



Engelei

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## Part 12

# Indigenous Meitei Sports



Meitei hockey players who came to see me at my Medical College in Agra in 1962, while visiting the Taj Mahal. (L-R) standing. 1st Late Waikhom Damodar, 3rd Late Ngairangbam Jugindro, 5th Achoubi, Last author (Final year). Seated from (L) 3rd Late Yellangbam Ibohal.

Looking at the top photograph takes me back to the days of my carefree student days, when nothing but study filled my mind. They were all my friends who were representing Manipur in an all India Hockey tournament in Delhi. They came to see me and the Taj Mahal in Agra. I was very proud of them, as a Manipuri.

I remember the immense pride they had and their desire to win the tournament for Manipur. All people in Manipur are now proud to be Indians. Everyone is touched by the patriotic song, rendered for the first time, by the late Lata Mangeshkar on 27 January 1963 at the Ramlila Ground in New Delhi, in the presence of Jawaharlal Nehru.

I was working at Irwin Hospital, nearby. The first verse of the song:

**Aye mere vatan ke logon, Jara ankh me bhar le pani,  
Jo shahid huye hai unki, jara yad karo Qurbani.**

In English: Oh my fellow country folks, shed some tears from your eyes; remember the sacrifice of those martyrs.

The song was written by the poet Kavi Pradeep from Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh and was composed by C Ramchandra, the famous Hindi film music director. It was to commemorate dead Indian soldiers (1,383) during the Chinese invasion of India in 1962. The first two lines of the song are enough to tug at your heartstrings:



Lata Mangeshkar with J Nehru at the RamLila ground, New Delhi. 27 Jan 1963.

Manipuris are also known for their loyalty to their mother 'country' of Manipur - *Ima leibak manipur*. Competitiveness in sports had also instigated Meiteis in their capacity for bone-marrow recklessness rather than remaining shapeless, spineless creatures hiding under their family like a slug beneath a stone.

The love of their homeland is a virtue which is embodied in this classic patriotic song that I would like to invoke, as the forerunner of the indigenous games of Manipur that is the theme of this chapter.

I heard the song only once at a function at Tamphasana Girls' High School when Pandit Nehru came to Imphal in 1953. Haobam Ibechaobi Devi, who grew up with me in my neighbourhood, sang it in her lilting and euphonous voice, that matched her captivating beauty (cf. Book

*The Origin of Meiteis, 2009, p130 by the Author).*

**Phajeida Ima meitei Leima,  
maigei salai Khudingda nacha chanbi oibnana meerak tilhoudrabi  
imani;  
Ashangba mani chingna thalliba, lupagi tara malaba turelna koina  
cheelibasibu karamba leipakta leirigaba?**

Translated in English: What a beauty you are, Meitei Princess! Because of your love and concern for your children you sacrificed your social life everywhere. You are bulging at the seams with green gem-like hills and full with overflowing silver wire-like rivers. Could there be another country like you?

Our national pride was the source of our national identity. It correlated with great ethnic, civic pride and the core of our national games. National pride had strong positive relationship between feeling good about ourselves and the desire to defend our Manipur. It led to a spontaneous effort to excel in sports.

This led to the innovation of many indigenous games and sport, where they developed an aspiring sentiment that they ought not to endeavour to destiny but to make it subservient.

Who could have imagined such a tiny Manipur, unknown to anybody in the world, could hold an 'Olympic games', the like of which are only seen in the 'World Olympics'. It was a physical expression of unlimited Meitei ingenuity and talent in sports. The first Manipur Olympic Games was held in 1947, soon after Independence. The venue was at Mapal Kangjeibung. It was possible only because Meiteis have inherited a trait for sports from ancient times.

Before I get my feet wet I want to take the pleasure of refreshing the reader about the Taj Mahal in Agra, the Monument of Love. The digression will also help the reader to have a well-earned break.



Four very close friends at the Tajmahal in Agra 1955. (L-R): Y Ibotombi, N Brajakishore, Author, Kh Dhiren.



