The remark of Prof. Peter Bodeut that "Romanian folk dances, in their movements, reflect the entire history of Romanian life" is also true in case of the folk music of ethnic minorities of Manipur.

Apart from the unrecognised groups, there are thirty-three constitutionally recognised scheduled tribe communities in Manipur. They are 1. Aimol, 2. Anal, 3. Chongthu, 4. Chothe, 5. Hmar, 6. Koirang, 7. Kom, 8. Liangmei, 9. Mao, 10. Moyon, 11. Paite, 12. Pao-me, 13. Purum, 14. Simte, 15. Tarao, 16. Vaiphei, 17. Tangkhul, 18. Kabui, 19. Zou, 20. Thadou, 21. Maring, 22. Lamkang, 23. Kharam, 24. Thangal, 25. Zemi, 26. Chiru, 27. Gangte, 28. Koirao, 29. Maram, 30. Monsang, 31. Sukte, 32. Oinam, and 33. Lushai. The ethnic music of these communities are of many kinds and

each community has an ethnocentric tendency of claiming that it is their own and different from others. This sense of exclusivity enables them to survive amidst a kaleidoscope of other nationalities. This gives them a sense of security, not simply in matters of music, but also in matters of their territory or geographical space that they survive on through agricultural practices and other areas of interest.

Like any other tribal music, the music of the ethnic communities of Manipur is rhythmic rather than melodious. The rhythm is maintained through the use of percussion. They also use voices like shouts and cries to bring a change in the rhythm and corresponding changes to the accompanying dance movement. They are accustomed to applying music-like utterances while engaging in agricultural activities in the field and other activities. These are monosyllabic expressions like 'ho', 'ha', 'hoi', etc. They do not have any meaning but the music provides a stimulus to their activity. These are also found lifted from real life experience and used in songs. It is common practice among the communities that the singers of such music-like songs do not start the music at a time with all the voices in their respective notes. Singers of the dominant note will lead first, then the chord and last the low voice. Thus they will present beautiful harmonic music. The Kabuis call it "Chang tat hoi" or "Hoitan", Maos call it "Uri-han", "Lota-han" or "Mabho-han" and Tangkhuls call it "Kham-mohon". So, a kind of harmonization is there in the music.

There are some common features running across most of the music of the communities. The singers in general are divided in three groups. In Tangkhul, the first voice is known as "Lokyei" and in some way it approximates the soprano of Western music. The women generally take the lead singing Lokyei. The second voice group is known as "Khokrei" and it resembles the bass of the West. This is a low and heavy voice sung by the men together with the leader of the women group. The third voice group is known as "Lokla" and, again, may be compared to the alto of the western music. This is the harmonic voice or the Chord given by the women group. Thus the whole group gives polyphonic music. Another group known as "Khangani", equivalent

of the tenor, has been introduced recently. We should remember that ethnic communities of Manipur have been embracing Christianity through missionaries who came from the West and, through them, have imbibed many things from the West and re-appropriated them as their own.

Harmony is intellectual, while melody is purely emotional. The ethnic communities have their own harmonic system of singing. The singers do not need any pre-composed notes on paper. The composition invariably takes place vividly in front of the audience inspired by the emotions and feelings that come spontaneously to their minds. They are however not familiar with the intellectual exercises in singing a harmonic music, only that they distribute the notes according to the pitch of their respective voices. Their music is a simple harmonisation having a common motif like the development of sounds in the 'drone' of the tumbura of the Indian music.

