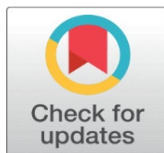
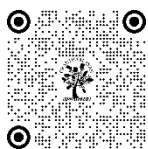


NARRATIVES OF THE PAST: TRADITIONAL HISTORICAL WRITINGS IN MANIPUR

Dr. Nalini Nongmeikapam¹✉

¹Associate Professor, Department of History, G.P. Women's College, Dhanamanjuri University



Corresponding Author

Dr. Nalini Nongmeikapam,
journalpublication24@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the vast collection of traditional historical literature in Manipur, a northeastern state of India renowned for its cultural richness and historical significance. The study examines the evolution and dissemination of Manipuri historical narratives via oral traditions, manuscripts, and chronicles. The article highlights the unique blend of mythology, folklore, and factual accounts that shape the historical understanding of the area. The study examines the role of Meitei chroniclers, who have meticulously documented the social, political, and religious aspects of Manipur, including advancements, royal lineages, and customs. Furthermore, the article explores the methodological challenges and opportunities associated with analysing traditional historical writings, including issues of translation, interpretation, and the preservation of fragile manuscripts. The analysis emphasises on significant literary works such as the "Cheitharol Kumbaba" (Royal Chronicle of Manipur) and "Puya" (sacred texts), highlighting their significance as repositories of cultural memory and identity. Moreover, the study examines the evolution of Manipuri historiography in relation to the influences of colonialism, modernism, and globalisation. This study investigates the utilisation of novel historical methodology and interdisciplinary approaches by contemporary researchers to reevaluate and reinterpret conventional sources. This article underscores the enduring significance of traditional historical literature in Manipur, not just as resources for studying history but also as crucial components of the region's cultural legacy and collective identity.

Keywords: Historiography, Meiteis, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Pakhangba, Puyas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Manipur, located in the northeastern region of India, is a region with a deep-rooted cultural legacy and a history that extends over thousands of years. The history of this subject is not simply a record of occurrences, but rather a complex fabric composed of elements of myth, folklore, and verifiable facts, which have been carefully maintained through traditional historical literature. The paper explores the origins, history, and contemporary importance of these myths in forming Manipuri identity and historical consciousness. Manipur, situated strategically at the intersection of South Asia, has been shaped by a variety of cultural influences, ranging from Hinduism, Christianity, Islam to its own native belief systems. The cultural fusion is reflected in the historical texts of Manipur, where oral traditions, old manuscripts, and royal chronicles have been crucial in recording and understanding the region's history. The Meitei chroniclers have played a crucial role in the study of Manipuri history by meticulously documenting the socio-political dynamics, royal lineages, and religious activities for centuries. The "Cheitharol Kumbaba" and sacred "Puya" scriptures provide vital sources of historical knowledge and hold great spiritual and cultural significance for the Manipuri people. However, the

study of conventional historical texts presents methodological obstacles, such as difficulties in translating, interpreting, and safeguarding delicate manuscripts. The issues are further intensified by the influence of colonialism, modernism, and globalisation, which have transformed scholarly methods in studying Manipuri history. This article seeks to explore the intricate aspects of Manipur's history and shed light on the enduring cultural legacy of the region despite modern changes. This highlights the lasting importance of conventional historical texts as both sources for historical research and as foundational elements of Manipuri cultural identity. This study aims to uncover the intricate layers of Manipur's historical fabric, elucidating the enduring influence of traditional tales on its past, present, and future.

2. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION OF THE MEITEIS

The past, present, and future are interconnected to form the inexorable progression of history. The way in which 'History' is approached in this manner cannot be distinguished from the process of development of the Meiteis themselves. The Meiteis have possessed a unique style of historiography since ancient times. The sacred texts known as 'Puyas' and 'Puwari' include a collection of ancient literary compositions passed down by our ancestors. These texts provide proof of a historical consciousness, as they are interconnected with the historical events of Manipur. Khagemba's appointment of the five gurus to document the knowledge of the 'Umanglais' serves as more evidence of the monarchs' efforts to preserve the ancient civilization. There are various old manuscripts, including significant chronicles and other historical and semi-historical literature, that provide valuable insights for reconstructing the history of Manipur. However, these texts did not possess the contemporary methodologies of historiography. The emergence of contemporary historiography in Manipur is a relatively recent occurrence, dating back to the early 20th century. This growth can be attributed to the direct influence of British colonial writers. However, these ancient traditional writings serve as the foundation for an accurate reconstruction of Manipur's history in the context of modern historiography.

