

Tracing the Wari Leeba Tradition: An Investigation into the Practice of Storytelling among the Muslims of Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur is a land inhabited by different ethnic, social and religious groups. The community of Muslims living in the Indian State of Manipur is called as the Meitei Pangal or Pangal. The present paper explores on the tradition of Wari Leeba or the art of storytelling among the Meitei Pangal community of Manipur. Wari leebea is a narrative storytelling art and it is performed as an oral recitation with dramatic gestures and physical enactments on a performative space. It is believed that the community of Meitei Pangal started practicing the tradition of Wari Leeba during the rule of King Churachand Maharaj in the late nineteenth century. They had developed and promoted their own form of storytelling art which is highly influenced and adapted from the tradition of Wari Leebea of the Meiteis. On the one hand, the Meiteis are the dwellers of valley in Manipur who follow Hinduism and Sanamahism. They perform Wari Leebea and Lairik Thiba Haiba during various social functions like birth rituals, death rituals, wedding ceremonies and other festivities whereas the Meitei Pangals perform Wari Leebea right after the harvest; mostly at nights. Thus, the study also seeks attention to the influence and impact of Meitei's Wari Leebea tradition to the evolution and growth of the storytelling art practiced in the life of Meitei Pangal in Manipur.

Keywords: Hinduism; Lairik Thiba Haiba; Meitei Pangal; Meitei; Wari Leebea.

Introduction

The Muslims living in Manipur are ethnically called as the Meitei Pangal. Generally, they are known as the Pangal. The community of Meitei Pangal

has numbers of performance traditions which include dancing, singing and storytelling art. *Khunung Esei* or *Khullang Esei*, *Ghazal*, *Qawwali*, *Marifat* and *Naat* come under musical tradition whereas *Mari Chatpi*, *Thabal Chongba* and *Marabak Jagoi* are the dancing tradition in the lives of Meitei Pangal in Manipur. The art of storytelling called as *Wari Leeba* which is influenced by Meitei's *Wari Leeba* tradition is now not performed in the present-day society.

The Muslims of Manipur have more than 400 years' old long history. It is getting reflected and manifested in many political, social, economic and cultural dimensions. The number of traditional performing arts of the Meitei Pangal is less compared to the Meitei but they exhibit their culture and social values much. The Meitei Pangal of Manipur came during the reign of king Khagemba around 1606 AD (Irene 15). It is said that they came to Manipur as prisoners of war from Sylhet through the agency of the then King of Cachar. There were around 1000 men as captives. The then king, Khagemba, was a generous king who granted them the permission to stay in Manipur. They were provided their partners (Meitei women as wives) to grow and settle in Manipur since then. Moreover, as their wives are the Meiteis, they adapted and assimilated to the Meitei culture easily. This resulted them to practise their social and cultural norms under the influence of the cultures of the Meitei. Thus, many traditional singing, dancing and storytelling art practices of the Meitei Pangal are similar to the Meitei in some extent. Of course, there are dissimilarities in terms of aesthetics, performative styles and narratives because each of the communities in Manipur are diverse in their socio-cultural and religious systems. On the one hand, the Meiteis are the followers of Hinduism and *Sanamahism* (An ancient form religion followed by the Meitei) whereas the Meitei Pangals follow Islam.

Literature Review

The researchers examined review of literatures regarding the present topic of *Wari Leeba* tradition and its associated cultural practices and history while preparing the paper. In order to understand thoroughly about the performing arts of Manipur, the researchers analyse Nongthombam Premchand's book *Rituals & Performances: Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur*. Here, in this book, the author travelled the history of Pre-Hindu ritual performance of Lai Haraoba to the advent and practice of Hindu theatres like *Nata Sankirtana*, *Ras lila*, *Gostha lila*, *Goura leela* and *Wari Leeba*. In the book, *Folk Culture of Manipur* by Dr. M Kirti Singh, many folkloristic practices including folk songs, folk tales and multiple aspects of ritual and

cultural practices of Manipuri people are discussed. The author mentions briefly about the performance of folk songs of the Muslims in Manipur. There are few writings on the performance traditions of Muslims of Manipur as compared to the Meitei. An important book which deals with the performing arts of Manipur is *Manipur Amasung Meitei Pangal: Houkhraba Amasung Houjiki* by SM Sheikh. In this book, the author has a chapter entitled as *Meitei Pangal Samajda Performing Arts Ki Mapham* which is solely devoted to various kinds of performing arts like folk songs and dance, devotional songs of Islam and the tradition of storytelling. Here, the author gives a short and descriptive account on the performing arts of the Muslims of Manipur but lacked detailed study. In the book, *Pangalgi Khunung Esei Amasung Hapchillakpa*, the authors Mohd. Abdur Rahman and Kayamuddin Pukhrimayum explore on the different kinds of folk singing tradition in the life of Manipuri Muslim. Here, we can also trace some of the significant narratives of folk songs which also include some singing aspects of *Wari Leeba*.

