

An Important Aspect Of The Fishing Practice Carried Out By The Meiteis: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to narrate various techniques of fishing used by the Meiteis in different water bodies particularly in the valley of Manipur. Meitei people have been using different types of fishing implements which have a long history. A section of this paper is also devoted to highlight a brief history of fishing practice showing the development in different points of history. Role of kings in the development of fishing was very significant. They always encouraged fishing. Indigenously evolved tools have been used with modifications from time to time. Foreign cultures also influenced fishing related knowledge of the indigenous people of Manipur. Due to contact with foreign people Manipur experienced change in fishing technology. For instance, in the 16th Century, Meitei king received a trap known as *Tekhao Loo* used for catching large fish as he established friendly relation with Assam. There are many literatures which contain fishing practices in different historical periods. This study is also done by conducting interviews and group discussion with the fishers of different localities. New types of implement have been developed in course of time. Accounts of fishing techniques, and gears- construction, operation and their use are studied in this article. The fishing gears are operated using different methods. Women also play an important role in this activity and implements for fishing to be employed mainly by the women have also been developed. Encouragement of traditional fishing methods is needed as they are economical and eco-friendly.

Key words: Meiteis, Manipur, fishing, techniques, tools

Manipur is North eastern state of India and bounded on the east by Myanmar, on the west by Assam, on the north by Nagaland and on the south by Myanmar and Mizoram. The southern boundary of Manipur is very close to the Tropic of Cancer. It has two physiological divisions- valley region and the hills that surround it. There are three major ethnic groups in Manipur- the Meiteis who are living mainly in the valley, the Nagas and the Kukis who are the hill dwellers. Meitei people live particularly in the valley of Manipur. Fish is the second most important foods of the Meiteis after rice. There is an immense cultural significance of fish in our society. When a feast is arranged fish is usually a central food. Offering of fish to gods and goddesses for getting wealth and peace is so common. Giving importance to fish by the Meiteis to is evident from the worshipping of separate goddess for fish. For the Meitei people, fishing is an old practice. There are many fishing grounds in different water bodies. Sources of fish are ponds, streams, rivers, lakes, swampy and marshy areas etc. The fishers used different kinds of fishing methods and tools which had traditionally been developed and eventually got sophisticated in due course of time though there are some local differences. As fish constitute a main food item of the Meitei people, they obviously try to develop various methods of fishing.

To study fishing practice in ancient Manipur one has to rely on the old literatures. There are so many literary evidences of fishing in Manipur. *Panthoipi Khongkul*, is an old text which portrays fishing activities in early Manipur before Nongda Lairel Pakhangba who ruled Manipur from 33 to 154 A.D. Catching of fish by women using *Nupree- Il*¹ and *Long*² in a place known as Turel Langmeipung is found mentioned. It is also said that one day, Panthoibi, a girl of Mangang clan casted *Nupree- Il*. A fishing tool known as *Tunggol* which is used for keeping harvested fishes was also used by her.³ Another text which tells us about the fishing practice in olden days is *Moirang Shai- on Taret*. As described, after getting permission from the king of Moirang principality a feast which was related to an indigenous game played between the maidens led by Yaithingkonu, the daughter of a noble of Moirang and the married women led by a lady whose name was Nganbi was organised. For that, the women caught fishes operating their devices in the Loktak Lake. Some women fished with *Long* in the

shallow water and some other plying on boat operated Nupee- Il.⁴ Operation of Nupee-il standing on the boat is the unique feature of the valley women of Manipur and this technique is still being adopted by the women in the same lake.

Catching of fish by erecting fishing weirs and using traps was prevalent in early period. Early literatures reveal the construction of royal fishing weirs at the fishing grounds and appointment of fishery officers by the kings. One Nongban Kadem of Angom clan was the servant of the king Ura Konthouba (568-658 AD.). *Ningthourol Lambuba* tells us about the construction of fishing weirs and setting of traps by him.⁵ There were several groups of people living in different areas in ancient Manipur. Each group tried to control resourceful areas. In trying to exercise fishing rights over the streams and rivers conflicts and quarrels took place.⁶

Due to influence from the foreign culture fishing technology of Manipur got developed. Kabomba's reign (1524-1542 AD.) was very important as far as fishing technology is concerned because a new kind of fishing trap known as *Tekhao Loo* (*Tekhao*= Assam and *Loo*= Trap) began to be used in Manipur as a result of his friendly relation with Assam. During the time of this king a new route to Assam was opened.⁷ In the 17th Century, a group of Muslim prisoners of war were made settled in Manipur by king Khagemba following a war against a combined force of Muslim and Cacharis in 1606 A.D. After the joint force was defeated by the Manipuri soldiers many Muslims were taken as prisoners. They were settled in different parts of Manipur especially on the banks of rivers. There were many professionals including fishers among those captives. One Kaniya who was expert in fishing was given a girl and settled.⁸

