



## **CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF MANIPURI FESTIVALS IN TRIPURA**

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### **Abstract**

Festivals tell much about a community's culture and traditions. Manipuris celebrate almost all the Hindu festivals, but they have localised each festival by adding local elements. This very act of localising Hindu festivals achieved two goals. One, they appealed to the locals. Two, Hinduism spread quickly in Manipur. Manipuris who migrated to Tripura also celebrate many festivals, but many of them are different from how they are celebrated in Manipur. In this paper, the researcher does not indulge in a comparative study of the festivals but rather lays out the important festivals celebrated in Tripura by the small yet significant Manipuri community and their cultural implications. Furthermore, there is a growing sense of revivalism among the Manipuris in Tripura in terms of their cultural identity, which can be interpreted as an import from their diasporic centre. Towards the end of the paper, the researcher touches upon the issue of diaspora very imperceptibly because the issue of whether or not the Manipuris in Tripura should be regarded as diasporic people remains inconclusive.

**Keywords:** Culture, Diaspora, Manipur, Tripura, Festival,

The first mention of the term 'Takhen', which denotes the present-day Tripura, is found in *Cheitharon Kumpapa* or the Royal Court Chronicle, and it reads, "Meitei Reima Taipompi gave birth to Mapum Takhen." The entry is made during Meetingu Tangchampa's reign (1542 CE), and it means that "Meitei princess gives birth to the future king of Takhen" (53). Manipuris living in Dharamnagar or Bishalghar area refer to the capital city Agartala and its adjoining areas as Takhen. However, Manipuris from Manipur proper refer to the entire state of Tripura and the tribes living in it as Takhen. The

origin of the word Takhen is unknown and untraceable, but the word has gained a foothold over the centuries in Manipuri culture and imagination. People of Kumbi, a town near Loktak Lake, migrated from Takhen. In the oral history of Kakching, their progenitor Ibudhou Khamlangba migrated to Takhen and came back home after marrying a Tripuri princess Shija Kalika. They still believe that they are one of the tribes which migrated to Manipur from Takhen. Then, there is a sub-clan called Takhenchangbam in the Manipuri Sagei system. Takhen used to be a popular name both for males and females. Also, a flower called ‘takhellei’ is believed to have been brought from Takhen (Tripura).

L. Birmangal Sinha and Pannalal Roy inform us in their book *Itihasher Aloke Tripura O Manipur* that the Tripuri king Taidakhin is the first king to marry a ‘Mekhli Princess’ or a ‘Manipuri Princess’ according to the *Rajmala*, the Royal Court Chronicle of Tripura (58). King Taidakhin, though mentioned in the *Rajmala*, is regarded as a king who ruled Tripura in pre-historic times. However, it is established that Tripura and Manipur have established trade and political ties since ancient times. It is evident in the two-way migration we encounter from time to time. The first historically recorded matrimonial alliance between the Royal House of Tripura and Manipur occurred in 1798 CE between the Tripuri king Rajdhar Manikya II and the Manipuri Princess Harisheshwori, daughter of the then King Bhagyachandra (1763-1798 CE).

Whether or not Manipuris living in Tripura should be considered Manipuri diaspora is subject to interpretation. However, historically speaking, Manipur and Tripura were sovereign kingdoms prior to British occupation and later became part of India through the Instrument of Accession in the 50s. It would be wrong to argue that being within the same country, Manipuris in Tripura should not be treated as diasporic people. Because the basic understanding of the term ‘diaspora’ is “a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of the displacement” according to James Clifford (308). Therefore, it would be equivalent to undermining centuries of history and the relationship between the two kingdoms. Their historical relationship is well documented and corroborated through various texts and chronicles found in both erstwhile kingdoms. In present-day Tripura, Manipuris constitute a small part of the population, and they have played a significant role in the socio-political and historico-cultural development in the

state for many centuries. It means that there have been waves of migration to Tripura from Manipur. We can find two types of migration. The first one is migration due to matrimonial alliances. In this type of migration, a small yet significant group of royal retinue leave Manipur alongside the princess who marries a Tripuri prince. This group of people constitute *pung* (drum) players, *pena* (fiddle and string) players, singers, dancers, and people who will serve the princess. The second one is based on calamities and political unrest in Manipur. It is a fact that the large scale migration of Manipuris took place during the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* or Seven Years Devastation from 1819-1826 CE. Giving a historical sense to this argument would be appropriate at this juncture.