Tangkhum, Rongmei and many other ethnic communities play bowing-style stringed instruments. Mao play the plucking style with fingers. Of all the bowing instruments, we may make mention of 'La' of the Rongmei, 'Nra' of Zemi, 'Ra' of Liangmei, 'Talla' of Tarao, 'Tari' of Maring, 'Tingteila' of Tangkhul and 'Gaigong' of Paomei. Another stringed instrument played by plucking with fingers is 'Olabii', a 4 feet long instrument with a thin bamboo finger board. The sound box or resonator is a bowl covered with thin hide and over it only one metal string runs. This is used by Mao and another instrument of similar kind used by Paomei is known as 'Lanae'. Some more stringed instruments used by other tribes are 'Sananta' of Tarao, 'Tingtang' of the Hmar, 'Selangdah' of Chongthu, 'Sirangdah' of Anal, 'Silangda' of Thadou, 'Sirangdar' of Kom, 'Serangdar' of Koireng and 'Sarangdar' of Purum. These instruments resemble the 'Sarinda' of Bengal. Sarinda is predominantly used by the indigenous communities of the northern hilly tracts of India and some in Bihar. In Assam, this instrument is found among the old Assamese who sing 'Borgit' and they call it 'Sarengdar'. In Manipur, the bow is made of fibre extracted from the bark of a tree called 'singkap.'

Another instrument is the cylindrical or barrel drum made of wood covered with leather and used for percussion. Small drums of this kind are used among the groups in Manipur. They



Maibi enacts a trance.

are beaten with a stick or sticks. Each group gives names of their own to this instrument - the Purum call it 'Khong', Simte call it 'Khuang', Tarao call it 'Khung', 'Khungpee', 'Khungral' or 'khungtame' according to differences in sizes. The Mao never use such drums or any kind of percussion instrument in their dance and music. They prefer hand claps instead.

The most obvious Southeast Asian character is the presence of knobbed gongs with a convex bulge at the center. Meitei call it 'Shembung', Rongmei call it 'Shenmu', Kom call it 'Chum' and likewise all the groups using it give different names of their own. A small idiophone made of a piece of split bamboo, only seven to eight centimetres long, is also used. It is played with a string, placed at the mouth of the player and plucked with fingers. The mouth of the player acts as the resonator as well as producing delicate tonal sheds with the use of the breath. Paomeis call it 'Chuii', Taros call it 'Sarat ting' and all have their own names. Many use the horn for giving rhythm to their music and dances by beating it. Simtes call it 'Saki', Taraos call it 'Sheelki', Koirengs call it 'Sekhi', etc. 'Rusem' or 'Gosem' is an aerophone, a wind instrument consisting of a hollowed gourd wind chest holding several pipes of reed. When the holes on the pipes are closed or opened, either chords or melodies can be played. Such instruments are believed to be the oldest in the world and believed to have originated from Southeast Asia. Purum, Simte, Tarao, Vaiphei, Koireng, Kom, Paite etc. use it with different names of their own. Flute is used, but the horizontal flute is more popular than the vertical flute. Trumpets made of bamboo or horns are also used.

Located at the junction of South Asia and Southeast Asia, the ethnic communities of Manipur reveal a harmonious confluence in the culture of their musical instruments and the music itself. ❀

# The Art of *Thang-Ta*

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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 Lallup. 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 Laiharaoba. 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, *leiba* 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. *Ngakpigi 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 *Khutlon* (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 Thinba (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. Saturoi Lanturoi Sapharoi Lanpharoi, 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 be 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.

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4. *Saturoi Lanturoi Sapharoi Lanpharoi*, 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.
- \* Writers of this article are indebted to Padmashree Shri N. Khelchandra, Shri L. Devabrata Singh, Shri L. Heramot Singh, Shri Gourkishor Sharma and Shri G. Sana Sharma, all masters of Thang-ta for their kind and invaluable help. ❁

## An excerpt from *Rituals and Performances: Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur*

NONGTHOMBAM PREMCHAND

This book 'redefines the concept of theatre and broadens its scope to accommodate ritualistic forms of performances which were earlier regarded more as rituals or dances or festivals and not so much as forms of theatre', according to the text on its jacket. '*Rituals and Performances* will be of interest not only to theatre practitioners and scholars of theatre and performance but also to social scientists, folklorists and lovers of Manipuri culture,' it adds. Published by Cultural Resource Centre, Yaikul Hiruhanba Leikai, Imphal, Manipur, the book has been priced at Rs.250.

