https://doi.org/10.65734/tgi.ssei.avp.ijcsss.ti.26.29.2

Indigenous Education in Manipur: Looking Back and Moving Forward

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Abstract

The indigenous system of education, either formal or informal, is a unique manifestation of the cultural heritage. Deeply rooted in its cultural values and inter-generationally transmitted orally or written through a variety of agencies, indigenous education of Manipur has evolved to build up a strong human capital that was physically, morally, vocationally, culturally and religiously cognizant in its culturally contextual methods of teaching and learning strategies. Holistic and community-based, indigenous education has its orientations for building the capacity of the youth to tell the truth and shoulder the social responsibility and social integration. In the current emerging new paradigm shift in the educational eco-system, which emphasizes sustainability, inclusiveness, multidisciplinary and cultural economy, the indigenous education is regaining attention. Its utmost contextual relevance is seen in the background of contemporary issues in educational eco-system.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a growing move to incorporate indigenous knowledge into the curriculum so that education becomes more relevant, sustainable and culturally sensitive. In spite of the commendable initiatives from different stakeholders and some success stories to see the relevance of the indigenous system in the contemporary times, there are still genuine challenges to its smooth sailing.

In this background, the present paper, drawing on the available ancient texts and relevant secondary works, intends to analyse the rich heritage of the indigenous education system, dwelling on its origin, development, subject matter, agencies, initiatives from different stakeholders to revive and incorporate into the present curriculum and in the meantime also the contemporary relevance and challenges to the effective realisation of the goal.

Keywords: indigenous, texts, heritage, ecosystem, relevance.

Introduction

This study begins by putting up some pertinent questions: Has the indigenous education played its role in the social and political formation of Manipur? Is indigenous education a manifestation of aged-old cultural identity? What has been the state of the art and contemporary relevance of the indigenous education?

While keeping all these questions in mind, the study makes a humble attempt to explore the indigenous education system of Manipur, mainly centering on origin and subject matter; agencies; and status and contemporary relevance. The study is based on a historical perspective by relying on the available primary and secondary sources. While the primary sources include the ancient Meitei texts called *Puya*, the secondary sources include published modern books, articles, etc.

Manipur, before the Anglo-Manipur War, 1891, was a sovereign kingdom with her own history and civilisation. As a literate society, Manipur is known for her own scripts and a galaxy of ancient texts called *Puya* on different topics. Before the arrival of the western education, indigenous education was one of the pillars on which was built up the foundation of a strong nation. It is interesting to note the manner in which belief, custom, morality, ideology, cultural values have been well reflected in the indigenous education. However, there is a need for organised and systematic research to document, preserve and see it in the light of its relevance in the contemporary time.

The history and civilization of a nation is reflected in its own educational system. It is argued that the understanding of a society in matters of experience, knowledge, wisdom, aptitude, skills, and other human values varies from place to place, time to time and the contextual educational system. In this context, indigenous education refers to that type of learning where its growth and development of models, methods, and contents originate within the culture. In this way, indigenous education plays its role to impart knowledge, skills, and disciplines to shape the students as ethically responsible citizens.

In the case of Manipur, reading the available ancient texts, one finds how the rich treasure of the indigenous system of education is well reflected. The Meitei word for education is *mahei* or *mahei-mashing*. Mashing is derived

from the word *mashin* meaning skill, profession, or trade.[1] It relates to ethics, morality, spirituality, and way of life to attain perfect living of a person throughout his lifetime. It imparts military training, martial arts, vocational training, indigenous games and sports, arts and crafts, philosophy of life, astrology etc. With its unique ideals and philosophical outlook, indigenous education was given to inculcate moral character, chivalry, obedience, honesty and truthfulness in the minds of the youth. In the pre-literate days, it was transmitted orally till written down in a variety of ancient textual forms.

