

## **Arambai : A War Weapon of Manipur**

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### **Abstract**

Though Manipur was a tiny kingdom with a small population, its history had begun since the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D. Manipur was an independent country for about 2000 years except for a brief spell of subjugation by Burma during the 7 year Devastation. This long period of independence had been made possible only by virtue of the Manipuris' martial skills and prowess in war and battle. Really speaking, the history of Manipur's was a history of warfare. In the early days, it was not an easy task to defend Manipur's independence and self reliance against the far bigger and more populous neighboring countries. It was the sole responsibility of the erstwhile kings and nobles to save the independence of Manipur from the clutches of Takhel (Tripura) and the sworn enemy, Awa (Burma). To be brief, almost all the people of Manipur were warriors adept and dexterous in war and battle.

The Arambai was one of the most important weapons of Manipur. It was a weapon that a horseman could hurl in any direction forwards, backwards and sideways, riding a horse. When was the time of attack it used to cause utmost casualty to the enemy. And while retreat, it was thrown backwards to keep the enemy at bay and for self defense. As the tip of the arambai dart was poisoned, a slight injury or scratch was lethal enough for the enemy.

**Key Words :** Manipur, Arambai, weapon etc.

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## **Arambai : A War Weapon of Manipur**

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### **Introduction:**

Though Manipur was a tiny kingdom with a small population, its history had begun since the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D. From the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33 A.D.) to the last war of Manipur's independence, 1891 between the British and Manipur, Manipur was an independent country for about 2000 years except for a brief spell of subjugation by Burma during the 7 year Devastation. This long period of independence had been made possible only by virtue of the Manipuris' martial skills and prowess in war and battle. Really speaking, the history of Manipur's was a history of warfare. In the early days, it was not an easy task to defend Manipur's independence and self reliance against the far bigger and more populous neighboring countries. It was the sole responsibility of the erstwhile kings and nobles to save the independence of Manipur from the clutches of Takhel (Tripura) and the sworn enemy, Awa (Burma). To be brief, almost all the people of Manipur were warriors adept and dexterous in war and battle.

For an independent country to be able to withstand the enemy attack, a strong, well-equipped armed force is indispensable. Even today, many countries, the world over, are trying to increase and improve their armed forces and military arsenal for self defense. Therefore, when Manipur was an independent self reliant kingdom, its rulers tried to the utmost to increase and enhance its armed force and military equipment.

### **Objectives of the study:**

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To study the background and origin of the war weapon of Manipur.
2. To study about the historical background of the weapon Arambai.
3. To focus the role played by the weapon Arambai to the battles of Manipur.
4. To study the impact of Armabai in the history of Manipur.

### **Methodology of the study:**

In this research paper a large number of data are available in the form of written records like books, magazines, journals, official records and newspaper etc. For the collection of these data, it is needed to explore from the various records. In this study the method will be base on historical and empirical. The tools and data required for the collection of the work will be based

with the help of primary and secondary data. In this study the analytical method will also be applied.

### **Arambai and its impact in Manipur:**

In the book, 'Mashil' that the establishment of a well organized military began from the time of Punshiba who reigned from 1704 A.D. to 1432 A.D. The military department of this king called 'Singchep Meira Haijouroi' (department of wedge torch swingers). In 'Mashil', it is written why a 'Lanmi' (soldier) has been called a Lanmi. During the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652), one Khagi (Chinese) cannibal came to this kingdom and the people were in great distress. When warriors had killed this cannibal, the king praised them for saving the land from ruin. They were provided with food and clothing. After some time, due to shortage of daily provision, they were allotted paddy field instead of rice. In lieu of daily fish, the Waithou lake was given to them. For salt, Karou salt well was endowed to them. For clothes, they were endorsed to acquire them by searching cattle thieves in the hills and depriving them of their clothes. Hence, for being leaders in hunting and fighting, they were henceforth called 'Lammi'. When the king went on war and hunting they were the vanguards and while the king was sleeping at night, they were eyes of the night.

The time of king Garibaniwaj (1709-1748) was time of the Meitei Army's being strongest. Entrusting most of the administrative affairs of the kingdom to the officials of the four Panas (administrative divisions), namely - Khabam, Laipham, Ahallup and Naharup, the king himself took over the defence of the kingdom and organisation of the army. During his reign, the armed force of Manipur was divided into three i.e. (i) infantry, (ii) cavalry and (iii) navy.

During the reign of Garibaniwaj, the cavalry was the most important of the three divisions. The Manipuri cavalymen were so dexterous and capable that they could encircle and control the enemy warriors all of a sudden and as a result, the enemies were inevitable to surrender and beg for life. A Manipuri horseman was so an expert equestrian that he could be compared with the Greek mythical centaur (half horse, halfman). During confrontation with the enemy, they would drive the horse back and forth incessantly, whirl and whirl in a circle round the enemy troops, and then suddenly attack at the slightest available chance. Striking, slashing, piercing and blocking by turning round and round and by leaping back and back, they overwhelmed the enemy troops and inflicted their bodies or their horses.