### Introduction:

If we go by the concept of theatre as defined by the West, which is more or less secular and entertainment centred in approach, we may not find any theatre indigenous to our context. We may find rituals, dances or festivals but not theatres. And, we may come to a wrong conclusion that theatre came from the West to Manipur via Bengali theatre in 1902 during the British rule. This is a problem troubling the scholars who have been brought up under a Western knowledge of education and who take theatre to be, strictly, a translation of written drama into action on the stage. This is an idea which grew out of a text-centred and literature bias concept of theatre. On the other hand there is a group of scholars well-versed in the Indian schools of thought, and who desperately try to define or re-define theatre in the context of Manipuri culture using parameters drawn from the intricacies of Sanskrit *poetics* enshrined in the *Natyashastra*. Both schools of thought, either the western or Indian which are enveloping our mind represent a very constricted or reductionist view of theatre which considers the art of theatre to be the sole enterprise of a small group of elites. Again, the strict adherence of our local scholars to these dominant canons of narrative reveal a chronic sense of dependency of knowledge, of decision making process and of politics on their part. This calls for the need of re-defining theatre and freeing it from the shackles of the ongoing intellectual bondage, and accommodate traditional ritualistic performances in the overall discourse of theatre.

One will find that, freed from the shackles of the Western concept and subjected to a process of analysis, the essential features of the art of theatre are the same all over the world even though multifarious forms of theatre have been seen flourishing in different social and cultural

contests. Perhaps, this analysis has helped scholars in their attempts to re-define theatre in order to enable them to make an objective assessment of the various forms of theatre existing in different parts of the world. This has also helped the scholars and practitioners of theatre to evolve new approaches for a fresh examination of their own performance traditions. The important point to be noted here is that the essence of theatre remains the same everywhere throughout the history of mankind and that under different social and cultural conditions different forms of theatre made up of the infrastructure of the intrinsic spirit and the essence of theatre and the super-structure of the language, the style and mode of expression dictated by regional, political, social and cultural imperatives, have been seen flourishing all over the world. These aspects of the unchanging essence and changeable features in the whole structure of any form of theatre are discussed in the First Chapter of this book. At this point, I am reminded of what Peter Brook said that theatre is a 'self-destructive art'<sup>1</sup>, thereby hinting at the changes which have taken place in the forms of theatre available in the world. In the First Chapter I have tried to discuss this aspect with particular reference to the post-Stanislawsky scene. I have referred to the theatre of the West and the theatre of the East. I have also discussed some forms of African ritual theatre and the views of some black scholars. In this way, I have, in this chapter, carved out the way in which the essential features of theatre in general and the various forms of theatre will have to be examined in order to arrive at a substantive understanding of theatre.

From the Second Chapter onwards I proceed to an argument that in Manipur there has been a distinct trend of traditional theatre. This trend began with *Lai Haraoba* and that it has continued even in the contemporary forms of Manipuri

theatre like *Shumang Lila*. This development or the changes which have taken place in the history of traditional Manipuri theatre were the outcome of the changes in the social, political and cultural milieu of Manipur through the ages. Thus, while dealing with the grammar of the theatrical performances I have tried to draw attention to the background or the milieu of these performances. The history of development or changes from *Lai Haraoba* to *Shumang Lila* has been dictated by the changes which have taken place in the life of the Manipuris, starting from the days of pre-Hindu indigenous religion continuing to the days of Hinduism and finally to the era of secularism.