There are a number of ancient Manipuri chronicles and texts which provide valuable historical information. They are- '*Cheitharol Kumbaba*', '*Ningthourol Lambuba*', '*Moirang Ningthourol Lambuba*', '*Nouthingkhong Phambalkaba*', '*Khuman Kangleiron*', '*Chengleiron*', '*Takhen Ngamba*', '*Samsok Ngamba*', '*Awa Ngamba*', '*Khagi Ngamba Miyat*', '*Ahongpung Lalupam*', '*Keipharon*', etc.

3. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF SOME CHRONICLES

A. CHEITHROL KUMBABA:

'Cheitharol Kumbaba', a royal chronicle, is a repository of historical events. This book chronicles the various occurrences that transpired in Manipur from 33 CE till the rule of Maharaja Bodhachandra in the mid-20th century. The record was maintained according to the king's decree and was not documented as a result of the pundits' initiative. The recorded events encompassed wars, triumphs, coronations, natural disasters, administrative matters, political relations with neighbouring hill tribes and sovereign countries, evolving aspects of society, economy, religion, and culture, as well as captivating narratives of Manipur's gradual subjugation to the advancing British colonial power. A common drawback of this chronicle is that the recorded events appear to have been arranged in a manner that was sanctioned by the king. The pre-15th century documented events of the book are excessively compacted and lack the level of information found in the later part. "Till the 15th century, the entries in it are very brief and relate to the activities of the king alone. We get however accurate accounts of the years of accession and death of kings. From 1485, we get more detailed accounts of their reigns." (Jhalajit, 1965, p. 29). The chronicle has been taken as more or less authentic for entries from the time of king Kyamba (1467-1508). Kyamba seems to have affected a reform in keeping the chronicle. "Up to the beginning of his reign, the name of months in which the recorded events took place is not mentioned. From the time of Khagemba onwards, we get the names of the months as well" (1965, p. 105). Thanks to Kyamba's improvements, this chronicle has supplied a wealth of information about the transformations that occurred in the economy, politics, culture, and religious life of the people of Manipur. Hence, the 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' offers profound understanding of the early existence of the Meiteis and serves as an essential resource for the restoration of Manipur's history. The question as to the date of compilation of the royal chronicle 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' has been a most intriguing topic of discussion. It is very clear from the contents of the book that the events recorded in it begin from the time of Pakhangba who is said to have reigned in 33 CE. Following from this, it can be assumed that the probable date of compilation may perhaps be from 33 CE. However, this assumption has been out rightly rejected by the scholars in context of its literary composition and the much-condensed accounts of the 37 kings in around eight pages.

The other two answers to the question are: firstly, it was compiled in 1467 CE during the time of Kyamba and secondly in 1780 CE in the reign of Maharaja Bhaghyachandra. The second opinion is arrived from the following lines in page 9 of the chronicle-*'Takhen Ramchandragi Kum Sakabda 1702 asida shreeshrijukta Bhaghyachandra maharajna kanchipurda lieringae matol ibungo Anantashai khwairakpada haidoktuna cheitharol mangkhrababu amarak linghouae'*. However, a date which is a milestone of dating, 1467 CE is mentioned in the book for the first time. It is from this year that the peculiar system of counting the year by a method known as 'Cheithaba' was introduced is distinctly mentioned in page 10 of the book 'Sak 1407 Hiyangloina cheithaba houae'. From this, it seems probable that the compilation of the book began by this time. "There seem to be a break in the recordings due to the Burmese invasion and the confusion it created, and king Bhaghyachandra might have perhaps summoned the pundits to re-write it or perhaps, the records which are not found in the palace diary might have been copied from the other found diaries of the other local pundits" (Khelchandra Singh, 1969).