In addition to the above-mentioned books, the researchers also refer to published articles, presented seminar papers and conducted interviews. Some of them are *Wari Leeba: The Declining Storytelling Tradition of the Meitei's of Manipur and Tripura* by Sukla Singha, *Manipuri Ramkatha through Wari Leeba: A Dialogue between Text and Oral Renditions* by Ahanthem Homen Singh, *Hindu Religious Literature and Cultural Transformation in Manipur* by Dr. Ch. Sarjubala Devi, *Manipuri Muslim (Meitei Pangal) Gi Khunaida Wari Leeba Gi Chatnabi* by M.M Ahmed. One of the researchers had conducted interview S.M. Sheikh, who is an independent scholar and writer of Manipuri Muslim's culture.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the tradition of *Wari Leeba* practised by the Muslims of Manipur.
2. Analysis on the influence, impact and permeability of the art of storytelling between the communities of the Meitei and the Meitei Pangal.
3. Reconstruction of the dying art form of *Wari Leeba* in the life of Manipuri Muslim to preserve their identity and conserve as a cultural asset.

Research Methodology

To conduct the research, the researchers mostly rely on the historical analysis and use the methodology of qualitative research such as conducting interviews with the experts of the relevant subject or topic, detailed analysis of secondary data collection like reviewing the articles and books related to the topic. While preparing, the researchers also get knowledge from recorded videos of the performance and observation of the actual performance.

The Tradition of *Wari Leeba* of the Meitei Pangal in Manipur

The art of storytelling has been embedded in the Manipuri society since time immemorial. Among the repositories of oral lore, the practice of storytelling is evident in most of the social groups living in both the hills and the valley of Manipur. In the households of the Meitei, the elders of the house, usually the grandparents would sit together with their grandchildren around the *Phunga* (a traditional kitchen furnace in Manipur) and tell stories from the folktales at night which is called as *Phunga Wari* (folktales associated with the hearth) (Singh 2).

Likewise, in the society of the Meitei Pangal, the tradition of storytelling by elders to their children has been present since their existence. The art of storytelling called as *Wari Leeba* of the Muslims of Manipur has been adapted from the *Wari Leeba* tradition of the Meitei community during the reign of the king Churachand Maharaj (1891-1941). (Sheikh). In this art form, there are two performers, one reciting the narrative in Urdu and the other one translates the meaning into *Meiteilon* (a language mostly spoken by the Meitei and the Meitei Pangal). The narrator stands on the right whereas the translator stands on the left side on a performative space. The setup of that performative space is simple with minimum use of stage crafts like a raised platform usually a bed, mattress and a pillow. Both the performers adorn traditional Meitei Pangal's dress of a man like white kurta, pyjama and a turban. There is no usage of musical instruments in this art form. The performance is conducted by a high yielding farmer of that particular harvesting season on behalf of a good harvest by inviting all the people at his residence or at any suitable site preferably at a courtyard for the performance. Normally, the performance lasts for two to three days. The basic aesthetic appeal of this art form is to give entertainment and leisure to the people after their day's hard work.

The performance begins with one of the performers usually by the narra-

tor who recites in Urdu with a warm welcome and greets everyone with a great zest. He narrates the selected piece of story from the many stories with great energy, actions, physical enactments etc., to keep the performance alive. So does the translator keep the same spirit as the narrator. There are various narratives which include *Jung Nama* (war story) stories like *Karbalagi Lan* and *Rustom Amasung Shorab*, love stories from Islamic literatures like *Laila-Majnu*, *Yousuf-Zulekha*, *Misar-Saheban*, *Hatim-Tai* etc., stories from the Arabian Nights like *Alif-Laila*, story of *Ali Baba* and many local fable stories which gives moral lesson like *Houdong Amasung Pebet Ki Wari*, *Lamhuina Yengondagi Yen Phaba Gi Wari* etc. (Ahmed 2). Other than these stories, the performers tell stories at the court of the king about the king's grandeur, power and fame in a dramatic representation.

It is believed that this storytelling art which carries the essence of entertainment was lasted till 1960's in their society. The fundamental reason behind the degradation of this traditional art is due to the replacement of these traditional arts by the coming up of newer forms of entertainment like drama, cinema and other modern forms of entertainment prevalent in the present-day society (Ahmed 1). Most of the traditional performing arts including dance, music and storytelling of the Meitei Pangal are performed only during the marriage ceremonies. Now, in the present time, there is also a changing pattern of marriage from two day's celebration to only one-day celebration. These societal changes resulted in the deterioration of these traditional performing arts.

Even if the art of storytelling is not seen in most of the Muslim dominated areas in Manipur, the role and contribution done by some of the legendary performers help us to reconstruct this rare form of art. The most famous performers of *Wari Leeba* in their society were, Raja Ali (Expert in Urdu) from Kshetrigao Awang Leikai and Tonjao (Meiteilon Expert) who were the experts who mastered in this art form of narrating stories mostly based on the theme of war (Ahmed 3).

Influence of the Meitei's *Wari Leeba* Tradition into the Art of Storytelling Practised among the Muslims of Manipur.