Author with son Neil, daughter Anita and wife Margaret revisiting Agra in 1991.

As a little boy I remember the soothing Bengali song, *Premar somadhi teere... Tajmahal, Tajmahal...* (SD Burman) that I heard in 1941/42, played on a LP vinyl record in a wind-up gramophone, His Master's Voice

We know the Taj Mahal is located in the old city of Agra. The city of Agra was the capital of Mughal Emperors, Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, beginning from 1526 to 1585. The Taj Mahal is the pride and passion of Shah Jahan's love for his wife Mumtaz Mahal (Persian: Jewel of the Palace) wrought in living white marble. Shah Jahan (Persian name, born as Muhammad Salim in Lahore – of Anarkali connection'.

Mumtaz's real name was Anjuman Banu Begum. She was born in Agra

to an affluent Persian family. Shah Jahan conferred the title of Mumtaz Mahal to her when she got married to him at her age of 18. It was a love marriage. Mumtaz Mahal died at the age of 33 during the birth of her daughter named Gauhara Begum, while she was staying in Deccan (present Madhya Pradesh) with her husband who went to a fighting campaign there. Shah Jahan used to take her everywhere he went.



Real sepulchres of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz that are kept in the crypts below.

Shah Jahan had one wife before and another after Mumtaz. Each had a son. But he paid little attention to them. He decorated Mumtaz's residence with gold, precious jewels and fountains with rose water. She was kept in exorbitant luxury. It is said that Shah Jahan loved her so much that, 'she had a child every year of their marriage'. She bore 14 children, seven of whom survived to adulthood. Aurangzeb was the third son.

After the death of Mumtaz, Shah Jahan's hair turned white overnight. When his vision diminished due to old age, he used to watch the monument as a reflection in a convex mirror about the size of a thumb nail, fixed on the wall of his quarters in Agra Fort, where he was confined by his son Aurangzeb in June 1648. It faced the Taj. The mirror was still there when I was in Agra.

The Agra Fort was built on the same banks of River Jamuna and at 2.5km from the Taj Mahal. Among other luxuries, Shah Jahan built a unique bathroom for Mumtaz to enjoy a long bath. The bathroom ceiling had small mirrors fixed with beautiful pattern, while the walls were made to produce different musical notes when tapped by the

hand. There were eunuchs who would play *ghazal* music from the *ghazal khana* (ghazal room) outside, while she was taking a luxurious bath.

Now back to Imphal. Meiteis are good in sports. Sport is an athletic activity, often of a competitive nature like a javelin thrower. It can also be a game. But a game like football, is not necessarily a sport that involves athletic activity. The differences are subtle and often overlap.

Sports had been played for over two thousand years worldwide. Harpastun, a game like Rugby, was played in Rome. Tzu Chu, like football, was played in China. Polo was played in Manipur and Persia.

Meiteis had a variety of indigenous games, including the serious sports of Meitei martial arts. They are also very keen on modern sports, and presently some of them are quite outstanding in certain sports and games. A few of them have represented India in the Commonwealth Games and World Olympics. A handful has won medals in World Olympic Games and Commonwealth Games.

I am not good in games and sports. But I was part of Imphal sporting club.



Imphal Sporting Club. Author standing (R) in dark coat, 1948.

Sports give excitement to players and spectators alike. Excitement creates pleasure. Scientists say, in anticipation or in actual winning of the game our brain secretes hormone Dopamine, dubbed the 'Happy

hormone', which is the transmitter chemical at the junctions of nerves endings that are related to the sense of excitement. Excitement generates pleasure.

Talking of science. I have wondered if Meitei sporting talents were inherited! I believe they are. Studies show that athleticism can be genetically inherited from a parent or parents. It is agreed among the scientific and sporting communities that inherited genes play a large part in sportsmanship. Already, as of 2009, more than 200 genetic variants have been isolated.