Though there were many lakes in Manipur valley Waithou Lake, Loktak Lake and Ikop Lake were the principal fisheries in the 19th Century. In the Waithou Lake, a bund is raised each year to hold the required water. A toll in which tax was given to the king was there at this bund. The cavalry of the state were given the fishing in the Waithou Lake. They settled at the surrounding areas of this lake and distributed each other the work of fishing. Fish for their own consumption was retained and the rest was sold at the toll where those who bought it and retailed it in the market were always to be found. There was enough supply of fish in Manipur and fish was more abundant in the dry than in the rainy season. R. Brown asserted that in comparison with the fish found in Silhet and Kachar the quality of Manipuri fish was inferior. The varieties of fish were many, thirteen kinds inhabiting the rivers and twenty two inhabiting the lakes and jheels.⁹ At least twenty six varieties of fish of the Loktak Lake were reported by R.B. Pemberton, out of which eighteen were commonly found in the rivers of Bengal.¹⁰ According to the needs and skill different localities adopted different techniques in fishing. The fishers used weirs, fishing baskets, traps, spears and nets.¹¹

The fishing industry was mainly in the hands of the Lois. However it gave employment to other groups of people.¹¹ Fishing practice carried out by the particular community is also seen in other parts of India, where it is a caste based occupation. *Kathkari* and *Bhoi* are the tribes of Kolhapur district of Maharashtra who traditionally practise fishing which is their long established principal means of living.¹² In Assam, practice of fishing by specific caste is prevalent. The traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas of Nalbari district of Assam is fishing. For them fishing is an ancient practice and major livelihood.¹³

Fishing Techniques

Various techniques are adopted by the people in different localities of Manipur. Though the main implements are the same, some modifications are made to suit the local conditions. After all, changes in shape and size took place from time to time. Common methods of fishing are shown as bellow:

Il Chingba- This method is carried out using a net known as *Nupee- Il* and the most popular in the valley of Manipur. For constructing this implement, two bamboo frames are arranged in X shape by joining in the middle with the help of a can strip and four tips of them are fastened to the four corners of a rectangular net (Fig.1). At the time of the operation the whole system is supported by a bamboo pole. It is operated from the banks of the pond, river, lake, and from the boat (Fig.2). This type of fishing is generally performed by the women. Various kinds of fish can be caught with it.

Long Khonba- It is practised only by the womenfolk. An elliptical shaped basket made by weaving fine bamboo strips, known as *Long* is used (Fig.3). By holding by the frame the device is dipped into the shallow water, pulled towards the operator and then lifted. It is the fishing gear usually for catching small fishes and used in community fishing too.

Loo Thumba- This method is also widely practised in Different areas of Manipur. *Loo Thumba* means setting of trap (*Loo*= trap and *Thumba*= to set). Fishing traps of the Meiteis are made of bamboo. Important traps used by the Meiteis are *Taijep*, *Kabaw Loo*, *Tekhao Loo*, *Sahra Loo* etc. The first one is the rectangular shaped trap (Fig.4) and used to catch medium and large sized fishes. Medium sized *Taijep* is more common. The length and breadth of this gear are the same. The traps are inserted among the weeds vertically near the edges of pond, lake, canals and small rivers (Fig.5). They are also set in the paddy field by cutting the ridges. *Kabaw Loo* is more or less spindle in shape (Fig.6) and operated normally in the streams for catching different kinds of fishes ranging from small to medium sized fishes. The largest trap employed by the Meitei people is *Tekhao Loo* having dome shape (Fig.7). It is operated in the rivers for catching large fish. *Sahra Loo* is a conical large trap having two parts- the first part for allowing the fish to enter and the second part for collecting them. These traps are set in the small rivers and canals and catch mainly comprises of small and medium sized fishes.

Long- oop Tanba- It is performed by using male operated bell shaped fishing tool called *Long- oop*. The bottom of this fishing gear is very wide and it has a small opening at the top through which the caught fishes are removed. It is operated in the waist deep water. The operator slowly wades and plunges it into water (Fig.8). It is suitable for catching medium to large sized fishes.

Phoom Chingba- Floating mass of vegetation is called *Phoom* in local parlance and the meaning of *Chingba* is to pull. For carrying out this practice a large sickle with a long bamboo handle known as *Phoomlen Thanggol* is used. The floating masses of vegetation is cut into pieces and pulled out of the water one by one and put on the bank. The fish taking shelter within these are collected with hands. 1– 3 persons are required in this fishing practice.

Khut Humba- This method is the simplest form of fishing and carried out without any implement in different water bodies such as ponds, canals, rivers, flooded paddy fields, swampy and marshy areas. It is a method of fishing in which fishes are caught with bare hand.



Fig.1: Nupee Il



Fig.2: Operation of Nupee Il



Fig.3: Long



Fig.4: Taijeb



Fig.5: Setting of Taijeb



Fig.6: Kabaw Loo



Fig.7: Tekhao Loo



Fig.8: Operation of Long-oop

Conclusion

Fishing is an old profession in Manipur and Meitei people have been practising it. The tools and technology which were developed in early period got improved from time to time. The knowledge on the fishing practice inherited from their forefathers has been in use by improving them occasionally. Contact with foreigners helped in the improvement of indigenous technology. At present, traditional technology is being used side by side with the modern equipments in different water bodies. As the tools are economical, feasible and sustainable, their use should be encouraged. Use of these fishing gears promoting sustainable fishery is a successful one on the part of the Meitei people. We have to preserve, promote, protect and document these eco-friendly fishing methods though need to be standardized.

Notes and References

1. Nupee- I l- It is a rectangular fishing net generally used by women.
2. Long- An elliptical shaped fishing basket made by weaving bamboo strips.
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