

Schooling of Meitei Thang Ta in Manipur Past and Present

Aheibam Rishikesh Singh

ABSTRACT:

This research paper will discuss the Thang-Ta culture, an indigenous Martial art form of the Meiteis in Manipur which includes fighting techniques of sharp weapons, different types of Swords, shields, lance, spear etc. It is also known as Huyen Lallong. It is believed that this indigenous art form was developed from the war environment of the tiny state, Manipur in North-east India since the early Christian era. From the very beginning, the traditional Meitei martial art was an integral part of an educational system that went beyond more combat training, instilling students with essential values, etiquette, skills and battle strategies. The aim of this research is to highlight the types of schooling system of how the techniques of combat are taught by the Gurus (skillful teachers) to the learners including physical fitness training, disciplines, dress codes and many more. At present, there are two schools of Thang Ta namely Ancient school of Thang Ta or Traditional School of Thang Ta and Modern School of Thang Ta. The changes and updates of these schooling systems will be discussed in a more scientific way. This study will focus more on the study of field work resources and analysis will be done in a more scientific way. The findings of this study will influence the growth of many scholars in the field in Meitei society and at the same time this will enrich the age old indigenous culture.

Key words: Martial art, techniques, school, Meitei society, indigenous.

INTRODUCTION:

There is an assumption that the foundation of modern East Asian martial arts and South Asian martial arts is likely facilitated by cultural exchanges of

early Chinese and Indian martial arts. During the Warring States of Chinese history (480–221 BC) extensive development in martial philosophy and strategy emerged, as described by Sun Tzu in “The Art of War” (c.350 BC).

The ancient culture keeps on processing, changing with time and continues with perpetual system. There has been a progress with the education system in order to fit the ancient knowledge of culture. With this progress, even in India, many subjects have been introduced consisting of different cultural knowledge to safeguard and preserve the indigenous culture to a great extent. Among the culture education in India, Martial arts culture has been a cornerstone of human culture for thousands of years. The term “ Martial arts” is a direct English translation of the Sino-Japanese word (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>). Martial arts are codified systems and traditions of combat practice for a number of reasons. Now-a-days, it covers the disciplines of self-defence, military and law enforcement applications, competition, physical, mental and spiritual development, entertainment, preservation of a nation’s intangible cultural heritage. John Clements (2006) says, the term „martial arts’ itself is derived from an older Latin term meaning, “arts of Mars”, the Roman god of war, and was used to refer to the combat systems of Europe (European martial arts) as early as the 1550s. The education system has witnessed a significant shift in recent years, with martial arts gaining immense popularity in academic curricula. In India, there are many martial arts associated with culture. For instance, Dao Khela, Fala Khela, Lathi Khela in West Bengal; Pari Khanda in Bihar; Kai Varase combat in Karnataka; Mardani Khel in Maharashtra ; Kalaripayat in Kerala and Thang-Ta in Manipur. In these states, martial arts have become an integral part of education system and it is known as Gurukula Educational Institution. These traditional martial arts have long been trying to link with the new knowledge of traditional martial arts for providing a wellrounded development. Today, in Manipur, an ancient martial arts known as “Thang-ta”, is well preserved and developed. And it becomes an integral part of new education system of Manipur.

DEVELOPMENT OF THANG-TA:

Today, it is believed that human warfare dates back to the Epipalaeolithic to early Neolithic era. The oldest works of art depicting scenes of battle are cave paintings from eastern Spain (Spanish Levante) dated between

10,000 and 6,000 BCE that show organized groups fighting with bows and arrows. Fighting with sword and shield, two-handed swordfighting and other types of melee weapons besides unarmed combat was practised in any corner of the world. Even for the Meitei community, racially prominent in Mongoloid race, there is a very ancient form of indigenous martial arts called “Thang-Ta”, which includes all the skills and techniques of fighting. Thang-Ta is a popular form of ancient Manipuri Martial Arts and it is also known as “Huyen Lallong”. The art form is very old but recently revived and developed from the war environment of the tiny state of Manipur in North-east India, which was an independent kingdom before the British India Government. Research on the origin of Manipuri Thang-Ta requires scientific study and the art form which existed in the very early period is not discussed here in detail. Because it is a part of Myth. So, the present study is focussed on the recent development and its revivalism. From the early period “Thang-Ta” has been a part of education as “Guru Shiksha Parampara” and is still continuing. After the establishment of Johnston School in 1885, there had been an emergence of new education system in Manipur which it could be regarded as “Western Education”. In this time too, Thang-Ta had become more popular and it is learnt by the young and the entire independent kingdom. In 1891, Manipur was annexed under the British India Government, from this time onwards the institution of Meitei Thang-Ta had also been closed. Open learning under the teachers was stopped. Might be because, the skill, technique and power of Manipuri Thang-Ta was known to the British soldiers during the time Anglo-Manipur war 1891, also known as Khongjom war in the history of Manipur. After the war, annexation of Manipur British Empire, Thang-Ta education was banned. Any Meitei could not go even holding a branch of bamboo and strictly declared not to mention even the term “Thang-Ta” in the territory. In this regard, a notice was issued by General Collett which was written on 29 and published officially on 30th April’1891. The notice is written as :