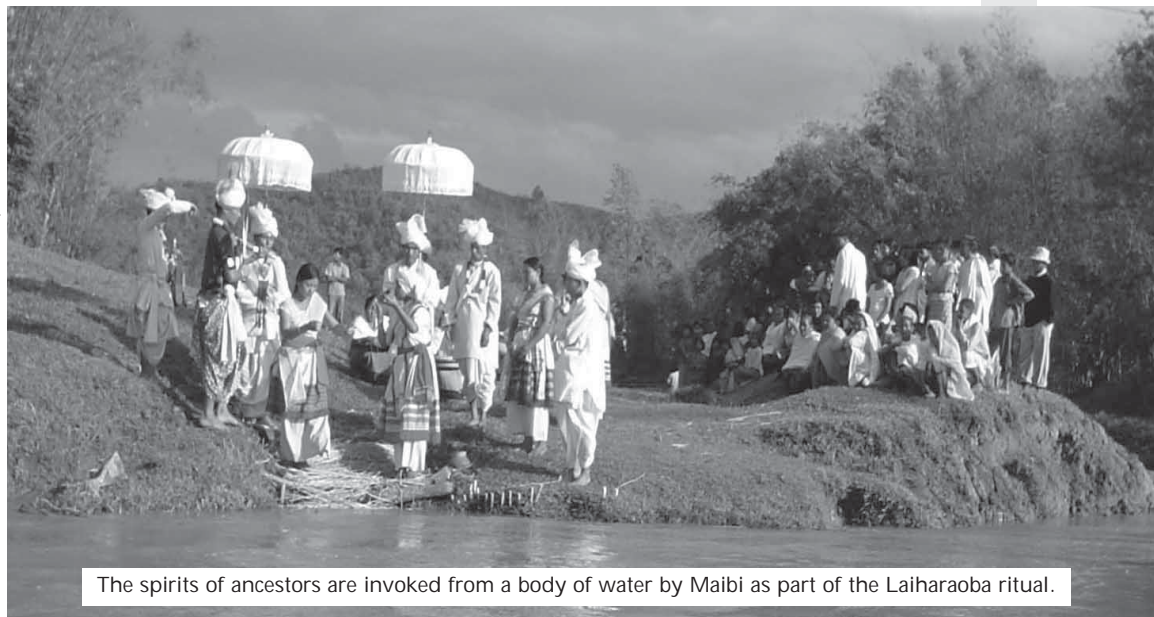
My effort in this book is to chart a map of the process of development of traditional theatre from *Lai Haraoba* to *Nata-Sankirtana*, to *Gostha Lila*, to *Udukhan Lila*, to *Gour Lila* and finally to *Shumang Lila* in a historical frame of time. The forms of theatre which emerged at every stage of this process of development had distinctive qualities. I also refer to the various elements like dances, songs, chants, music, gestures, body movements etc. which have contributed to the total structuring of the various forms of performances. An analysis of these theatrical dynamics of traditional Manipuri theatre has led me to raise the basic contention that almost the same structural framework has been used in *Lai Haraoba*, *Nata-Sankirtana*, *Ras Lila*, and other forms of traditional Manipuri theatre, even though the rising wave of realistic presentation in the style of production has increasingly diminished the importance of the traditional framework. This structural framework has transcended the barriers of religion and culture. The same framework has been used to give theatrical expression to different themes growing out of different religions. One can even say that there is hardly anything religious in this framework, which has brought about a creative fusion of subjects or themes from Hinduism with local and indigenous materials and sensibilities – a fusion which has given rise to a distinct form of theatre.

The way in which this indigenous structural framework has been used for the Hindu theatre of Manipur can best be observed in the *Nata-Sankirtana*, which is one of the earliest outcomes in the creative interaction between the pre-Hindu performance traditions

and the Hindu-religion and culture which has been introduced in the eighteenth century Manipur. I discuss the form and content of *Nata-Sankirtana* in the Fourth Chapter of this book. Here, I refer to the fact that the use of the indigenous structural framework has made *Nata-Sankirtana* a performance charged with remarkable theatrical potentials. In the *Ras Lila*, which can be regarded as an extension or continuation of the *Nata-Sankirtana*, one can observe that the sequence of *hakchangshaba* of *Lai Haraoba* has been transformed into a beautiful sequence called *bhong-gi achouba*. The same sequence will also be found used effectively in a *Gostha Lila* performance. The point is that the same sequence or the same structure or the same tradition to which the sequences of the structure belong, has been used in the various forms of the traditional theatre of Manipur.

