



The Meitei-Pangal Legacy in Manipur (India): A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The historical narrative of Manipur illustrates the sustained contributions of diverse communities, marked by their bravery, resilience, and innovative spirit, in which the Muslim community, locally recognized as Meitei-Pangals, holds a particularly notable status. In spite of being a minority, they played a significant role in the defending of the kingdom, enhancing its economic framework, and contributing to its cultural heritage. Embedded in the lallup system, Pangals made substantial military and economic contributions, often sacrificing their lives in wars against neighboring kingdoms and the British during the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. Their contributions surpassed beyond the military engagement: they initiated progressive agricultural practices including paddy transplantation and the application of bullock-drawn ploughs, advanced craft skills such as weaving, pottery, paper production, carpentry, and firearms manufacturing, and encouraged the proliferation of commercial networks. Muslim women similarly participated energetically in socio-political movements, as exemplified by the Nupi Lal, standing shoulder to shoulder with their Meitei sisters. Nevertheless, their contributions and innovations remain largely unacknowledged in conventional historical narratives. This manuscript endeavours to recover and highlight the various contributions of Muslims in the historical and cultural heritage of Manipur, emphasizing their contributions as warriors, innovators, and unsung patriots.

Keywords: Assimilation, Agriculture, Contribution, Craft, Manufacture.

1. Introduction

The narrative of Manipur's history is often framed through the perspectives of its monarchs, wars, and cultural achievements; however, the contributions of certain communities are remain overshadowed. Notably, the Muslim population of Manipur, referred to locally as Meitei-Pangals, warrants particular recognition. Since, their significant migration in 1606 C.E. From 17th century, Muslims have played a crucial role in the socio-political and economic landscape of the kingdom. Although constituting a relatively small segment of the population, their impact is remarkably extensive. The Pangals were assimilated into the *lallup* system¹ (all the adult male member of the kingdom were to served the king ten days in every fourteen days), which mandated their provision of both military and civil duties. In this role, they collaborated with their Meitei counterparts as soldiers, artisans, cultivators, and state officials. Their expertise in firearms and artillery secured them a vital role in the kingdom's defence apparatus, while their advancements in agriculture, including paddy transplantation and the utilization of bullock-drawn ploughs, revolutionized food production practices. Furthermore, the advent of weaving techniques, wheel-turned pottery, paper making, carpentry, and firearms manufacturing significantly enhanced the material culture of Manipur. Equally significant was their involvement during periods of turmoil. From rescuing monarchs amid political intrigues to the ultimate sacrifice in war against Awa, Kabow, and ultimately the British in the year 1891, Muslims proved their loyalty to their adopted homeland. The Anglo-Manipur War marked a pivotal moment, during which numerous Pangals fought gallantly, although their efforts are rarely acknowledged in formal accounts. In addition to the battlefield, Muslim women also played a vital role through their vigorous participation in movements such as the 'Nupi Lal', which challenges colonial economic exploitation. This manuscript seeks to illuminate the unsung patriots of Manipur, mapping their multifaceted contributions across military, economic, and cultural endeavours. By recovering their forgotten legacies, it emphasizes the

imperative to recognize Muslims not merely as marginal figures but as pivotal participants in shaping Manipur's historical narrative and cultural heritage.

1.1. Objective & Methodology

The objectives of this manuscript are to elucidate the contributions of unsung patriots of Manipur, investigating their multifaceted contributions in both military, and cultural domains; and as well as their contribution in state economy during the pre-colonial period. By recovering their forgotten legacies, it emphasizes the imperative to recognize Muslims not merely as marginal figures but as pivotal participants in shaping Manipur's historical narrative and cultural heritage. Primary data and Secondary data collected from Agricultural census, population census, Economic Census, Periodical reports published by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, among others, are utilised extensively. This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, considering various factors associated with the agrarian framework, which culminates the diverse disciplines like sociology, Political Science, Economics, and more.