Regarding the authorship of the chronicles, there seem to have been different pundits or a group of them as selected by the reigning king and thus, it was being entrusted to numerous hands and the choice of the person being solely dependent on the king himself. This was a serious setback of the book since results of important events recorded before by a particular chronicler is not taken into account. "There are instances in which an important event is recorded to have happened on a particular date and the result of which may be expected sometime later on... but such an expectation is not fulfilled... the apparent reason of this was on account of its being entrusted to numerous hands, the next person who was to put down the events of subsequent dates might have ignored the importance of it or he might not at all know that in the preceding dates its cause had been recorded" (Yumjao, 1976, p. 145). The initiation of the king in recording the chronicle leads to the omission of various events which are not found desirable to the king. "*Defects of this nature in a book like Cheitharol Kumbaba which is maintained by the State is unavoidable...*" (1976, p. 146). The royal chronicle 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' has been credited for its historical utility by a number of scholars-Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra in his book '*Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas*'; R.K. Jhaljit who based most of the information written in his book 'A short history of Manipur', W. Yumjao's 'An early history of Manipur' and also L. Ibongohal's book 'Introduction to Manipur'. "Cheitharol Kumbaba is the most important chronicle in Manipur in which the reign of a king, the important events during his reign are written. It is still preserved carefully and is written regularly upto this time. This may be compared with the Kashmir Rajatrangini" (Ibongohal, 1987, p. 65). These praises, however, are not without its flaws too. The events recorded preceding Kyamba's reign give the duration of the reign of the kings to be 120,110 and 100 years and so on. "To a scrutinizing critic, it would be something historically impossible, if this book would have avoided the addition of the accounts of the preceding period, its value would have been much considerably increased in the eye of a student of history." (Yumjao, 1976, p. 145)

The most radical and an extremely bold step have been taken up by Wahengbam Ibihal Singh in his book, 'The History of Manipur (an early period)'. He has out rightly stated— "Cheitharol Kumbaba, in respect of its dating which create not only confusion but also mislead the young learners and scholars as well" (Ibihal Singh, 1986, p. 24). The author in a peculiar methodology has denounced the present copy of Cheitharol Kumbaba as being forged and also states that there is a foul play in the dating of the Cheitharol Kumbaba. He supports his contention from the lines of Cheitharol Kumbaba (page 110) whereby an introduction of a new era known as Chandrabda was undertaken by king Bhaghyachandra (one Chandrabada being equal to 789 AD). "The date 789 AD should have been as done in most cases, the date of accession of the founder of a dynasty or a prominent king to whose lines Bhaghyachandra or Gambhir Singh belonged. So we conclude this intrapolated epoch is the date of accession of the throne by Nongta i.e. Nongta Lairen Pakhangba since he is the founder of the dynasty" (Ibihal Singh, 1986, p. 29). The author concludes that 980 CE would be the date of accession of Pakhangba to the throne and that of Naothingkhong is given as 1215 CE as against 663 CE as recorded in Cheitharol Kumbaba, basing his reference on the Shan account which gives the date of Samlungfa who visited Nongthingkhong in 1220 CE and also from the Bengal account. This rather interesting but controversial question of re-dating the event of 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' is still open for reconsideration amongst scholars. However, despite all the proposed setbacks no one has completely denounced the historical utility of Cheitharol Kumbaba.

For the pre-British period the Cheitharol Kumbaba is the only source we have which is of any substantial historical value. The earlier part of the chronicle before the reign of Ningthoukhompa upto king Bhagyachandra (from 33 CE to 1432 CE) contains more of legends, while this is not historical in the real sense, it does give an insight into the world view of the writers and may contain clues to real events. The accessibility to the chronicle and its utility in the reconstruction of history of Manipur has been greatly enhanced with the publication of this chronicle in Bengali script and also in English. The chronicle was edited by L.M. Ibongohal Singh and pandit N. Khelchandra and published by Manipur Sahitya Parishad (1967) in Bengali script. In 1995, another version of Cheitharol Kumbaba was published with a new title 'The Lost

Kingdom, 1995' by L. Joychandra Singh. This copy was translated from the original 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' by Bamacharan Mukherjee who was a clerk in the British political agency and was commissioned to translate the chronicle into English after the conquest of Manipur by the British in 1891. Another version of Cheitharol Kumbaba translated into English by S.N. Parratt was published in two volumes in 2005 and 2009 representing the periods (33 CE– 1763) and (1764–1955). The importance of N. Bihari's English translation of 'Cheitharol Kumbaba', published in the year 2012 also provided an insight about the value of this book. The importance of the chronicle in tracing the history of Manipur cannot be doubted as is evident from the continuous efforts of scholars to restudy this chronicle.