Gangmumei Kabui, in his book *History of Manipur: Pre-Colonial Period*, explains how the Burmese invasion unfolded due to the infighting in the Manipuri court just before the period mentioned above. The Burmese were looking for an opportunity to invade Manipur and spread their kingdom to the Brahmaputra Valley. They got the opportunity to do so in 1819 CE. The Burmese carried out unspeakable crimes against Manipuris in the Imphal Valley following this invasion. Kabui records the extent of atrocities meted out to the people of Manipur by the marauding Burmese army as:

Manipur had never before faced such a national catastrophe brought about by the Burmese conquest. The oppression and cruelties with which the Burmese dealt with Manipur had no parallel in [the] history of Manipur. It was a sort of genocide of the Meiteis that had been carried by the Burmese reign of terror. [...] The country was depopulated. [...] The population of Imphal valley was reduced to about 10,000 or about 2000 households only (289).

The reign of terror initiated an exodus of Meiteis on a massive scale to the neighbouring principalities/kingdoms. The then king Marjit Singh who was king of Manipur between 1812 and 1819 CE, fled to Cachar, Assam, along with one-third of the population. Thousands were taken to Burma as slaves and prisoners. Thousands took refuge in Tripura and Bangladesh.

Manipuris settled in Tripura in clusters of small hamlets. There were collections of villages populated by Meiteis, Meitei Pangals, Manipuri Bisnupriyas, and Kidnas. These social groups migrated together, but there were linguistic, cultural, or religious

differences among these groups. However, they settled in Tripura together and peacefully. As regards Agartala, the first Manipuri settlement was named ‘Mekhli Para’. Later, when the palace was moved to the present location, Manipuris populated the localities in the vicinity of the palace. Prominent localities where the Manipuris settled are, Dhaleshwar, Abhoynagar, and Radhanagar.

These settlements initiated the formation of a separate Manipuri identity outside of Manipur. The present Manipuri culture in Tripura results from the acculturation that they received as they came in contact with the local communities. However, there was no significant threat to the culture they followed as they led an unrestricted life under the patronage of Tripuri kings. As in Manipur, when they migrated, they brought along their dual heritage based on their ancient animist belief system and the newly adopted Hindu traditions. The displaced Manipuris formed their identities outside of Manipur around this duality and could easily absorb other traditions as they had done in the past.

Manipuris are known for their vibrant culture, which is an amalgamation of the Hindu traditions and their old animistic way of life. Regarding a Manipuri’s fondness for festivals, J. Shakespeare had to say the following, “The Manipuri is a very cheerful person, fond of any form of amusement, and he has accepted gladly all the festivals of the Hindu calendar, but to show his independence he observes them a day later than other Hindus.” (417) They have always preserved their own identity through various cultural practices. The recent revival of the *Lai Haraoba* festival, (appeasing of the Gods), has played an essential role in preserving their cultural identity. Other festivals include Yaoshang or Holi, Cheiraoba or the Manipuri New Year, which is celebrated in the month of Sajibu, Kang Festival or Rath Yatra, and the iconic Rasa Lila festival.

Princess Harisheshwori brought with her an idol of the Radha Madhava, which was placed in a temple established at the then capital of Tripura at Old Agartala. It is the first recorded instance of the spread or perpetuation of Manipuri arts and culture, which will take their roots in the soils of Tripura for a long time to come. The Radhamadop idol was later placed at the temple next to the Radhamadop *Mandap* in Radhanagar at the heart of Agartala city. Here at this *mandap*, the principal Rasa Lila is performed in

October/November. Rasa Lila in other places can only be performed a day after the principal Lila in Agartala is presented. The tradition is still followed even today.

Manipuris have learnt all the necessary cultural attributes of the host cultures, which helped them live alongside other communities with ease. A precise amalgamation of traditions can be seen in the reinvention of their identity, noticeable in their dress code, food habits, and all the activities in their everyday life. They have successfully retained their distinct Manipuri identity by implementing strict orthodox rules and disciplines within their communities in various parts of Tripura. However, Manipuris in Tripura are constantly pressured to lose their long preserved traditional values and cultural system despite their efforts to retain them. Some of the causes are linguistic as well as shifting worldviews.