2. Discussion

The Meitei-Pangal (Muslim) community in Manipur, despite their limited population, played a remarkable role in the history of Manipur. The monarch of Manipur enrolled them in the *lallup* system; consequently, they rendered valuable economic and military contributions to the kingdom. The various skills in diverse occupations and trades of the Muslims greatly enhanced the economic landscape of Manipur.

As soldiers, the Muslims engaged in numerous military expeditions initiated by the rulers of Manipur against the neighbouring kingdoms, with numerous individuals laying down their lives to safeguard the independence of the kingdom. The Pangal community in Manipur was under the dominion of the monarch and was obliged to undertake the *lallup* system as mentioned above, thereby contributing to the military organization along with the predominant Meitei community. Therefore, in fulfilling their duties as *lallup* system members, they were regularly involved in the state activities assigned from time to time. Their appointments to *sagei* were determined based on their proficient activities or for some other reasons. Accordingly, they took part in state activities whenever the context necessitated. There are various important incidents that can be identified in which Pangal took an immense role in accentuating the glorious history of Manipur. Some of the events may be mentioned chronologically before coming to the last war, namely the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891.

The military system of the Ningthouja kingdom was highly organised and disciplined. Since the 17th century, many of the Meitei Pangals played an important role as war diplomats, frontline fighters, and, when necessary, as tiger hunters, and guards the villages. In the year 1606, during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652 C.E), there was a Military Section known as *Khunjagi Lanmi Lup* amongst the Pangals. Due to their advanced proficiency with firearms, rather than conventional weaponry like swords, bows, arrows, since their arrival, they were mainly assigned as artillery soldiers. They participated in Top-Siphai, Bengun-Siphai (Military Band Company) as well as in various other companies where they primarily held musket, *kamar* specifically rifles. The Pangal community has held rifles since the reign of King Khagemba around 1620 till Maharaja Garibniwaz (1709-1748 C.E). In the year 1824 C.E., when the Manipuri levy was established under Maharaj Gambhir Singh, there were three cavalry men and 15 infantry personnel from the Pangal community. Muslims joined the Manipur Levy of Gambhir Singh to evacuate the valley of Manipur from Burmese occupation for seven years (1819-1826). Manipur Levy's war against Burmese in the year 1826 C.E., and the Khasi campaign led by Gambhir Singh in 1829 many Meitei Pangals took immense role. Moreover, in the last war of Manipur in 1891, numerous Pangal were involved and made sacrificed for their motherland. Collectively, with all such participations throughout history, it is a clear fact that Pangal communities will not leisure around when their motherland is in need.

The execution of the five British officers became the immediate cause of the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. The British Government declared war against Manipur on 31st of March in 1891. By the first week of April 1891, three contingents of troops marched towards Imphal from three different directions namely Kohima, Silchar and Tamu. The Manipuri forces engaged the British soldiers in all the three fronts. The final and most momentous battle was led by Major General Paona Brajabasi and Chongtham Mia, fought between the Manipuri forces and the British forces at Khongjom from 23rd to the 25th of April, 1891. Many brave Manipuris laid down their lives on this battlefield. Despite the valiant's efforts to safeguard their independence, the mighty British ultimately won the battles. Manipur was annexed to the British Empire on 27th of April, 1891. Additionally, many Pangals (Manipuri Muslims) displayed remarkable bravery alongside their fellow Manipuri soldiers during the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. Several areas majorly inhabited by Muslims suffered the attacks and atrocities inflicted by the British colonial force.

Although The Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 short lived, was one of the biggest wars that were ever fought in Manipur after the Seven Years' Devastation. This war had wide range political and administrative implications. As a result, numerous questions arise about the war emerged which necessitated the search to get tangible answers. Historians and general public agreed that disunity and lack of cooperation amongst the princely states of Manipur were the primary cause and subsequent defeat in the Anglo-Manipur War. Rich tributes were paid to Manipuris who had shown extraordinary courage during the Anglo-Manipur war.