The General Officer commanding the Manipur field force nearby gives orders to the subjects of the late Regent of Manipur that until further order no person in the state of Manipur is permitted to possess firearms and swords which must be produced before the chief political officer at Manipur fort within seven days from this notice. Any person found in

possession after the issue of this order will be liable to punishment with death or transportation. Date 29th April, 1891.

In spite of all such restrictions, Meitei forefathers began to open another form of school called “Sharit-sharak” secretly. It is a fighting art form with complete skills without weapons. During the time of First World War (1914–1918) Churachand Maharaj was the king of Manipur.

Meitei soldiers who were experts in Thang-Ta and Sharit-sharak went and helped the British soldiers. British soldiers with the team of Meitei warriors who were well trained in Thang Ta and Sharit-sharak defeated the German soldiers. On seeing the fighting skills of Meitei soldiers in the war, British Government honour the Meitei soldiers and as a token of success gave the title- K.C.S.I.C.B.E. to Churachand Maharaj. About this expedition, it is written as:

Tarani Eraida German lanchatluba

Bilatksahebnachingbasephaichaniyangkheithunglei.

Chingmeirongdagihounabajaigaloinannasephaibhanlengduna ok-e.
SanathongdaEsheisak-

*e. Thong manungchanlaga Shreejut Maharajnachingba Sana Konungda leiramba
sephaiga salami touduna Shreejut Maharaj khurum-e.*

In 1927 in the durbar at the Royal Palace of Manipur, Maharaj introduced a long time prevailing cultural matter and discussed it. From this time, the use of the word Thang-Ta was dropped and it was changed to the new name „Satjal” and started learning “Satjal” from 1933. Consequent upon it, ultimately on 30th May, 1934 the meeting of the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha was held at Imphal centre at 6 p.m. with Manipur Maharaj Churachand as the president and Hjam Irawat as the Convener (Swagatkari). This is recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, a chronicle of Manipur as:

*Taranipanni Emsakeisha leibaki angam-athoupumnamak tinduna Shreejut
Maharajna sabhapati oiduna dharmagi achar khaina takpi-e.*

In resolution No. 8 of this Mahasabha (meeting) it is written as:

*Manipur haiba jat eikhoigi Thang-Ta, mukna kangjei ashinachingbasi
mutsilakpana maram oiduna masibu mutannaba amadi hinghanabagidamakta
matikhaba guru thamduna amasung Sindamshang lingkhattuna hairiba
bidyasing ashi tamba.*

This resolution was proposed by Shreejukta Samarendra Singh, B.A. and seconded by Shreejukta Atombapu Sharma, Bidyaratna.

Under the said resolution many teachers reopened the school of “Thang-Ta” and “Sharitsharak” and began to teach students openly and many books were also published. In 1934 on 7th

October “Manipur Byalas Church” was established and Rajkumar Sanatomba and Rajkumar Shree Sanahal started giving training in Huyel Lallong. Along with it in 1937 two books entitled *Meitei Huyel Lallong* and *Satjal* written by Rajkumar Sanahal Singh were published. In 1937 a performance of “Satjal”, five armed men strike and defend was shown at the All India Medical Conference at Guwahati as organised by Hijam Irabot as a member of the organiser. On the other hand, ojhataranggo established a private building at Huikap in 1938 for the first time in Manipur for Thang-Ta and started teaching of this fighting art form. In World War I and II, the well trained soldiers in Thang-ta contributed significantly. Their bravery and war skills, honed through Thang-Ta training, were valuable assets on the battlefield. This results the lifted of the ban of practicing Thang-ta which was imposed by the British ruler. However, the British ruler did not take any role in adding Thang-ta as a cultural subject in new education system.

SCHOOLS OF THANG-TA IN MANIPUR:

In 1947, India got independence from the British rule. After this in 1952 in Churachand Higher

Secondary School “Thang-Ta” was included in the syllabus as a special subject. This was the first time in Manipur that Thang-ta to be included in the new education system. Although

Thang-Ta s new education system is being developed actively, the old education system is still being practised in some parts of Manipur. Guru Thokchom Ibohal Singh became the first teacher of Thang-Ta. After this in 1952 in Churachand Higher Secondary School “Satjal” was included in the syllabus as a special subject. Thokchom Ibohal Singh became the first teacher of Satjal. Guru Thokchom Ibohal was a devoted student of the incredible Thang-ta master Laikhuram Khagendrajit, who lived in the reign of Sir Churachand Maharaj.