The art of storytelling and its significance is manifested in the life of the Meitei in different social, cultural and religious activities. From the birth of a child to death, the art of *Wari Leeba* holds a prestigious and inseparable activity as a part of ritual performances. It is performed in the birth rituals, death rituals, marriage ceremonies, rites of passage and other devotional festivities of Manipur (Devi 15). In the contemporary times, *Wari*

Leeba is categorized into two according to its binary division of religious faith within the same Meitei community. On the one hand, there is storytelling associated to Hinduism which focus on different Hindu literatures often called as *Hindu Wari Leeba* and on the other hand, there is storytelling ascribed to the religion of *Sanamahism* called as *Meitei Wari Leeba* which has the narratives based on Meitei lore like the story of creation of cosmology, mythological stories and historical legends etc. (Mayanglam-bam and Rajketan 92).

Wari Leeba performance was introduced by the Meitei kings who follow Hinduism to preach and propagate Hindu belief system through storytelling and other arts in that time. It is believed that the art of storytelling was introduced in the court of king Pamheiba or Garibiniwaz (1709-1748) (Singha 37). In order to establish and flourish Hinduism particularly the *Vaishnava* faith, the then king ordered to translate the Hindu texts like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and then started performing it as a narrative art at the king's court which ultimately attract the people of Manipur who were once following their own religious faith of *Sanamahism*.

Wari Leeba and *Lairik Thiba Haiba* are the two important traditional forms of storytelling among the Meiteis. The performance of *Wari leeba* is a narrative storytelling art and it is performed as an oral recitation with many dramatic gestures and physical enactments on a sacred performative space. It is performed by a single performer and the narrative of this art form is selected from different genres of Hindu literatures. The most important and popular narratives are taken from the Hindu Epics like the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* (Singh 158). The *Wariroi* (the artiste of *Wari Leeba*) is usually a male performer but nowadays women also started performing in many occasions and platforms. The performance of *Lairik Thiba Haiba* is another narrative art performed by two performers namely the *Lairik Thiba* artiste and the *Lairik Haiba* artiste. Here, the *Lairik Thiba* performer would recite *Sanskrit Shlokas* that are based on Hindu texts and scriptures and the *Lairik Haiba* performer would translate those *Sanskrit Shlokas* into *Meiteilon* for the audience.

As stated above, *Wari Leeba* of the Muslims of Manipur was flourished during the reign of king Churachand Maharaj in the 19th century, it is quite apparent that the growth of this art in the life of the Meitei Pangal had incorporated the form, structure and technique of the Meitei whose storytelling tradition had established much earlier. As we can see that there is a similarity between the system of *Lairik Thiba Haiba* and the art of *Wari Leeba* of the Meitei Pangal in terms of the structure and technique yet dif-

ferent narratives. The *Lairik Thiba* artiste of Meitei's *Wari Leeba* is corresponding to the performer who narrates in Urdu of Meitei Pangal's *Wari Leeba* and the *Lairik Haiba* artiste of Meitei's *Wari Leeba* would correspond to the performer who translates Urdu into *Meiteilon* in the Meitei Pangal's *Wari Leeba* tradition. Hence, it is proved that there is an influence of *Wari Leeba* tradition of the Meitei into the practice of *Wari Leeba* tradition of the Meitei Pangal in Manipur. There have been always similarities between the communities of the Meitei and the Meitei Pangals in many socio-cultural norms and ways of living. After all, the Meitei Pangals are the descendants of Meitei women. Besides the similarities, each of the communities have uniqueness in their own cultural expressions; for instance, the aesthetic difference of *Wari Leeba* tradition between the two communities which exemplifies different ethnicity and indigeneity that will retain their identity in the larger spectrum of the cultural heritage of Manipur.

Analysis and Findings

The art of storytelling found in the valley of Manipur especially, among the Meitei and the Meitei Pangal are significant part of Manipur's cultural heritage. These traditional performances of dance, music and storytelling and other arts exhibit utmost importance of social and cultural values that exude their respective identity and indigeneity. Through this paper, the researchers are also able to conceptualize the permeability of art transcending boundaries in terms of ethnicity and religion. For instance, the Meitei's tradition of *Lairik Thiba Haiba* which is devoted to Hinduism is adapted and imported to the traditional practice of storytelling in the life of the Meitei Pangal who follow Islam. This can be seen as a 'secular' aspect of art in the vast and diverse country like India.

The art of *Wari Leeba* practised by the Muslims of Manipur is dying and almost getting extinct. Many other forms like folk singing and dancing traditions of the Meitei Pangal in Manipur are vanishing and on the verge of extinction. Moreover, the numbers of performance traditions among the Muslims of Manipur are quite less while compared to the other communities of Manipur. Thus, we need to reconstruct and restore their cultural history so as to preserve and revive these traditional performances of singing, dancing, storytelling and other arts. Proper documentation and focusing more on academic studies and research of these dying art forms must be taken into consideration in this generation so as to conserve these dying forms of arts for the future generation.

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