In Manipur, my educated guess is that Meiteis had the benefit of inherited genes, transmuted by their environment. Meiteis had to be competitive and fit to fight or fighting fit against the neighbouring tribes and beyond. Various games and sports including martial arts kept them on form.

So, Meiteis invented and played a lot of games and sports, basically for enjoyment and fun during the peace time and for physical activities needed in a warfare.

The sagol kangjei or polo is such a sport played during the peace time, while it served as a cavalry, throwing *arambai* darts during a war. They were like Genghis Khan's Mongol soldiers who could shoot arrows from small bows, at targets in front and to the rear while galloping.

This sporting habit also stemmed from Meitei social structure that was socialistic and egalitarian. It recognised no differences in wealth, power, prestige and status for playing sagol kangjei or for that matter, any form of sport.

Among the indigenous Meitei sports, we begin with the annual '*Hiyang Tannaba*' (Boat Race) that was one of the many sports and games that Meiteis indulged with buoyancy and enthusiasm.

Meitei folklore indicates that the boating competition began during the reign of *Meidingu Irengba* in 984 CE. Anybody and everybody could take part in this sport if he was proficient in it.

Historically, the annual boat race used to take place in the month of September (Langban in Manipuri calendar), in the Kangla moat that surrounded the Kangla on three sides and it lasted five days. It was the most important festival in Manipur and was celebrated with feverish excitement in the presence of the reigning king.



Hiyang Tannaba

Each boat race was immediately followed by hockey matches (*Kangjei sanaba*) that took place at the *Mannung kangjeibung* (Inner Polo Ground in the Palace Complex). No prizes were given for the winners of the boat race. It was only for the honour.

During my boyhood days, it was quite a delightful day to go and watch the boat race known as *Heikru Hidongba* in the moat (Thangapat) of Bijoy Govinda, located by the main Sagolband Road to Terra Keithel. It was not just the boat race, but an annual festivity that drew so many spectators. The race itself was quite short, but the razzmatazz was plentiful.

This boat race was introduced in 1779 when the idol of Shree Bijoy Govinda was brought from the Royal Palace Temple, to be installed at the new temple that was built with donations from a man called

*Nongpok Leirikkhomba* at Sagolband. As a result, the area became known as Bijoy Govinda Leikai. It was then decided to have a boat race every year on the 11th day of *Langban*.

The race was called *Heikru Hidongba*, the literal translation being the 'Boat ride of the gooseberry (*Heikru*)'. I don't exactly know the significance of gooseberry. On the day of the race, 180 gooseberries were threaded as a garland. Another garland was made of rice grains, each of which was husked by fingers. These were offered to Lord Krishna or Shri Govinda before the start of the race.

One or the other of the two wreaths was placed on the deck of a boat. There were two boats for the race. The decision was left to pundits to decide on which boat to place which garland and at a particular auspicious time. After performing certain rituals, the rowers and the cox, who were dressed in traditional costumes and special stylish *koyets* (turbans) would begin the race, starting from the eastern end of the moat.



Mukna sanaba (a form of wrestling).

Meiteis had many indigenous sports and games apart from Sagol Kangjei and boat racing. They were both outdoors and indoors. The outdoor games among others, were *Yubi lakpi* (Rugby), *khong kangjei* (hockey), Sagol kangjei (Polo), Mukna *Kangjei* (wrestling-hockey), Mukna *sanaba* (wrestling), *Thang-Ta* (martial arts of swords and spears) and *arambai hunba* (throwing of darts) while mounting a horse

in battles. *Hiyang Tannaba* as mentioned above, was the most important of all the sports. Mukna Kangjei was usually played at the end of Lai Harauba festival, mostly in the villages.



Mukna kangjei

The most famous indigenous sport is Sagol Kangjei (Hockey on horseback). It is known as Polo all over the world. Manipur is reputed to have introduced to the world, the modern polo game as it is played today.



Barefooted ancient Manipuri polo players.

The contemporary game of polo was born in Manipur over 2,000 years ago, as recorded in the Cheitharol Kumbaba – ‘Royal Chronicle’ (33-1897 CE) of Manipur. It is now revived by the Manipur Polo and Horse-Riding Association and is flourishing.