Before the introducing of Thang-Ta in the schools of Manipur, Thang Ta was also very popular in other neighbouring states. In 1923 Thang-Ta Shintakpurel (teacher) Laikhuram Khagendrajit went on pilgrimage leaving Manipur and reached Tripura where he worked for some time as the Private Secretary of Tripura Queen Shreemati Ratnamanjuri Devi, daughter of Meidingu Debendra Singh who ruled Manipur for three months. In 1925 Ojha Khagendrajit's disciple Taranggo and Thokchom Ibohal Singh also were in Tripura with Khagendrajit. At that time at Tripura palace, Thang-Ta show was performed occasionally. Seeing the Thang-Ta show of Thokchom Ibohal and Tarango the people of Tripura appreciated the warfare and strategies of Manipur and moreover, they honoured Meitei Leibak more. Thus, after living for about 7 (seven) years in Tripura the great teacher of Thang-Ta Khagendrajit came back to Manipur in 1930.

Another discipline of Thang Ta known as "Arambai" was also very popular during that time. In the field of Arambai, Khagendrajit learnt the ins and outs of it from his teacher who was the only teacher of Thang-Ta. During that time there were only few youths who could throw „Arambai' from horseback. Knowing Khagendrajit's excellent skill in Thang-Ta and arambai, Churachand Maharaj allowed him to go on horseback on the road alone by hanging Arambai at one time and this was written in the book entitled *Laikhuram Khagendrajit* published by Khagendrajit Research Committee.

The middle of 19th century marks the beginning of the history of martial arts in India as modern sports developed out of earlier traditional fighting systems. This wave came across many countries including Europe, Asian and Southeast Asian countries. The wave of martial arts also reached in Manipur. During this time different sub disciplines of Manipuri Thang-Ta began to revive from the earlier form. Out of it the discipline in Thang-Ta called „Cheibi Phunaba' (stick fighting) was also very popular. For two consecutive years from 1955 to 1956 ojha Indramani and others performed the contest of "Cheibi Phunaba" in the name of Manipur Man Building Institute (MMBI). The teachers who were judges in this tournament were - N. Khelchandra, Moirangthem Goura Singh, Achousana, Indramani, Shagolshem, Tarango, Maisnam Achou, Layenlakpam Damu and Padmashree ojha Raghu. Those students who participated in the contest were - Bamon Sunil from Lamboikhongnangkhang, Pebam Ibomcha,

Manikchand from Uripok Naoremthong, Salam Achou, Nupamacha from Uripok, NingthoukhongjamLeirak, Sanahal brothers, Bihari, Khaidem Manmohan and Birjit Ngangomba, Sarnachand Ngangomba, Cheenglensana, etc., from Nagamapal. In 1971 under a specific order of Education Department a permanent post of teacher was reserved for such education in Thang-Ta. But in no other schools except C.C. Hr. Sec. School, so far, teacher for Thang-ta had been appointed.

In the course of time, “Manipur Unarmed Martial Arts Association” (MUMAA) organized a tournament called “Cheibee Phunaba” for five consecutive years starting from 1986. And Meitei Huyel Lallong Academy, Yumnam Huidrom, with a great effort, brought up Cheibee game upto the national level and starting from 1993 it has been being performed in many places of India. As a part of it, in the 5th National Games organised in Manipur from 14th to 25th February, 1999 a “game demonstration” was shown at MapalKangeibung, Imphal on 21st February of the same year. On the closing day of the said National Games, as a part of closing ceremony show, there was a “Thang-Ta” show performed by 600 players.

Different disciplines in Thang-Ta began to grow and expand. The earlier form of, Gadga’ from which came the new name “Cheibi”, into the form of sport. All Manipur Cheibi Association (AMCA) was formed as a state level organization on 18th October, 1998. From this time sports meet have been performed at the state level. As a result of the continuous effort of this organisation in 2000 A.D. Manipur Government issued a registration certificate to indentify this sport as an indigenous game of Manipur in the world of sports. After this, the 4th Cheibi Championship was organised on 2nd February, 2001 at K.T. Hall, Canchipur and it was followed by many tournaqments in various parts of Manipur. Every year, the association has been organizing “Mongshatabam Iboyaima and Arambam Punyabati Memorial”, Kanglei Mega Sports Festival Cheibi Yendamnaba” and “Arambam Somarendro Ningshing KumonThouram Cheibi Invitation Tournament” etc.