This non-religious indigenous structure, which is composed of the elements of music, song, dance, body movements, costume, space and even the relationship between the performance and the audience, is the backbone of the central nervous system, which has transcended barriers of culture or religion, and which has drawn all the foreign materials into a process of interaction and final fusion with local Manipuri conditions and sensibilities. We may say that *Lai Haraoba*, *Nata-Sankirtana*, *Ras Lila*, *Gostha Lila*, *Udukhan Lila*, *Gour Lila* and *Shumang Lila* have clear genetic relationship because of their structural dependence on the indigenous structural framework.

At this stage I would like to refer to the use of Hindu religious scriptures like the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Git Govindam* and the *Chaitanya Charitamritam* as the sources of text for the Hindu theatre of



The spirits of ancestors are invoked from a body of water by Maibi as part of the Laiharaoba ritual.

Manipur. The texts based on episodes from these religious scriptures were theatrically presented through the use of the existing non-Hindu performance structures, which are abstract, non-realistic and ritualistic in character. Gradually the presentation became more and more realistic, particularly from the stage of *Ras Lila* onwards. The style of presentation became more sophisticated, common dialogues became to replace the chants. The unfolding of the performance text in the scheduled frame of time became more like the dramatic presentation of a written text with a carefully designed structure of plot.

Involvement of a text in the form of Hindu scriptures brought about many qualitative changes to the growth and development of the traditional Manipuri theatre. The oral behaviour which dominated in the early stages of development came to be gradually replaced by the laws of a

written text which imposed some kind of rigidity and a principle of coherence. Texts are grounded in the form of written words on papers of some kind and, here written words are laws which have to be strictly followed while giving enactments to it. In fact, the tradition of a prompter in the western model of theatre indicates the dominance of the text or the authorial power because actors cannot delete or interpolate any word or a sequence of action other than the textual prescriptions. But this does not mean that a written text was strictly followed with a sense of maintaining its sanctity in the theatre-making process or while unfolding a traditional form of theatre. Epic-reciters, story-tellers and balladeers who did mono-

dramatic performances amidst big congregations at mandaps and other secular spaces were the chief functionaries who popularised the texts. While giving enactments these artistes brought in many changes to the texts, and it was always the contexts which affected the texts. The traditional Manipuri theatre, the Hindu theatre in particular, although founded on written texts, were subjected to oral tradition and many local features were brought into the narrative. But, in spite of all these interpolations and changes the dominance of a text is still discernible when we consider the linearity of the performance, the gradual development of actions, the characters and the overall meaningful structure of signs which govern the performance.

This is true of the secular traditional theatre called *Shumang Lila*. Scholars may trace its origin to the period the king Chandrakirti (1850–1886) or to a more distant historical past. But *Shumang Lila* in its full form came to be born when a written text intervened the earlier forms of performances like the comic skits called *Phagee Lila* and other forms of performances prevalent during intervening period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. So, many qualitative changes were brought to the growth and development of the traditional Manipuri theatre with the intervention of written texts.

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### Theatre Reconsidered

Wide misconceptions of the idea of theatre exist among many theatre-workers, theatre-lovers, playwrights and various sections of people including scholars. Some take theatre for a playhouse, others take it to be equivalent to the drama of popular acceptance, and many others take it strictly to be the translation or realization of a written play into action on the stage. Again, ritual performances of Hindu origin like *Ras Lila*, *Gostha Lila*, *Udukhal*, etc. of Manipur can be studied as genres of theatre. Thus, before we go into an exhaustive study of these traditions of performance it will be helpful to examine some observations on what theatre actually is and on the range of traditions and styles of performances which fall within its perimeter.