There have been annual international polo tournaments in Imphal in November each year since 2012. My wife, son and I are enthusiasts

and we have been visiting Imphal for the past few years to watch the Matches.

After I became a doctor working in Imphal, Moirangthem Gojendra introduced me to playing the game. And I did play a few times.



Author's wife Margaret attending the 9<sup>th</sup> Polo International 2016, Imphal.

Manipur has a distinct outdoor sport for women. It is called Woolaobi. Meitei mythology has it that it was played by "Helloi Taret - seven spirit sisters. It is a bit like the Indian Kabaddi. They play among two teams. There are no dividing lines.

A girl from one team will raid the opposite team saying "woo" and without stopping try to touch someone. Whoever is touched is out of the game. If she breaks her "woo" she will be caught and out. The team that scores most by touching, is the winner. The losing team had to entertain them next day with food or some refreshments.

Meiteis are not short of indoor games. Among them, *Kang sanaba* is the most popular. The girls and boys often play together. It used to be played in the afternoon of *Sajibu Cheiraoba*, Meitei New Year's Day. On that day, before WWII, our *awanag shangoi* was booked every year for *Kang sanaba*. My father as an engineer, kept its clay floor perfectly level and smooth.

Cheitharol Kumbaba recorded that the game was introduced by Meitei king Loitongba (1122-1150 CE) as he accidentally played with the seed of the creeper plant in his palace garden. Legend had it that, one afternoon of a Manipuri New year, Chahi-Houba or Cheiraoba in Manipuri, Ningthou Loitongba was taking a leisurely stroll in his royal garden when he saw two Kangkhils (seeds) lying in a corner.

King Loitongba picked one up and seeing how smooth the seed was, he threw it underhand to see its flight. He then, picked a seed and threw it, aiming to hit the other Kangkhil. He repeated the recreation as he found it exciting. Thereafter, he introduced it as a competitive game to his royal household members and others. It became an annual event of Cheiraoba on the 14th of April every year. Loitongba deserves a frisson of our admiration

"Kang' comes from Kangkhil, seed of a creeper plant called Kangli. The creeping plant belongs to the pea family and species of *Entada phaseoloides* (Box beans) with a wide smooth seed. It grows high up on the trees as it creeps up. It was known as Kangli or kangul in Manipuri.



Kang Sanaba (game of Kang).

The kang is nearly circular and very smooth, slim and flat. It is stood upon the ground upright with its broadside facing towards the party, by whom it is to be pitched at with an ivory disc. At another time, it is placed edgewise, when it is to be struck by the disk propelled on its flat

side along the surface of the ground. It requires a great force and precision, using the middle finger of the right hand flipping off the forefinger of the left. The side that scores the most hits is the winner.

This game of Kang sanaba as I understand, has had some modifications over the years since its introduction, notably during the reign of Raja Chandrakirti (1850-1886 CE). One of the changes was the use of a circular object made of wood for the hoi polloi, and of ivory for the royalty instead of kangkhil.

The game was further systematised with game rules and formation of *Kangkhut* or team, consisting of seven players on each side. Much later, the circular kang was replaced by an oval shaped kang that was made of buffalo horn or tortoise shell.

Meiteis also play modern sports, such as football, hockey, volleyball, badminton and others with finesse. An outstanding performance as I remember, was winning the championship trophy of the volleyball by the Imphal Sporting Club based at Uripok, in the Assam Olympic Games that was held in Jorhat in 1941. My eldest brother Gokulchandra was a player in the team.

Manipuris now excel in many fields of sports in India. President of India, Ram Nath Kovind calls Manipur, 'Powerhouse of sports. It goes to the credit of Meitei sportsmanship that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has established the Manipur Sports University in Manipur, the first of its kind in India that will offer Bachelor and master's degrees in physical education and Sports.

Sports can teach a person to be strong in body and mind.

