

Weapon Tradition of Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur was a tiny, thinly populated kingdom, it has a long history of an independent country from the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D to the occupation of Manipur by the British in 1891 except for a brief period of Burmese occupation. Iron is the martial of which most of war related weapons are made. Therefore, it is pertinent to study how long this very important thing, iron, has been used in Manipur. In archaic language, thang (sword) is called 'Kajeng'. Again, in archaic language, the maker of sword is called 'Leinung Tante Thangsaba'. In archaic language, Ta (spear) is called Timen. The spear is one of the oldest weapons of Manipur. It is the weapon most commonly used by both the plainsman and the hills men. Different spears have different purposes. (i) Lambu Ta is a large, long spear and is specially to combat with tigers. (ii) Langshoi is the smallest but longest spear and is used as a goad on the elephant. (iii) Khangnangta is used on the pigs and has the shape of a sharp point of an arrow. (iv) Sagol Ta (Thougal Ta) is a lance used by the cavalryman. (v) Taronta (Hunnata) is also a spear used by the cavalrymen (vi) Tapak has a very broad tip. This is used against both men and animals. Ten (bow and arrow) is called Waira in archaic language. From the old Puya (old manuscript), *Numit Kappa* (shooting of the sun), we know that the arrow has arrow has been used in this land from a very early time. The Arambai was a very terrible weapon, highly dreaded by the enemies. The Meitei (Manipuris) used this weapon immensely against Awa (Burmese), Takhel (Tripuris), Khagi (Chinese) and Thongnang Mayang (Cachari) and old manuscript, Kumphi points out that the Arambai was one of weapons wielded by the Kumphi warriors. The Arambai is a weapon that the cavalryman can hurl in any direction at ride a running horse, say, forward right and left.

Key Words : Khamlangba, Poireiton, Pakhangba, Leinung Tante Thangsaba, Tarung Thang, Cheisu Thang, Leikham etc.

Introduction

Though Manipur was a tiny, thinly populated kingdom, it has a long history of an independent country from the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D to the occupation of Manipur by the British in 1891 except for a brief period of Burmese occupation. This uninterrupted long history of Manipur as an independent country was by virtue of the martial skills of the Meiteis. Indeed, the history of Manipur is a history of war battle and the like. As outbreaks of war and wild animals were very frequent in the past, the erstwhile kings and nobles took to themselves the task of coping with the situations. During the monarchical period, it was the bounden duty of everybody to learn martial arts and take up military for the defence of their motherland from the invasions by neighboring, hostile countries. Each and every body was a warrior-cum-hunter. Therefore, in the administration of Manipur, martial affairs have a unique status.

Weapons related with war and the like:

Iron is the martial of which most of war related weapons are made. Therefore, it is pertinent to study how long this very important thing, iron, has been used in Manipur. Below, is a brief account of the smelting of iron and its use in Manipur.

According to encyclopedias, the people who first used iron in the world were the Hittites who settled in regions west of the Black Sea. They started to smelt and used iron in between 1900 B.C and 1400 B.C. The secret knowledge of iron smelting spread slowly but gradually to almost all places of Europe and Asia. By about 600 B.C it spread eastwards. Archaeological excavation has proved that, in India by about 3rd century B.C., the people who inhabited on both sides of the Ganges used iron. From the study of old Puyas, it is known that the craft of iron smelting reached Manipur by about 1st century B.C.

When discussing the history of iron smelting in Manipur, we cannot omit the legend of khamlangba. In the ritual adoration of Lord Khamlangba it runs thus, 'God-King Khamlangba, gnasher of stone as if gnashing salt, chewer of iron as if broken grains of rice, Khamlangba the begetter of iron, king of iron'. Khamlangba is also called Tek Tek Thangsaba (maker of sword) Leinung Mori Yotshungba (iron smelter). Because of all the gods who settled here, he was the last, he was called Khamlangba. According to the book, 'Poireiton Khunthok', he immigrated along with Poireiton. According to the old Puya 'Khamlangba Khunthok', when Khamlangba whose profession was iron smelting and iron smithy settled here, he could not find iron ore. So, he went to Takhel (Tripura) in the west in search of iron ore. There also he could not find iron ore so, he returned to Manipur along with Shija Kalika as his wife. After further search, he found iron ore in Kakchin where he started iron smelting and iron smithy.

From the book, 'Phamlon' or 'Laishra Phamlon' we know that Khamlangba was a coeval of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, first historical king of the Manipur. During the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, he was one of the ten Ningthou Pongba Tara and held the post of Nongthonba. The immigration of Poireiton was during the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, i.e. in the 1st century A.D., which fact is corroborated by many old manuscripts which account that when Poireiton came here Nongda Lairen Pakhangba took forcibly all his belongings and followers. All these sources prove that iron smelting and iron work begin from the 1st century A.D.

The early weapons that were in use during war and battle were sword, spear, arrow, Arambai, oblong shield and shield.

1. Sword

In archaic language, thang (sword) is called 'Kajeng'. Again, in archaic language, the maker of sword is called 'Leinung Tante Thangsaba'. When fighting the enemy, the most important weapon is the sword. And in the direct hand-to-hand fight the sword is the most handy, convenient weapon. A swordsman carries with him a shield for self protection. In olden days, swords were made so as to resemble tree leaves, grasses, birds, fishes, flowers etc. several books like *Miyat*, *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, *Thanglon Thangchat* testify these facts, e.g. Cheishuthang –rainbow shaped, Tarungthang – shaped like a Pongtha leaf, Chaklai Thang shaped like the leaf of Leikham herb, Kapakthang – resembling a Kabo Leiteng, Pikanba – resembling a copella bird (Cheklaobi), Sairem Thang – shaped like a labeo fish, Laithang Nungthanba - shaped like the ramified tip of Leikham herb, Nungshamba – resembling to the Anguilla eel.