Etymologically speaking the word 'theatre' comes from the Greek work '*theomai*' which means *to see*. In Greek, the spacious gallery carved out on the rocky hill slopes is also known as '*theatron*'. But, '*theatron*' refers to only the area meant for the spectators. Then, the word theatre has been used liberally in various contexts, for example, phrases like 'cinema theatre', 'operation theatre' are quite common. Cinema halls where moving pictures are shown are also known as theatre. Well-equipped hospital room where surgical operations on human bodies are carried out, is known as the operation theatre. The playhouse where live performances are staged are also known as theatres. In such theatres the area is divided into two spatial units by a proscenium arch. The two units are the auditorium where the audience sit and the box-like area called the stage, facing the auditorium. Behind the unopened three walls of the stage we have the lighting booth, the green room and other areas where tricky manipulations to create an illusion of reality on the stage are carried out.

The etymological connotations and the implications given rise to by the liberal use of the word theatre will, however, be of no great help in understanding the distinctive features of



The Penakhongba provides musical accompaniment to the Laiharaoba ritual.

the art of theatre. We are concerned with this art manifested through its time-and-space paradigm. Theatre in its essence is an action performed by some agents within the limits of a time-and-space framework. This is, perhaps, the reason why most critics and theatre experts call theatre a living art. The English theatre director Peter Brook has rightly said:

I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, this is all that is needed for an act of the theatre engaged.<sup>ii</sup>

## II

A wide-spread and more or less deep-rooted misconception is that theatre is an art based on the exact translation or realisation on the stage of a fictitious play written under certain established norms. This, of course is a global phenomenon and has its origin in the Aristotelian concept of tragedy encapsulated in his *Poetics*. Most of the die-hard students of this school of thought are not willing to accept the fact that there was and is a wide stream of non-literate theatre forms in which conservative values and norms are retained but no written texts are referred to. This trend of taking theatre exclusively as an enactment of a written play has been popularised by educational institutions like colleges and universities where the texts of plays are taught as a separate genre of literature.<sup>iii</sup> This kind of thinking has had a lingering impact in countries where the Britishers had introduced their system of education during the hay-days of colonial rule. During this period the colonial government presented plays written by famous playwrights like Shakespeare, Goldsmith and Sheridan, established theatre groups and constructed proscenium theatre halls for obvious political reasons. As for instance, in India, Calcutta became a centre of English education and English plays were presented on the stage with the establishment of the Calcutta Theatre in 1779 during the Governor Generalship on Warren Hastings.<sup>iv</sup>

More than five decades have gone by since independence, but the colonial hang-over still works in the mind of the people associated with theatre, who turn a blind-eye to the fertile tradition of indigenous theatre forms which had been popular among the people for a long time. In this context it will be helpful for anyone doing serious study in theatre to draw a clear line of difference between the imported theatre and the indigenous theatre. Somewhere the noted theatre scholar Darko Suvin used a meaningful term for the Aristotelian model of theatre. He calls it 'drama theatre' and uses the term for all 'plotted or diegetic group of activities'.<sup>v</sup> This term will be useful because it can successfully keep

the Aristotelian models of theatre apart from the traditional indigenous forms.

In 'drama theatre', the written play is the backbone of the production. Other secondary factors like costume, scenic design, make-up, etc. are subject to the necessities growing out of the text of the play. Word is the chief medium of communication. But, all these factors will be found to be subordinate to action when theatre is considered in the context of its time-and-space frame-work. Although recognized as a separate genre of literature like poetry and novel, a play is ultimately based on the action that would come into life on the stage. Thus, a full impact of a play can be felt only when it is enacted on the stage, and not merely by reading it. As action is the living centre of a play the full realization of the structure of actions envisaged by the playwright will take place only during performance. That is why a playwright like Eugene O'Neill who was involved in the practical problems of the theatre, could write theatrically successful plays. His plays will show that he has a keen sense of the actions he wanted to enact on the stage.