Despite the adverse circumstances, there is a renewed vigour in their efforts to preserve what is left in terms of identity, culture, and language. This resurgence happened in the 80s in literature and the 2000s in culture and heritage. The best example is the recent revival of the appeasing festival called *lai haraoba* has played an essential role in preserving some of their cultural identities, which is celebrated lavishly. Earlier *lai haraoba* was celebrated in many Manipuri villages before it gradually declined during the 90s, only to be revived in 2006 by the Puthiba Welfare and Cultural Society of Tripura situated in Abhoynagar, Agartala. One of the reasons for the gradual decline of the Lai Haraoba festival is the decline in the number of the *maibas* (he-shamans) and *maibis* (she-shamans) or the Manipuri Shamans in Tripura. Due to this reason, the *Lai Haraoba* Festival came to a complete halt with an uncertain future until 2006. There are in total four Lais (deities) in Tripura, namely Ibudhou Puthiba in Agartala popularly known as Pagla Devta, Ibudhou Pakhangba in Math Chomuhani, Lamjeng Lairenbi in Bajalghat, Bamutia and Lairenbi in Durganagar, Khowai out of which only the Ibudhou Puthiba in Agartala is actively celebrated every year in winter. All the leading performers, including shamans, are brought from Manipur for the propitiating festival. Apart from the shamans *thang-ta* (martial arts), artists, dance troupes and musicians are brought from Manipur to showcase Manipuri art and culture. Since its revival, *Lai Haraoba* has enjoyed popularity among the Manipuri population. Non-Manipuris also take part in the festivity with much devotion and enthusiasm. The age-old feeling and the customs that all together revived along with it

brought in the sense of togetherness, a discovery of their identity and the love and longing for their tradition.

Moreover, the main motive of the Puthiba Welfare and Cultural society is to create awareness, promote, and preserve their ancient heritage, which is only possible with the *Lai Haraoba* festival because it still retains some of the original Manipuri customs and traditions otherwise not found in any other Vaishnavism inspired festivals. Interestingly, the Puthiba Lai is quite famous among the non-Manipuris too. The deity is often identified with the Hindu God Mahadeva by them.

The most important festival of the Manipuris is Holi or Yaoshang in the local parlance. It epitomises the traditional Hindu festival by amalgamating their traditional indigenous cultural style, making it uniquely different from Holi celebrated anywhere in India. In Manipur, Holi is celebrated for five days, but in Tripura, it is celebrated for two days. Holi is incomplete without the door to door *nakathengba* or collecting *chanda*/donation. *Nakathengba* is not restricted to any age group, so individuals or groups can collect donations in the locality. Conventionally, *nakathengba* is one occasion in which blessings are showered on households that respond to the monetary campaign. Therefore, in the evening of the first day of Holi, the lady of the house sits at the verandah with sweets and other eatables to welcome everyone.

Not just that, there is singing and dancing, and bands of local musicians visit other Manipuri localities to sing songs that echo the Holi celebration of Radha with Krishna and the Gopis. The youths also indulge in *Thabal Chongba* or ‘dancing under the moonlight’, which almost declined during the early nineties. However, it is revived along with the annual *Lai Haraoba* Festival. Although the aspects of the festival have changed entirely in Manipur, it is still a festival that celebrates the love between Krishna and Radha. It is manifested in the songs they sing during the festival. Furthermore, it remains one of the distinct cultural markers, particularly to the Manipuris of Tripura.

Holi festival is followed by *Cheiraoba* or Manipuri New Year in the Month of *Sajibu* (March-April). It is still done in the traditional Manipuri way, but surprisingly,

every locality has its distinct way of performing the associated rites and rituals. Dishes are cooked to be offered to the spirits of the ancestors. After the food is prepared, three separate meals are set on the banana leaf and offered to the spirits of the ancestors at the gate or entrance of the homestead. They pray to the ancestors for the well being of the family. Later on, they will climb the nearest hill in the evening and offer prayers again. When it gets dark, children of the family will beat anything that produces a loud sound like utensils and baskets and chase out evil spirits from every corner of the house. However, in Tripura, this celebration is highly Hinduised, and the idea of ancestor worship has been abandoned by many. However, they have retained the tradition of offering food as a symbolism.

*Kang Chingba* or Rath Yatra, which usually takes place during July or the Manipuri month of *Engen* is another major festival among the Manipuris of Tripura. The festival is a nine-day long affair. The first day is celebrated like it is celebrated in other parts of the country. Manipuri *Bamons* (Brahmins) who are the custodians of community *mandap* and have *mandirs* organise Rath Yatras. The festivities continue for nine long days with various activities. The rath is pulled in the locality on the first day with offerings made to Lord Jagannath and His sister Subhadra. On the ninth day, the same *rath* is pulled again, but there is a sense of the *rath* going back to where it began its journey on the first day. The ninth day is called Kanglen. Between the first and ninth day, there will be a community feast every night at the *mandap*, which is preceded by *kirtan* called *Chaitep chongba* or songs of Jaidev. Wherever Manipuris are settled, this festival is celebrated with much fervour and enthusiasm. People from other communities also pull the *Kang*, although the Manipuris perform the rituals. The significance of this festival is the ritual of sanctification of the land. They believe that the *Kang* will take away all the ills of society for a calendar year. Then the act is repeated in the following year with the same revelry, aims, and goals.