The political history of ancient Manipur was of frequent conflicts with her hostile neighbouring kingdoms and internal domestic crisis. For internal and external security, Manipuris prepared themselves to face any form of challenge by providing physical strength, courage and obedience to the youths under the state's strict supervision. The aim was, therefore, to train the youths as responsible subjects to obey, endure, and fight for safety and security of the kingdom. This was firmly moulded by the indigenous system of education. Besides providing physical strength and courage to the pupils, education aimed at inculcating moral virtues such as obedience to elders, truthfulness, fortitude, sincerity and politeness.[2]

For a better understanding, the indigenous education may be analysed in two categories: (I) Formal type and (II) Informal type.

In its nutshell, the formal type was a school-based learning which was further divided into (I) textual education and (II) non-textual education. In the textual, manuscripts (*Puyas*) on different subjects were taught by the *Maichous* (learned scholars) to the *Mainous* (young scholars).[3] The Non-textual, on the other hand, dealt with physical and vocational education[4]

1 Ch. Jamini Devi, *Education in Manipur* (Imphal: Rai-Pravina Brothers Publication, 1989), 4.

2 Ch. Jamini Devi, *Education in Manipur*, 5.

3 Textual education studies manuscripts on different topics. The *maichous* taught the young scholars known as *Mainous* on reading and writing of *Meitei Mayek,* the original script but significantly on different topics of the puyas dealing with administration, history, geography, literature, genealogy, astrology, astronomy, medicine, physiology, prediction, song, dance, craftsmanship etc. *Maichous* wrote puyas with the help of the *Mainous*. The important school of learning was at the residence of *Maichou.* Among the meritorious scholars, mention may be made of Khongnangthaba, Moirang Lalhanba, Konok Thengra, Langol Lukhoi, and others.

4 Physical education included the art of warfare, sports, hunting, Sagol Kangjei (Polo), boat race, mukna (wrestling) etc.), while vocational type encompassed agriculture, car-

to build a strong human capital physically and mentally fit for the nation. While, the informal education refers to the learning of culture, morality, religion, politics etc.

Agencies: Knowledge Transfer

From earlier times, the civilized nations of the world have developed learning strategies that were meant to generate, preserve, and transfer various domains of knowledge over the generations. There were formal and informal educational agencies that imparted the students how to develop different skills at different stages of life. Here, a brief survey of some agencies may be shared herein.

Family

The family assumed a crucial function in the absence of institutionalized educational system. Involvement, affiliation, initiation of rites, and discipline were methods in family education. The life-skills were picked up through imitation, observation and apprenticeship.[5] The child gained proficiency in the mother tongue in which the child grew and received instructions in the mother tongue in informal way. It focused on the development of moral behaviour, discipline, and manner.

Lallup

Lallup was a formal centre since a long time. Literally means military organization, lallup was service rendered by every male between the ages of 17 and 60 to the state covering both military and development works.[6] For a standardized administration, King Loiyamba issued a royal edict called *Loiyamba Shilyen* in 1110 A.D. dividing the jurisdictions of the state into six *Panas* or circles. Each *Pana* or circle under the supervision of an officer known as *Lakpa* sent a team called *Lallup* to render military service in wartime and welfare works in 'times of peace'. Apart from the military training, moral education: etiquette, character development, discipline, good manners etc. were imparted to the youth.

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pentry, embroidery, weaving, tailoring spinning, storytelling, singing etc.

5 S. Gyaneswar Singh, *Impact of Modern Education in Manipur: A Case Study of Two Villages* (PhD Thesis, Gauhati University, 1978), 137.

6 Gangmumei Kamei, *History of Manipur: Pre-Colonial Period* (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2015), 148.

Pakhangphal And Leishaphal

Pakhangphal and *Leishaphal* were traditional institutions for the young boys and girls where they were taught discipline, behaviours, moral code of conducts, martial arts etc. for a peaceful life and a better future. The boys were taught defensive and offensive arts such as *Huiyen-Lallong*, *Thang-ta* etc. to be able to face external aggression. In the *Leishaphal*, the young girls were trained in weaving, dancing, singing, preparation of food etc. Modesty, forms of address were taught. The young boys and girls were taught that married life might be seen from two lenses: external and internal. In the external aspect, the couple must work together, while in the internal aspect, the couple must follow the rules of married life.[7]