On 22nd August, 2007, a common syllabus for Thang-Ta was framed by a fifteen member committee under the guidance of the Art and Culture Department, Government of Manipur. After one year of the formation of this committee from 9th to 12th August, 2008 for the first time an International Level a seminar on “Thang-Ta” was organised at the Manipur

University Centenary Hall, Imphal. The seminar was participated by many countries. On 11th March, 2011, the then Manipur Chief Minister O. Ibobi declared it in Manipur Assembly that he had informed the Board of Secondary Education, Manipur to include the traditional art of Thang-Ta of this land in the academic programme. And this declaration was published in the local dailies. From this declaration on 19th July, 2013 a committee of 9 (nine) members was formed and under the Board of Secondary Education, Manipur preparation for inclusion of Thang-Ta as optional subject in Class-IX and X were started. In the coming years, produced text books on Thang-Ta and started teaching in the schools as optional subject. Thang-Ta has been opted as an optional subject in many institutions from 2014. In the year 2016, HSLC examination, 388 students opted for Thang-Ta as optional subject. Consequent upon it, the Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur also started to take up action for the inclusion of Thang-Ta as an optional subject in Class-XI and XII. As a part of it on 2nd April, 2015 a committee of 12 members was formed and necessary actions were taken up, i.e. syllabus framing, textbook writing, etc.

Manipur University of Culture, Imphal was established in 2015 and a full fledged department of Thang-Ta was opened. The first course of Thang-Ta at the graduate level was introduced. As a part of it on 17th May, 2016 at 11.30 a.m. a syllabus committee consisting of 13 members was formed and it started to take up the responsibility to bring up the department. On 19th September, 2016, graduate level 1st Semester Class in Thang-Ta Department was started. In 2020 M.A. Course in Thang-Ta was introduced.

The new education system of Thang-Ta gradually develops and it upgrades upto M.A. level. The new system of education can provide students with a comprehensive and holistic learning experience. At the same time the ancient school of Thang-Ta (Gurukul system) is also developed on its own capacity. There are more than 120 schools of Gurukul system of learning Thang-Ta. This is all because of the commitment and cooperation between state Government and the Central Government. By incorporating the early and new form of cultural knowledge, Thang-

Ta can be practised in a wide range nowadays. The position can be mentioned as “Two sides of the same coin”. The step taken up in learning both the early and new form of Thang-Ta can be regarded as marvellous

progression. Together, Thang-Ta continues to thrive, inspiring and enriching lives for years to come.

CONCLUSION:

Thang-Ta education is advancing as many academic organizations, institutions, Colleges and University have established. Many research works have been done in Thang-Ta and its different sub disciplines like- Shait-sharak (skill and techniques of fighting without arms and weapons), Arambai (indigenously developed bow type of weapon used by throwing it from the riding horse), Cheibi Phunaba (Stick fighting) etc. Both the Schools of Thang-Ta, i.e. Ancient School of Thang-Ta (Gurukul System) and Modern school of Thang-Ta grow this indigenously Martial Arts with many new aspects for an academic vision without losing its originality. Though, there seem some changes in styles of the indigenous form of Manipuri Martial Arts, still is growing up. The fighting types such as swordsmanship, stick fighting, grappling, striking, stand-up fighting, ground fighting, combat sport, demonstration forms, physical fitness, mediation are the skills and techniques of Manipuri Thang-Ta. With the induction of NEP 2020, many advancement towards Thang-Ta has been made.

Reference:

Bowman, Paul (2021). *The Invention of Martial Arts: Popular Culture Between Asia and America*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-754033-6.

Clements, John, 2006. " A Short Introduction to Historical European Martial Arts, Meibukan Magazine (Special Edition No.1) 2-4.

Kangabam Syamkishower Singh-2008. Cheibi Cheirol, International Seminar & workshop on Spiritual & physical dimension of Manipur Martial Art-

Khumanthem Kaomacha Singh-1934 Manipur Itibrita-

Mutua Tombi-1975. Imphal

Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra Singh & L a i r e n m a y u m
Ibungohal Singh-1981.

Cheitharol Kumbaba-

Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra Singh-1984. Document of Anglo Manipuri war Part -1

Nandalal Sharma-1960. Meitrabak

Oinam Bhogeshower-1987. Ningthourol Lambuba

Paonam Phulendrajit Singh-1987. Paona Brajabasi

R.K Guneshower Singh-1981. Meitrabakki Thang-Tagi Marol

Sarangthem Bormani -2000. Meitei Ningthourol

Souvenir, 1st Foundation Day 12 August 2018, Manipur University of Culture,Palace

Compound, Imphal East.

“Sun Tzu Biography and Introduction: Sun Tzu The Art of War and Strategy Site by”.

Sonshi. Com. Retrieved 7 November 2010.

T.C. Hadson,Delhi-1975.The Meiteis

“Wrestling”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved 2 September 2019.