Now, by action we do not simply mean action in its physical manifestations. It also implies intellectual, emotions and verbal actions, which grow out of a centre of conflict, as we have seen in the plays of G.B. Shaw. Poets like Browning, Shelley and Tennyson attempted to write plays but they could not achieve success in this field. Because of the lack of a well-planned structure of action their plays remained as mere pieces of literature. However, Shakespeare's plays were successful both as literature to be read and as plays which could be performed effectively on the stage. This is because Shakespeare was fully acquainted with the Elizabethan stage-craft and intricacies involved in an event of theatre. In addition to this he was in full knowledge of and full command over the actions to be exploited on the stage during performance. In this context it will be necessary to point out that at the time of evaluating the potential of indigenous forms of theatre we are generally inclined to use such old yardsticks as dramatic structure, character, plot, conflict, dialogue etc. This, in fact, is a hang-over or a prejudice inherited from an exposure to the Aristotelian model of theatre. One can simply say that this orthodox way of looking at theatre will not yield any positive result. Because the two streams of theatre mentioned above have different natures and structures. In addition to this the social involvement and social environment, which is a very important factor in the promotion of theatre, will be found to be quite different. For example, the Aristotelian model of theatre is popular in the West, but in the East theatre is found growing out of a kind of co-

existence or interaction between the Aristotelian and indigenous forms.

Theatre is, in fact, a central human activity which manifest itself in multiple forms and contents under different social, cultural, political and geographical conditions. In addition to this theatre is one of the most recalcitrant and fluid art form which undergoes changes. Thus, the right approach for one to make a systematic study of a certain form of theatre is to identify its distinctive features in relation to the milieu in which it draws its nourishment. To establish a formula and try to use it in the evaluation of any form of theatre cannot be a correct approach. This does not, however, mean that theatre in general has no basic characteristics common for all the forms. It has its own laws and characteristics which remain unchanged in all forms of theatre. This point will become quite clear only after some forms of indigenous theatre and modern schools of theatre are examined systematically.

### III

We may, for example, take up the case of some indigenous theatre forms of Africa. Penina O. Mlama, a Tanzanian theatre scholar wrote:

The person who looks for theatre that merely entertains will find it difficult to discover examples in Africa. But to conclude that there is no theatre because of that is to refuse to understand the peculiarities of African theatre.<sup>vi</sup>

The remark of Penina has struck the key note. He has, further stated that in Africa 'entertainment is, in most cases a means of fulfilling another function of theatre'. Penina has called *Digubi*, an African initiation rite a theatre. *Digubi* is basically a Tanzanian rite of initiating girls into the adult status. It has two stages. The first stage

of *Digubi* is performed at the first menstruation of a girl, and the second stage is carried out on the eve of a girl's wedding ceremony. The ritual performance consists of mime, antiphonal song, dance and patterns of movement produced by groups of people. The point to be noted is that Penina's comment on theatre has posed a serious challenge to the entertainment-oriented concept of theatre popular in the West.

*Nyau* dance of Zambia, *Intsomi* of Xha tribe and *Ingnekwane* of the Zulu tribe are other forms of African theatre. Another black scholar Robert Mshengu Kavanagh has also seriously questioned the usual way of interpreting indigenous forms of theatre in Africa from the Western perspective. He has challenged the definition of drama in accordance with the European concept of theatre:

What is important is to describe as accurately and scientifically as possible the theatrical forms to be found in traditional African societies and allow definitions.<sup>viii</sup>

What the Africans want is a re-definition of theatre, a re-definition which can embrace a large variety of forms of theatres or traditions of theatrical performance. Apart from a rejection of the Western concept of theatre the black people have come out with a positive and confident assertion that they have their own native forms of theatre to be considered seriously.