Sinnaipham

The literal meaning of the term *Sinnaipham* is work place. *Sinnaipham Kaba* means 'to attend or go to work place'. This practice was prevalent in the Meitei society since early days.[8] *Sinnaipham* was a girl-centred formal institution. *Ningol Liktakpi* was supervisor and instructor. *Sinnaipham* was an institution where the girls between puberty and marriage got their skills and knowledge from their parents broadened in the company of elderly women of the families of the friends. *Sinnaipham,* in spite of its being a social institution for interaction among the girls, may again be seen from economic perspective. It was here at *Sinnaipham* that the girls improved their skills of weaving through sharing of weaving skills. *Sinnaipham* served as the backbone of the weaving industry and income generation in the pre-colonial times.

Amaiba, Amaibi, Loishang

The terms *Amaiba*, *Amaibi* and *Loishang* refer to traditional healer or priest, priestess or spiritual medium and designated house or department respectively. The highest-ranking medical office in the state was Yoirel Loishang which was bifurcated into two offices, Amaiba Loishang and Amaibi Loishang.[9] They were traditional departments where rituals, traditional healing and spiritual activities are carried out by Amaibas and Amaibis. It is considered

7 *Ibid.*, 26-39.

8 N. Khelchandra Singh, *Ariba Manipuri Longei: An Archaic Manipuri to Modern Manipuri Dictionary* (Imphal: Manipur State Kala Academy, 1978), 372.

9 Ch. Manihar, *Masilne* (Imphal, 2017), 175.

as a sacred institution in Meitei society especially among the followers of the indigenous religion of the Meiteis. This institution served as a tool for imparting treatment knowledge, values and practices to younger generations. *Amaiba* or *Amaibi Loishang* is a centre for various activities such as spirituality, religion, culture, healthcare etc. prevalent in the then Meitei community. In the traditional belief, Amaibas and Amaibis possessed divine inspirations. As a place for community bonding, it brings people together in community gathering, festivals, rituals etc. and creates a sense of unity and togetherness among the people. It is a place for disseminating moral and spiritual guidance among the people.

There used to be another department called *Ametpa Loishang* (Department of Therapy)[10]in the realm of traditional healthcare. Patients with illnesses were diagnosed and treated in this department. King Mungyamba, for instance, had Ningthoujam Kiyamba as a private practitioner while King Garibniwaz had Moirang Lalhaba as a private practitioner.[11]

State of The Art And Contemporary Relevance

Indigenous education is much beyond a cultural relic of the past but certainly a living tradition with its contemporaneity. The indigenous education is a comprehensively whole-some system that is historically rooted and an expression of cultural identity with a mission to build up an integrative personality in multi-dimensional knowledge for shaping a strong human capital for a strong nation. It is a community-based learning meant for upholding and protecting one's culture, social cohesion and integration. It moves away from a simple form of learning but a framework with an imperative role to build up the fabrics of society, economy, and polity. Apart from its orientation to economic sustainability through vocational training in specialized occupations, it prepared the ground to partake in the success of the statecraft.

Indigenous education got pushed to the corner by the advent of colonial education. Interestingly, Independent India inherited the modern Western model of education.[12] Indigenous education which suffered under colonial

10 Heisnam Budhichandra Singh, *Traditional and Western Medicine in Manipur* (PhD thesis, Manipur University, 2021), 13.

11 Heisnam Budhichandra Singh, *Traditional and Western Medicine in Manipur,* 117.

12 K. Kengoo, "*Educated Unemployed Youth in Manipur*," (*International Journal of Research*

rule has to manage to adapt to the post-colonial educational eco-system. The indigenous scripts got marginalized. The education system, as adopted, brought a socialization disconnected from its roots. What is seen is the moral and ethical-based community learning with the spirit of collectivism being gradually defined by materialism of academic achievements and the success of career.