Traditionally, swords are of different types. According to the difference of the swords in shape and type their uses and functions are also different. Kings, nobles, courtiers and high ranked military commanders wielded two types of sword, viz., Langthang (war sword) and Leiteng Thang (decorative sword). Langthang is used in battle fight and Leiteng Thang is used in martial exhibition and martial competition. Langthang is heavier, long and thicker than the Leiteng Thang and has a sharp edge along the blade and at the tip of the slightly curved back.

Old books like *Ningthourolgi Thang*, *Ningthourol Lambuba*, *Kangleirol*, *Pukhangba Phambal*, *Khagemba Langjei*, etc. indicate that during the monarchical days, the kings had their swords specially forged and gave specific names to them. The names of some kings' swords are indicated below :

King Urakonthouba had two swords named Soisen and Leirukhomba. King Naothingkhong's sword was called Ipuphaba King Charairongba had two swords called Khumomba and Pukanba. The name of King Kiyamba's sword was Lairenbang , King Khagemba's swords were (i) Khunkhomba (ii) Khoubomba (iii) Loknung Lakaba, and (iv) Nongthang Yeklaba. The name of king Garibaniwaj's sword was Yakhu Yekteiba. King Chingthangkomb's sword was called Changlei Meiraba. King Gambhir Singh had two swords named Khellei Meiraba and Yelei Meiraba. The name of King Chadrakirti's sword was Chenglei Meiraba.

2. Spear:

In archaic language, Ta (spear) is called Timen. The spear is one of the oldest weapons of Manipur. It is the weapon most commonly used by both the plainsman and the hills men. The spear is used in both war and hunting. The spearman wields an oblong shield for own protection. But, in hunting to use spear alone is more convenient. This weapon has two sharp iron tips at both ends of spear handle. Different parts of the spear have different names such as Tjin (shoukhet), Mashong, Maya, Khang (Ta Machi), Takhok, Taning, Tadon, etc. The spear is of different kinds, viz., Khangnangta, Lambu Ta, etc. Spears are generally used against animals. Different spears have different purposes. (i) Lambu Ta is a large, long spear and is specially to combat with tigers. (ii) Langshoi is the smallest but longest spear and is used as a goad on the elephant. (iii) Khangnangta is used on the pigs and has the shape of a sharp point of an arrow. (iv) Sagol Ta (Thougal Ta) is a lance used by the cavalryman. (v) Taronta (Hunnata) is also a spear used by the cavalymen (vi) Tapak has a very broad tip. This is used against both men and animals.

3. Arrow:

Ten (bow and arrow) is called Waira in archaic language. From the old Puya (old manuscript), 'Numit Kappa' (shooting of the sun), we know that the arrow has been used in this land from a very early time. In this Puya, Khwai Nongchengba contrived a bow and arrow. With it, he shot down the elder sun, Taohuireng Ahanba. Then, Chaoba Meleiba Sangton Sanouba killed Khwai Nungjengba with an arrow at Kangla. Though, the arrow was generally used for martially used purposes, it is also used in other purposes. This is evidenced by the depiction of arrow as Naowa Khoijuten (arrow for shooting at the ritual on 6th day of a child birth), Kasan Yongkap Ten (arrow for shooting monkey), Hangoi Taokapli (arrow for shooting floating frogs), Leinung Hikap Yaikap Ten (arrow used for blackmagic).

4. Arambai:

The Arambai was a very terrible weapon, highly dreaded by the enemies. The Meitei (Manipuris) used this weapon immensely against Awa (Burmese), Takhel (Tripuris), Khagi (Chinese) and Thongnang Mayang (Cachari) and old manuscript, kumphis points out that the Arambai was one of weapons wielded by the Kumphi warriors. With the help of the Kumphi warriors, the Meitei king Punshiba drove out the Angom king. Since then Kumphis became body-guards of the Meitei king. The arms of the Kumphi warriors were sword, bow and arrow, Rambai (Arambai) and Chakra. After generations of guarding and protecting the Meitei kings, the Kumphis played a great part when Meitei kings Kyamba invaded Kiyang Khambat of Kabaw valley in alliance with Pong king Khekhomba Shoohungkhum. Thus, Arambai had been used in this land since the time of king Punshiba.

The Arambai is a weapon that the cavalryman can hurl in any direction at ride a running horse, say, forward right and left. As the tip of the arrow is smeared with poison, even a slight scratch can be fatal to the injured person. A horseman can cause injuries and casualties among the enemies by throwing Arambais up to a distance of 100 yards. Ranjit Nongthang opines that there were three types of Arambai, (i) those made of calamus (yairi) leaves in the form of a thread ball, (ii) those made of peacock feathers, vulture feathers and Ura (a water fowl) feathers, and (iii) those made of bamboo strips.

Conclusion:

When there was monarchy in Manipur, when there was frequency of wars and battle and when it was defending its independence from enemies' clutches, it was the unavoidable obligation of very citizen to learn and master the martial arts. But now, with the inexorable change in the course of time, almost everybody has neglected this art and war fear articles. Therefore, it is high time for everybody to practice and preserve the traditional practice of martial arts of Manipur. It is the cultural tradition of martial arts only that has shown to the world that, the Meiteis, as a unique ethnic people, once flourished with might and pomp in the comity of independent nations. Therefore, for the sake of both the present and future generations, the powers that be also should take upon themselves the responsibility of protecting and preserving the unique traditional body of martial arts of Manipur.

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