The existing forms of theatre in Asia also do not conform to the concept of the Western theatre. The Asian theatre has a lot of resemblances with the African theatre in respect of the anthropological background. Faubion Bowers, one of the experts of the early generation of western scholars on Asian theatre found some underlying principles in all the forms of theatre in Asia. He said,

There is a kind of uniformity in motivation, in aim, in style, in execution of dance and drama which connects it altogether and makes it 'Asian' theatre rather than European.<sup>ix</sup>

We have all observed that in the Western theatre the spoken word is the primary medium of communication. But, in Asian theatre words are not enough; a fusion of dance, music and poetry gives rise to an intense form of aesthetic communication. In this connection it will be relevant to refer to the thinking of Beril de Zoete who wrote a useful book entitled *Dance and Drama in Bali*. Zoete writes:

Drama is not the telling of a story, but action, dancing, the same word applies to both, for drama is only conveyed through the heightened rhythm of dance never at a flat pitch of actuality.<sup>x</sup>



A Laiharaoba procession.



The Maibi perform a ritual dance.

This comment on Balinese theatre is also true of other forms of theatre in Asia. Almost the same idea was expressed by another theatre expert called A.C. Scott. In his book *The Theatre in Asia* he wrote:

One could generalize by saying that in Asia the high purpose of theatre has been to induce a personal communication, an immediate experience, a mood raised through the combination of dance, music and poetry drawing a response beyond the limits of empirical time and place in the onlooker's mind.<sup>xi</sup>

This creative fusion of dance, music and poetry becomes a more effective means of communication than the spoken words used in Western theatre. It effects not merely a realistic actualisation of dramatic tension; it produces an abstract and non-realistic but aesthetically effective realization of the essence of the drama. Even obscene human behaviours which cannot be decently presented in realistic Western theatre is successfully shown in abstraction with artistic finesse....

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Brook, Peter: *The Empty Space*, p.18.
- <sup>ii</sup> Brook, Peter: *Empty Space* (Penguin Books, London, 1969), p.11.
- <sup>iii</sup> 'Theatre, Arts of' in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol.18, p.212.
- <sup>iv</sup> Raha, Kironmoy: *Bengali Theatre*, (National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1978), p.8.
- <sup>v</sup> Suvin, Darko: 'Approach to Topoanalysis and to the Paradigmatics of Dramaturgic Space' in the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, Delhi, Vol. No.8, 1984.
- <sup>vi</sup> Mlana, Penina O: 'Digubi: A Tanzanian Indigenous Theatre Form', in *The Drama Review*, Vol.25, 1981, (published by The MIT Press, Cambridge and London, for the School of Arts, New York University), p.4.
- <sup>vii</sup> Mlana, Penina O: 'Digubi: A Tanzanian Indigenous Theatre Form', in *The Drama Review*, Vol.25, 1981, (published by The MIT Press, Cambridge and London, for the School of Arts, New York University), p.4.
- <sup>viii</sup> Kavanagh, Robert Mshengu: *Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa*, (Zed Book Ltd., London, 1985) p.43.
- <sup>ix</sup> Bowers, Faubion: *Theatre in the East* (Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., New York, 1956) p.4.
- <sup>x</sup> Zoete, Beryl de Spies, Walter: *Dance and Drama in Bali* (Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1938) p.18.
- <sup>xi</sup> Scott, A.C.: *The Theatre in Asia* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1972) p.14. ✽

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\* There are ancient manuscripts still preserved by numbers of individual custodians and other private and government agencies. These were written or engraved by stylus tools on different surfaces like barks of trees, leaves, bamboo stems, hand-made paper and also on copper plates. These manuscripts, estimated to be more than thirty thousand in number, contain folk knowledge on astrology, folk medicine, genealogy, mythology, legends, astronomy, physiology, flora, fauna, geography, chronology, *thang-ta*, folk beliefs, accounts of gods and goddesses found in Meitei pantheon, etc. These were written in archaic Meitei language in their own script. Some portions of this chunk of manuscripts have been rendered into modern Manipuri language and published. A large portion of old Manipuri literature is constituted with materials taken from these manuscripts known as *Puya*. ❀