However, most of the people of Manipur remains unaware the role of Pangal in this war and yet to recognize the name of these unsung heroes in the History of Manipur.

Many of the Meitei Pangals participated in the social and political movement during the colonial rule. It is also found in the record that numbers of Muslim women took part in the 2nd Manipuri Women's Agitation. These impoverished poor Muslim women, who were earning daily bread by selling vegetables, eggs, and tobacco leaves in the Khwairamband Bazar played a significant role in the agitation. During that period, the Khwairamband Bazar had accommodated less than 100 *Lukmais* (baskets for displaying things to sell), 1000 vendor's stalls, and 2000 consumers, the Muslim women coming from the outskirts of the Imphal town to earn daily bread united with a sacrificial spirit in the Nupi Lan (Women's Agitation), and they are honoured even today. But in case of Meitei-Pangal women, the situation is different; none are recognised until this year. A single Muslim woman named Sara Bibi is recognised after many years of her death as well as the incident of the Second Nupi Lal. According to the Sara Bibi one of the participant of the agitation, all the Muslim women who were vendors in the Khwairamband bazaar went for the agitation. According to her, the leaders of the agitation were Tungou, Sabi, Ibecha, Sajoubi and herself. Among these, Sajoubi and Sara were the leaders among the Muslims. Other Muslim vendors followed them. She also named some other Muslim women. They were Kusum, Kunjeri, Chaoba, Tombi, Tonjaobi, Sana and Khodi. Muslim vendors were not in numbers. But all of them went for the agitation. It may be because the agitation started from the Khwairamband Bazar. She further said that she also went to the ransacking of the Kasturi shop. So, she was one of who went to jail for it and spent one whole night and a day.

A noteworthy event in this context is the smashing of the rice storage of Kasturi after the women agitators heard the words from Kasturi's son saying that "the Meiteis and Muslims should be supplied with crude rice, the non-Manipuris and Tribals be supplied with quality rice". In such a dangerous situation, the few Pangal women vendors were involved according to the participant Sara Bibi. They didn't refrain themselves from such dangerous incidences. Even though they were not leaders, they took their role as a part of the incidences. Sara Bibi did not mention any injuries among the Pangal women. But she expressed her involvement in the agitation amongst the crowd. In response to this action, the Police arrested 6 women, including Sara Bibi, and detained them for one night.

2.1. Role of the Meitei Pangal community in shaping the Agrarian Economy

The Meitei Pangal of Manipur contributed for the growth of state economy since the 7th century C.E. They introduced the method of *Lou lingba or Lingthokpa* (rice transplantation).² Evidence relating to the transplantation of paddy is found in *Pangal Thorakpa*, that when the Muslims were going to transplant the paddy by pulling out the young plants for new plantation, the Meiteis wrongly thought that the Muslims were trying to escape. Because of this misunderstanding, the King of Manipur seized all of them and deported them to the Kabow border.³ Additionally, ploughs pulled by bullocks were also introduced by the Pangals.

The task of supplying milk and dairy products to the royal household was assigned to the *Shangomsumbamayum* clan of the Meitei Pangal community. Similarly, the task of supplying royal vegetables was allocated to the *Hawaiingkhohmayum* clans of the Pangal community. According to the *Nongshamei Puya*, the Muslim people were talented in gardening work.⁴ Most of them had a garden around their homes. The then kings acknowledged their expertise in gardening and even gave them their own *Sagei* names, such as *Hawai-Ingkhoh-Mayum*. Numerous Pangals were appointed by the kings to manage the cultivation of Royal Land. Muslims established a garden named *Ningthem Ingkhoh* at Khomidok Heinou Khongnembi through a royal edict for the purpose of cultivating various fruits and vegetables.⁵

The *Keikhong Ingkhoh* clan engaged in cultivation of mustard seeds, garlic, onions, and other vegetables, subsequently which supplied them to the King.⁶ In *Apong Ingkhoh*, a Pangal individual named Najra produced Chinese *Muga* (silk), which became the favourite product of the then King Paikhomba (1666-97) AD.⁷ The Phundreimayum clan is known for its *phundrei* (wooden lathe) producing skills, whereas the Chesam clan is known for its paper-making skills, among other things. Consequently, the Pangals played a vital role in the developmental endeavours of the Kingdom.