The Manipuri horsemen were no match for the enemy. They could do whatever they wanted to do at will. They could make their horses do whatever they liked to be done. They were adept in different weapons such as sword, spear, Arambai (a dart-like weapon), lance, javalin, Taronta ( a kind of spear), etc. So they could defeat the enemy easily. A horseman would wear his dhoti tucked up to the knee. He wore a half sleeved shirt, a pair of gauntlets and greaves. A

Lanphi (martial cloth) was worn on the right shoulder across the body. He wrapped a turban on the head and tied the ends of the turban with a silk thread so as to cover mouth and chin. A sword was tucked inside the Lanphi on the left of the waist. A shield was hung over the breast or on the right. Taron-ta (a spear) was hung on the left side. Timen-ta (a spear) was held by the hand. On both sides of the saddle were tucked quivers full of Arambai darts. A 5,7,9 cropped horsewhip was fastened to the left fingers. Thus equipped with all weapons and outfits, the horseman, touching the forehead of the warhorse and mounting it from the left, would go on a war path.

The Meitei kings, Kyamba, Mungyamba, Khagemba, Garibaniwaj, Bhagyachandra, Chourajit, Marjit, Gambhirsingh, etc. exploited the Manipuri cavalry with great success in the fight against Kabo-Awa (Shan and Burmese), Khagi (Chinese) and Mayang Takhel (Cachari and Tripuri). Knowing full well the resourcefulness of the Manipuri horsemen, their adroitness in war, and their ability to overcome the enemy swiftly, Alaungpaya who invaded Manipur and took several Manipuri troops prisoner to Awa (Burma) formed a cavalry of Manipuri horsemen and successfully exploited them in the invasion of Chiangmai of Siam (Thailand).

Of all the weapons used by a Manipuri horseman, Arabai was most dreaded. There are numerous accounts of this weapon having been used extensively against Awa, Takhel, Khagi and Thongnang Mayang. However, it is very hard to know the exact origin of this weapon. We cannot accurately say in which period of Manipur's history and during the reign of which king, the use of Arambai began. However, an old manuscript, 'Kumphi', gives an evidence, through not of consequence, that, during the reign of Meitei king Punshiba (1404-1432), an ethnic group of people known as Kumphi used this kind of weapon.

During the reign of king Punshiba the Angom Clan grew in strength and power. The king apprehended it was a threat to his throne. At that time the Tollongs who were crack archers were on the side of the Angoms. Punshiba discovered that nobody except the Kumphis would be able to compete with the Tol- longs. Some time earlier, the Kumphis made a plot to rise against the Takhel (Tripura) king. But the plot failed as the Takhel king had earlier got wind of it. Fearing that his life in Takhel was at stake, the Kumphi chief fled and took shelter in a Kuki village of Manipur. Marrying the daughters of the Kuki chief, he converted himself to a Kuki man, and living at Khongyam Kumphi Leishokpung, beggot many generations of descendents. Punshiba enlisted the service of the Kumphi commander and had the eaves of the Angom king's house shot down. When asked by the Angom clan king whose arrow it was, the Tollong commander replied it belonged to the Kumphis. Knowing that the Tollongs were no match for the Kumphis, he thought that he had better flee to Angom Yumpham. The manuscript, 'Kumphi' mentions that sword, bow and arrow, rambai (Arambai) and chakra (a sharp circular weapon) were weapons of the Kumphis. From this source we can infer that the use of this weapon began from the time of king Punshiba. We cannot find any reference of this weapon earlier than the reign of Punshiba.

As a result of this close relation with the Kumphis since the time of king Punshiba, the Kumphis played a great role when the Meitei king Kyamba invaded Kiyang Khambat of Kabow valley in 1470 in alliance with the Pong king, Khekhomba.

The Arambai was a weapon that a horseman could hurl in any direction forwards, backwards and sideways, riding a horse. When was the time of attack it used to cause utmost casualty to the enemy. And while retreat, it was thrown backwards to keep the enemy at bay and for self defense. As the tip of the arambai dart was poisoned, a slight injury or scratch was lethal enough for the enemy.

As horseman could inflict injuries on the enemy troops by throwing Arambai for a distance about 100 yards. According to the researchers conducted by Ranjit Nongthang, the Arambai is of three types, viz. (i) those made of calamus leaf in the shape of a thread ball, (1) those made of peacock, vulture and Ura (a waterfowl) feathers, and (iii) those made of bamboo strips.