B. NINGTHOUROL LAMBUBA

The next chronicle of importance is '*Ningthourol Lambuba*' which begins with the reign of Pakhangba of the 1st century and continues up to the 19th century. This book serves as the chief source of information about the expeditions of kings and personalities of the Queens of Manipur and serves as a missing link to the information which is not provided in 'Cheitharol Kumbaba'. This chronicle records the military exploits of the rulers, the origin of the names of places (topography) based on historical events. This book for example refers to the valour of Queen Lingthoingambi and the defense of her kingdom against Tangkhul invaders during the reign of king Ningthoukhomba. Moirang Ningthourol Lambuba in particular describes the valour of then reigning kings of Moirang, the origins of the queen, mothers, the numerous battles between the different clan groups and also the matrimonial alliances between them. It is also a valuable mine of information about the geographical location of various places of Manipur and how the names of these places originated. The main drawback of the chronicle is that it does not mention the year of the events recorded but merely gives the name of the king in whose reign the event took place. Therefore, the chronicle should be read together with 'Cheitharol Kumbaba'.

C. NAOTHINGKHONG PHAMBALKABA

'*Naothingkhong Phambalkaba*' is another ancient Manipuri chronicle which deals with Naothingkhong, a Meitei king reigned from 663 to 763 CE. According to this book Naothingkhong is very much a historical character. The book gives an account of his marriage to the daughter of the chief of Selloi-Langmais' Pitanga, the slaughter of a number of Langmais who intruded into the Meitei territory by the Meitei king and the subsequent step of revenge on the Meitei prince 'Naothingkhong' and the wisdom displayed by Pitanga to save the prince. This book seems to be history, myth and legend rolled into one. Other chronicles like 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' and 'Ningthourol Lambuba' though gives an account of king Naothingkhong and his marriage with the daughter of the chief of Selloi-Langmois, there is no mention about the role played by Pitanga, his flight to the Khuman kingdom and finally his shelter in the Luwang kingdom. The mythical and legendary aspect of the book is proved by the transformation of Pitanga into a mortal deity known as 'Yumjao Leirama' and also the reference of the Luwang king 'Punshi Yunoiba' whose parentage was traced both to divine and mortal sources and it is told that he lived for hundred years with twelve generations descending from him.

The writer of the book and the time of its writing cannot be determined accurately for the manuscript is anonymous and bears no dates of composition. "We find reference in the text to king Khagemba who reigned between 1597 and 1652 CE and the Kumbaba records of the king's endeavor for the spread of education and production of manuscripts. Therefore, our summarize is that it might have been written at the latest during early part of the reign of king" (Manihar Singh, 1983, p. 5). However, one can still maintain the limitation of determining such dates from the language and styles of composition for a writer of a present generation can still write in a much complex language of the past generation and vice-versa. The book is in the form of manuscript, written in the old Meitei alphabet. "As characteristic of old Manipuri prose, the diction is complex, the vocabulary, mostly archaic interspersed with down to earth imageries and the sentences are long, if not so inordinately as in older text like the Panthoipi Khongkul." (1983, p. 7) This book also gives a reference to the existence of different clan dynasties who had its own separate and independent territory traditionally poised against one another. Matrimonial alliances also existed amongst them and the stronger ones always dominated the weaker one and in course of time, the whole place was subjugated by the strongest clan. "The text is a piece of a living document of early Meitei culture and civilization. It also presents an account of the political relation between the different small kingdom based on clan dynasty" (1983, p. 7)

4. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DISCUSSIONS OF SOME KEY TEXTS

The books- '*Takhen Ngamba*', '*Awa Ngamba*' and '*Khahi Ngamba*' gives a descriptive account of the battles won over by the Meitei king over Tripura, Burma and the Khasi and Jaintia Tribes respectively. 'Takhen Ngamba' was written around the middle of 18th century by a well-known Manipuri scholar named Nongangbam Govindagram. This book describes the valour of the Meiteis in meeting their foes and also gives a reference to the social norms which was followed

by the king before going to the battle-field and also the norm of the reigning victor. 'Awa Ngamba' was written with the initiation of Maharaja Chandrakirti in memory of his late father Maharaj Gambhirsingh who drove out the Burmese from Manipur in 1824 CE. The book was compiled by three pundits-Khumujammacha Pundit, Chingakhammacha Choubatom, Sarangthem Surpanand and Thoudamacha Choubatom by 1871 CE. 'Khahi Ngamba' is also an account king Gambhirsing's expeditions against the Khasis to help the British in 1829 CE and the book is said to have been compiled by Pundit Chingakham Choubaton by late 19th century. All the above-mentioned books have been an immense source of historical information of 18th and 19th century Manipur with specific connection to the changing political scene of Manipur's contact with the British paramount power.