During the reign of King Khagemba, only after Muslim immigration that there was significant progress in the sphere of industry and technology, including carpentry, pottery, paper making, weaving, and others. *Puyas* (Meitei Chronicle), including Nongchup haram and Khagemba Lanpha, describe *Panganyong* (Loom) as sophisticated rather than elementary, and explore the complex implications of high-level weaving.⁸ Furthermore, the king assigned clan names depending on the division of labor and occupation with which they were acquainted. According to Choudhury Riyazuddin, the Phisabam clan was named after their ability to weave cloth using a waist loom.⁹

Tan (bread), a type of baked bread consumed by all communities today, was brought to Manipur by Muslims.¹⁰ The practice of tobacco consumption via smoking is thought to have been introduced into Manipuri society in the year 1610, coincides with the introduction of the first hookahs from the Mughal Empire, and was hence referred to as *Mangal phoo / Hidakphu*. The first Hookah was reportedly made by indigenous people in 1615.¹¹

During the period of King Khagemba's rule, one sepoy named Nuriya Shaikh, presented the king with an exquisite mud-pot which was named *sanapun*. His clan had been named '*Phusam*' in honour of the potter's

skill.¹² During the reign of King Khagemba, the war captives, later called Meitei-Pangal brought the wheel-turning pottery.

During the reign of King Khagemba, various market centres including Sana Keithel, Kha Keithel, Moirang Keithel, Khuman Keithel, Phaibung Keithel, Chairen Keithel, Namphao Keithel, Konglang Keithel and Andro Keithel were established.¹³ The enhancement of agricultural technologies was particularly through the introduction of the paddy transplantation, which is known as *Lou lingba* or *Lingthokpa* in Manipuri, by the Muslim immigrants, enabling an increase in agricultural production in Manipur. In the transplantation method, the farmer first had to grow the paddy in a nursery and then transplant it to the agricultural field.¹⁴ This method of cultivation was more productive than *Punghul* and *Pamphal* in terms of higher yield production. The introduction of the paddy transplanting and plough drawn by the bullock and buffalo may be regarded as one of the most significant contributions of the Meitei Pangal towards the economic development and growth of the kingdom of Manipur. Many of these Muslims were granted their own sagei, e.g. Hawaiiinkhol Mayum, by the then king of Manipur, acknowledging their expertise in gardening work. Following the king order, they established a garden called Ningthem Inkhol at Khumidok Heinou Khongnembi for the cultivation of fruits and vegetables.¹⁵ With the increase in agricultural production, the revenue system underwent a more formalized structure.

The steady development of technology in Manipur is affirmed by archaeological findings and historical literature. The technique such as spinning, weaving and dying had already been developed. *Panthoibi Khongul* mentioned about spinning and weaving of varieties of cloths.¹⁶ King Naothingkhong (663-763 C.E.) introduced innovated royal costumes such as *Leiruthak*, *Chareiningkham*, *Phirel Phurit* for the king and *Leiren Leichao*, *Kumsheng Phaneak* and *Kabrang Phaneak* for the queen. The realm of handicrafts witnessed significant development during the period of King Loiyumba (1074-1122 C.E.). The task of weaving involving as many as thirty-two different fabric of cloths was assigned to a cohort of thirty families. The process of dyeing, utilizing eight different hues derived from the floral pigments was assigned to eight families.¹⁷ The handloom industry had a significant development with the introduction of shuttle locally referred as *Pangandem*; probably the fly shuttle might have been introduced in the kingdom by the Muslim immigrants.¹⁸ Among the Muslim immigrants, many skilled weavers made great contribution to the development of handloom and handicrafts in Manipur. King Khagemba allocated *Phisabam Yumnak* (sub clan or lineage) to those Muslims who were skillful in the art of weaving. Additionally, the people of Manipur had been engaged with carpentry, which played an important role in the traditional economy framework of the kingdom. Khuyaoi Tompok (154-264 C.E.) introduced the drum which was significant for the used during wartime, dance, music and other social and religious events.¹⁹