There are attempts to revitalize the indigenous education in the contemporary curriculum. Popularization of Meitei Mayek script is one such attempt to foreground the indigeneity through schooling.[13] Another central idea is how the indigenous education may be integrated into the modern education system wherein students can be trained to acquire adequate skills to be fit in the competitive job market while grounded in its cultural roots.[14] Indigenous concept of vocational education that emphasizes the apprentice-practice orientation can be an area of emulation in the curriculum. On the one side, indigenous education is based on the interaction between the learners and the environment[15] through holistic orientation and spirituality. This points a new direction in the making of the modern educational eco-system a balanced, informed and inclusive. Attempts are made to introduce the skills of indigenous techniques of organic farming and management of agricultural resources. These practices received appreciation as relevant solutions to the current crisis of environmental conservation and climate change. In this, one sees moves from different stakeholders to incorporate the martial arts such as *Thang-Ta* (armed martial arts) and *Sarit-Sarat* (unarmed martial arts) in the school curriculum. This is just beyond the training but precisely because of a strong sense of cultural values with religious philosophy embedded in the arts.[16]

The integration guards the indigenous knowledge and complements the current education model. This entails the production of relevant textbooks,

Studies in Educational Technology 1, no. 2, 2012): 61–71.

13 Chirom Rebika Devi, "*A Critical Study of Teacher Education Programmes in Manipur*," (*Journal of North East India Studies* 4, no. 1, 2014): 67–77.

14 Sushil Kumar Sharma, *Educated Unemployment and Insurgency in Manipur: Issues and Recommendations* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2016), 1–10.

15 Sapana Devi Karam and Thounaojam Somokanta, "*Education in a Conflict-ridden State, Manipur: A Narrative Analysis*," (Economic and Political Weekly 51, no. 47, 2016): 52–59.

16 S.K. Varah & D.T. Pawar, '*Attitudes Towards Mother Tongue Education in Manipur*', (North-east India Language and Education, 2023, Vol. 37-6), 806-819.

training of teachers and development of cultural contextual curriculum. [17] It moves in the journey of de-coloniality. Students learn in the native scripts, understand in the cultural values. In the attempt to incorporate the vocational education, art and crafts into the general curriculum, students gain the formal training and competency-based self-employment skills to sustainable livelihood. The reform facilitates in the introduction of education a community-based learning aligning with the global trends towards what is being referred to as experiential learning.[18]

In Sum

In spite of the success stories, challenges are hindering the pace of resurrection. The current education is too formal to locate the community-based learning model.[19] The dominance of global languages marginalizes the indigenous languages. There is still dominance of the English medium schools with modern curriculum.[20] The subjects of indigenous education are relegated to as co-curricular or add-on rather than being mainstream. There is need for standard texts, training of teachers, and the required number of trained teachers, teaching-learning resources and materials. The crucial idea is how the existing reform could move in the right pathway with a bright prospect where the students are resilient to the future challenges. The success of the mission has potential to represent a significant milestone in bridging the yawning gap between modern education with the indigenous knowledge. Much needs to be accomplished to develop a relevant curriculum and support infrastructure to integrate indigenous education at all levels. However, it is interesting to ponder a better future-based model education system that is all-embracing, sustainable and vibrant.

The ongoing effort to integrate indigenous knowledge into the formal curriculum ought to push the way forward towards creating a model of global

17 S. Merina Singha, *Higher Education in Manipur and the Emergence of Modern Manipuri Women Writers*, (Ilkogretim Online, 2021, Vol. 20, Issue 5), 596-99.

18 Madhulika S. Patel & Saroj Pandey, '*Secondary Teacher Education in Manipur - A Field Study*', (Journal of Indian Education, NCERT, 2014, Vol. XXXIX-4), 49.

19 Wangkheirakpam Bidyabati, & Lairenllakpam Seilendra Singh, '*Issues of Inclusive Education in Manipur*', (The Primary Teacher, 2017, Vol. XLII-2), 13.

20 Kshetrimayum Nomita Devi, '*Changing Educational Trends in Manipur: A Shift from Privatization to Commercialization*', (International Journal of Research in Social Sciences, 2019, Vol. 9, Issue 6), 908-16.

standard which is more inclusive and culturally contextual thereby ensuring that future generations remain connected to their roots.

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