'Poireiton Khunthokpa', which is supposed to have been written, sometime in the 3rd century to 7th century. There is no mention as to who wrote the book and when it was written; and it was written in the archaic language of Manipur. The Poireiton Khunthokpa' is the most prominent among the pre-Garibniwaj manuscripts. From a linguistic perspective, it appears to be significantly earlier than any of the works we have reviewed thus far. Indirect and supplementary evidence would support the notion that the book likely originated in the 3rd century. The text details the process of the valley being settled by a group of individuals originating from the realm of death, led by Poireiton. The colony was initially created in close proximity to Langol Hill. It is likely that their reign encompassed the expansive region between Koubru Hill and Langol Hill. The book explores the contrast between the social structure of Manipur before and after the migration period, as influenced by the reforms implemented by Poireiton and his group of supporters.

'Sanamahi Laikan' is one of the next notable books of historical importance dealing with the impact of the spread of Hinduism in Manipur. This book was written around 18th century in the old archaic language with some mention of a few Sanskrit words. The religious change that took place in 18th century under the patronage of Maharaja Garibniwaj who was converted into a Hindu by Santidas Goshwai is being dealt deeply in this book. It also reveals the steps taken up by the king to make Hinduism an official religion of the state, the spread of the new religion, the burning of old manuscripts and destruction of old idols and its worship places. It gives specific reference to the re-installation of the ancient Manipuri God Sanamahi even amongst the Hindus.

'Chada Laihui' is another book which gives a detail account about the genealogical origin of the queen mothers and their names, the names of the reigning kings of the Ningthouja clans, right from 1st century up to the 19th century. It also describes the qualities of the queen mothers and their forefathers and also gives a geographical description of their ancient home lands. Like the 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' the accounts are recorded in the time of the reigning kings on the previous book already written by the former chroniclers. As written in 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' it was Maharaj Chandrakirti in 1869 CE who ordered to fill up the missing gap of 'Chada Laihui' to Purnachandra Singh and it was written under the direction of 3 pundits- Chingakham Chouton, Sarangthem Suparnanda and Thoudam Chouton. The book is also written in the old archaic language of Manipur.

'Meihouron' is the name of the book which records the genealogical origin of the Meiteis. It describes the origin of the different clans 'Sageis'. It is written in the old archaic language and such a book is normally kept in possession of the head of the Sagei, (the eldest Piba). Such a book on genealogy which was compiled by 1732 CE during the time of Maharaj Garibniwaj which deals with the tree of origin of the 'seven Salais' is known as 'Nongkhrang' and is said to have been written by Hoabam Pukhramba. 'Shangai Phamang' is another such book written by the initiation of Maharaj Chandrakirti as a correction to the genealogical book called 'Kangleiron'. The book was compiled by the three pundits, Pumachandra Singh, Supernanda pundit and Gokulsingh Pundit. The writing of this book commenced by 1872 CE and brought to an end by 1878 CE. All the heads of the Sageis (pibas) were called to the palace and their genealogical records were being referred by these pundits. This book is still a source of authority regarding the origins of the Sageis.

'Nongpok Haram' and 'Nongchup Haram' are books which refer to the immigration of people from the east and west respectively and how they were gradually-absorbed in the various family groups of the Meiteis. The Brahmins of Manipur too are not the original inhabitants of Manipur. The account of their migration is recorded in 'Bamon Khunthoklon'. It is recorded in Cheitharol Kumbaba (page 442) that the genealogical book of the Brahmins was written by 1878 CE during Maharaj Chandrakirti. Thus, we have the accounts of the settlement of the Manipuri Pangals (Muslims) from the beginning of 17th century during the time of Khagemba.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the traditional historical writings of Manipur, particularly through chronicles like the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and other ancient texts, remain vital sources for understanding the region's rich and complex history. These texts not only preserve the socio-political and cultural narratives of Manipuri society but also reflect the deeply intertwined elements of myth, folklore, and verifiable historical events. Despite methodological challenges, such as discrepancies in dating, selective recording, and the evolving nature of historiography influenced by colonialism, these writings continue to be foundational for historical research and the preservation of Manipuri identity. The article underscores the enduring relevance of these traditional narratives in shaping both historical scholarship and the cultural consciousness of Manipur, offering a profound connection between the past, present, and future of the region.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None

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