Hijan Hirao refers to the craft of a boat construction. Carpentry works including boat making, canoes, *kangpots*, beds, stools, spinning wheel, shuttles, hookahs, various agricultural tool and the erection of bridges were conducted by skilled carpenters.²⁰ From the inception of their settlement, Muslims employed the *Phundrei* (a wooden lathe) for the meticulous refinement of wood. Consequently, the Phundrei clan was assigned to those Muslim who were manufacturing *hookak* stands and necks, atop of Canopies-paygimaton.²¹ A machine for pressing sugarcane called *Topo* was also introduced by the Muslim.²² Thus the immigrant Muslim played a big role to the enhancement of carpentry work.

There is proper documentation regarding the use of paper in Manipur before the advent of the Muslim. It is said that some merchants of China introduced the paper as merchandise or trading goods to Manipur. The Meitei community learnt the technology of the typology of the Chinese handmade paper traditionally.²³ During the presence of the Chinese in Manipur, they had taught the art of making paper to the Meitei community.²⁴ The Muslim migrants had the knowledge of paper making techniques, which they had learnt in Bengal before they entered into Manipur. The king of Manipur conferred Chesam clan to those Muslim who introduce the art of manufacturing paper.

In the field of craft, the craft works were greatly impacted with the arrival of the Muslims in Manipur. The Muslim rulers of the medieval period had introduced many new technologies in different fields, the Muslims who came to Manipur brought the knowledge of the technologies which they subsequently applied and adopted in the kingdom. During the reign of Mungyamba (1562-1597), three gun-maker Muslims came and were allowed to settle in Manipur.²⁵ Among the Muslim soldier, captured during king Khagemba, same soldiers possessed the firearm making skills who continued to engaged the production of firearms thereby augmenting the stock of firearms in the kingdom and fulfilling the military's demands.²⁶

3. Conclusion

The Meitei Pangal of Manipur, in spite of their restricted numerical strength, has left a legacy that is both profound and enduring. In their capacity as soldiers, they defended the kingdom with valor in countless battles, from the confrontation against Awa and Kabow of Myanmar to the decisive Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, where many laid down their lives alongside their Meitei brethren. As pioneers, they introduced transformative agricultural practices such as paddy transplantation and bullock-drawn ploughs, and fostering the development of diverse techniques like weaving, pottery, paper-making, carpentry, and firearm manufacturing. In their role as traders and agriculturist, they also contributed a pivotal role to the development of markets and the sustenance of the royal household. Furthermore, in the moments of civil

resistance, particularly during the *Nupi Lal*, Meitei Pangal women actively participated, demonstrating resilience and unity in the face of adversity.

Yet, despite their extensive contributions, the place of Meitei Pangals in Manipur's historical narrative has often remained unacknowledged or inadequately represented. Recognizing their contribution not only rectifies a historical oversight but also deepens our understanding of Manipur's history as one shaped through working collectively of diverse communities. The Meitei-Pangals were not passive participants but unsung patriots, warriors, innovators, and agriculturalists, whose sacrifices and skills sustained the kingdom for centuries. To honor them is to enrich the collective memory of Manipur, ensuring that their contributions are remembered as an inseparable part of the state's history and cultural heritage.

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