Another famous festival of the Manipuris in Tripura is the Jhulan Purnima, which is celebrated in the Manipuri month of *Thawan* or August. It is a popular dance that portrays the romance between Radha and Krishna in the gardens of Vrindavan, especially their playful acts of enjoying the swing. Like the Rasa Lila, which involves singing and dancing by professional Manipuri artists, Jhulon is also performed by young dancers who

replicate the romance between Radha and Krishna. Although the celebration of Jhulon has seen a decline compared to other festivals, it remains one of the important festivals with celebrations still in practice in the Manipuri villages of Tripura.

If one major cultural festival identifies the Manipuris everywhere on earth, it should be the Rasa Lila. It is one festival loved and enjoyed by both the Manipuris and non-Manipuris in Tripura. Rasa Lila has a long history in the Royal Court of the Manikya Kings, which became popular after introducing the dance by aristocratic Manipuri families who settled in Tripura along with the Manipuri Princesses married to the Tripuri Kings. The dance became an essential part of the royal court, and throughout history, it enjoyed a popular status among the Manipuri people and the people of Tripura. It would be noteworthy to mention here that Rasa Gurus were sent from Tripura to Santiniketan at the request of Rabindranath Tagore. These Gurus were responsible for spreading this dance form outside northeast India.

The main Ras Lila happens at the Radhamadhop *mandap* at Radhanagar in Agartala. The *mandap* is a significant site for the preservation and propagation of Manipuri culture in Tripura. Regarding the importance of *mandaps* as a space for performance, Heisnam Kanhailal wrote “Mandap is not only a performing house but an inner core where both heritage and community live together and express the basic grace of celebration. The inherent characteristic of the performance tradition, i.e., the celebration is always expanded to its full extent in its nature of elasticity in order to see that the performance releases the powerful vibration in both vital and noble images of theatre” (68). The importance of *mandap* in the performance tradition of Manipur, especially after the adoption of Vaishnavism, is paramount. A whole new performance tradition arose from this space. And, Kanhailal calls it ‘*mandap lila*’. These various types of *mandap lilas* got rooted in the mind and memory of the Manipuris in Tripura. The Ras Lila at the Radhamadhav *mandap* is supported by the Govt. of Tripura through a grant because it is an expensive affair that involves spectacular costumes and an elaborate stage. The romance between Radha and Krishna comes alive in this dance. The Lila strictly adheres to the canons laid down by Bharata Muni in his *Natyasastra*, even though the story is based on the episodes of *Srimad Bhagavata Purana* Canto 10, Chapter 29 to 33, to be precise.



These are some of the cultural expressions of Manipuris brought from the land of their origin and kept alive in their host state. These festivals are part of the tangible heritage they inherited from their ancestors that connects them with their diasporic centre. They have also retained most of the rituals involved in the rites of passage ceremonies. Interestingly, Manipuris still hold an inherited cultural course that is significantly different from what is practised in Manipur proper. The culture and religion of Manipur have undergone substantial changes after World War II. However, in Tripura, the age-old customs and traditions of social hierarchy, rites and rituals, and the related customs are still followed. While Manipuris in Manipur were indulging in the revivalism of their old customs and traditions, Manipuris in Tripura abandoned them and went towards more Hindu-centric traditions. There can be many reasons for these developments. However, one crucial rationale could be the un/conscious abandonment of the pre-Hindu elements that do not matter much in the new environment. Shamanistic rites and rituals are the mainstays in the old faith system. Being a diasporic community, they must have felt the need to reassess the situation and renegotiate their position among the communities. Or, adapt to the majoritarian culture of the adopted land. It could further be observed that the reason for the loss or absence of chants, ritual songs, and related old myths among the Manipuris today is due to the changing dynamics of their identity in the new atmosphere. As Stuart Hall puts it, Manipuri identity in Tripura is very much like that of the diaspora identities, which are “constantly producing and reproducing [themselves] anew, through transformation and difference” (235).

The implications of Manipuri festivals that manifest their culture and traditions result from their acculturation and syncretisation as they come in contact with the local people. There is still a sense of transnationality and movement among the Manipuris that struggle to identify them as a distinctive community given the historical contexts of their displacement. At the same time, they have learnt some of the cultural attributes of the host cultures, which resulted in the creation of a double consciousness that makes them neither distinctively Tripuri nor Manipuri proper hence the phrase ‘Manipuris of Tripura’ can only best define them.

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