During the reign of kings, there was a department for the production of Arambai. For making an Arambai, different persons carried out their respective functions. People of Nandeibam clan would bring leather and sew it into tubes and quivers. Blacksmiths would bring Arambai arrows and bow made by them. Men of the Keirungba department would bring raw cane, arrow and bow. The Khut-heiba (craftsmen) would scrape and smooth the Arambai handle and fit it. Men of Potsangba department would bring peacock feather with which the Khut-heiba would fit the string and handle of the Arambai. The Kumphi archers would weave the string by turning it over and over. The soldiers would bring the feathers of the vulture, and the helmsmen the feathers of Ura (a waterfowl). In this way the Arambai was made.

The Arambai can be divided into two parts, the outer part and the inner part. In the outer part, in the leather tube are put 10 to 12 peacock feathers bound together and the tips are collectively embossed into a sharp iron arrow head. In the inner part, into the leather tube is inserted a bamboo rod. The rod extends out about 5 inches for use as handle. To the extended rod is tied a twine. When riding out to throw the Arambai by holding the bamboo strip rod, the horseman will grasp the leather tube containing the outer peacock feather tipped iron head. The horseman can hurl the Arambai up to a distance of about 100 yards. Further, the weight of the feather tipped iron arrow head enables the thrower to hit the desired targets.

Since the tip of the Arambai dart was smeared with poison, a slight injury might prove fatal to the enemy. So this weapon was very much dreaded by the enemy. In old days, there were different ways to prepare poison. The Andros (people of Andro) had different methods of procuring poison from poisonous plants and venomous snakes. They had many ways of using poison. An old Meitei Puya accounts – one Pureng Numanba of the Luwang sub clan on

Nongmaiching hill bore a grudge against the Angom Chief Pureiromba for not allowing him to worship the Tarangching hill. He borrowed from the Chakpas (Andro) a bamboo that grew in Thongkhong Karan. Out of it a bow was made. An arrow was made from Sandangchak. Poison was made by boiling Yaikhu arum. Smearing the arrow with this poison, Pureng Numanba shot down the deity of the Angoms, Nungkhong Nunglaobi.

Following are some of the accounts of the Meitei warriors attacking the enemy with arambai during the reigns of different kings. When Kyamba who reigned from 1467 A.D. to 1508 invaded Kiyang Khampat of Kabow Valley with the Pong king Khekhomba; when Khagemba who reigned from 1597 to 1652 invaded the land of the Khagis (Chinese); when Paikhomba who reigned from 1666 to 1697 invaded Paikhu of Ava, when Garibaniwaj who reigned from 1709 to 1748 successively invaded and overran Samjok of Kabaw valley, all the lands between the Ningthi (Chindwin) and Irrawady rivers, and struck with sword the door of the Kaungmudo Pagoda at Sagaing in Burma by defeating the Ava forces who were defending the Pagoda; when the Meitei cavalry attacked the invading armies of Samjok and Takhel (Tripura) who simultaneously attacked Manipur during the above named king Garibaniwaj's reign; when Bhagyachandra who reigned from 1763 to 1798 fought the Morans to help the Ahom king; when the bandit chief prince Herachandra waged guerilla war against the Awas during the Seven Years Devastation (1819-26), and when the Manipur Levy established during the Seven Years Devastation by Gambhir Singh who reigned from 1825 to 1834, drove out the Awas, Arambai weapons were extensively and sweepingly used.

The foremost of Meitei women, queen Linthoingambi, wife of king Ningthoukhomba used Arambai very skillfully when she invaded Sunaching, Yangla, Leishokpung, Langtha Kharam and Khoiroi villages. Taking advantages of the absence of king Khunjaoba (1652-1666) who had gone to invade Samjok of Kabaw valley, when the Kuyom tribals rose in a run and started killing a large number of people in 1654, his queen Tangjakhombi set out at the head of a cavalry force to suppress the Kuyom tribals. On the way, while returning after the conquest of Kuyom tribal village, the queen invaded the tribal villages of Nungsoi and Wainem. In these expeditions the queen attacked the hillmen by throwing handful of Arambai against them. These incidents are a testimony to the fact that, among the remarkable women of this land, was also born rare women well versed in the use of Arambai.

### **Conclusion:**

Manipur, which was once under a constant threat of war and foreign invasion, has, by the inevitable change of history, come under a different administrative system. Hence, the present generation is except for hearing its name, quite ignorant of the shape, size and form of

this weapon, the use of which was not known to other people than the Meiteis and which was a panic to alien enemies.

Therefore, for the sake of the present and future generations, it is high time the dedicated professionals of martial arts came forth to re-introduce this weapon to the public. They should try their level best to enhance the practice of this weapon to the status of a developed form of sport so that it may one day become an international sport.

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