

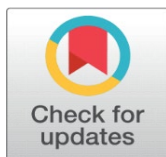
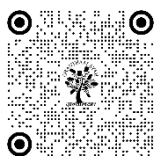
MILITARY ORGANIZATION OF THE ANCIENT KINGDOM OF MANIPUR

Dr. Mk. Washima Begum ¹, Dr. Subhaarati Oinam ², Dr. Sougrakpam Dharmen Singh ³

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of History, D.M. College of Arts, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, Manipur, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Education, N.G. College, Imphal, Manipur, India

³ Associate Professor, Department of History, D.M. College of Arts, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, Manipur, India



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3302](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3302)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Agrarian societies formed a hierarchical social order that included rulers, nobles, soldiers, peasants, laborers, etc. In this complex system soldiers play different role in the society. The army of the ancient kingdom of Manipur consisted of cavalry, infantry, Navy and also included elephants in the later phases. The cavalry was the strongest and most effective organ of the army. In fact, the kings acquired superiority over the troops only because of their horses and it was natural for them to concentrate on cavalry. The cavalymen were expert in defeating the opponents within no time with their intelligence by encircling suddenly so as to surrender and beg for their lives. The methods they used were to strike, slash, pierce, and block to defend themselves moving in circles and by leaping back and back to overwhelm the enemy. During war times the sessions of the military court could be conducted only by the two officials namely Senapati and Ayapurel as the other officials were stuck to the war. The horsemen were armed with swords, a dagger, arambai, catapult or sling moreover a bow and arrows. They not only fought against the neighbouring countries and tribes but also frequently fought with other clans of the same tribes before the absorption of other clan to the Ningthouja clan. The military was very efficient organized and well-equipped and disciplined.

Keywords: Agrarian, army, kingdom, levy, military, Puya, revenue

1. INTRODUCTION

Manipur is one of the easternmost states of India. It lies in between 23.50'N and 25.41'N Latitudes, and 93.2'E and 94.47'E Longitudes. The state was known as Kathe by the Burmese, Moglie by the Cacharis, Meklee by the Assamese and Cassay by the Shans. It was known as Manipur since the 18th century C.E. Manipur was an independent kingdom in the North-eastern part of India bordering Myanmar with a long history of its existence. Manipur's geographical feature is unique and has both hills and plain topography. Several communities inhabit the State. Majority of the populations are the Meiteis community inhabited in the valley area, while more than thirty tribes inhabited the hill areas. From the first century C.E., the Kingdom was ruled by the Ningthouja dynasty, founded by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33C.E. and ruled by his successors as an independent kingdom until 1891, when British India defeated this small Kingdom. In 1891 C.E, after the defeat of the Meiteis by the British in the Anglo-Manipuri war, the sovereignty of Manipur which it had maintained for more than three millenniums was lost. It regained its freedom on 14 August 1947 C.E. On 15 October 1949, Manipur was unified with India.

The history of Manipur is chronicled in Puyas or Puwaris (stories about our forefathers), namely, the Ningthou Kangbalon, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Ningthourol Lambuba, Poreiton Khunthokpa, Panthoibi Khongkul, etc. in the archaic Meitei script. The historical accounts presented here were recordings from the eyes and the judgments of the Meitei Kings and Maichous (Meitei scholars). Hill tribes have their own folk tales, myths, and legends. Manipur's ethnic groups practice a variety of religions. According to 2011 census, Hinduism is the major religion in the state, closely followed by Christianity. Other religions include Islam, Sanamahism, Buddhism, etc.

1.1. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objectives of the paper are to examine the historical development of military organization in Manipur, to assess their roles in society, to study their multiple systems of contributions, etc. of the period, and their contribution in state economy during the pre-colonial period. Study of this type involves a systematic examination of the historical materials. The situation relating to all the aspects of military organization has been examined carefully using the primary and secondary data. An attempt has also been made to analyze the military organization practiced at different points of time before the colonial rules. The research work is an interdisciplinary approach considering various factors relating to agrarian economy which culminates the diverse disciplines like sociology, Political Science, Economics etc., along with indebt historical background.

2. DISCUSSION

Agrarian societies formed a hierarchical social order that included rulers, nobles, soldiers, peasants, laborers, etc. These are also the characteristic features of a feudal society. Their social hierarchy was based on land ownership because their source of income and wealth depended solely upon the land. The term agrarian system has been coined to conceptualize this complex system. In this complex system soldiers play different role in the society. Thus in order to strengthen the administrative system of a state or kingdom the military system is to be well organized.

A military is a collection of armed forces that are highly organized which is used for warfare. Militaries are usually authorized and maintained by a sovereign state which may consist of army, navy, cavalry etc. As for the structures concerned about the military system of Manipur kingdom, it consisted of different systems along with its own structures. The sole check upon political power of the kingdom was armed force. As the kingdom of Manipur was based on military force, they maintained a very strong and efficient army. They needed this army to suppress the internal revolts, attack of the wild animals, repel foreign invasions, crush recalcitrant, collection of taxes and tributes, levies etc.

The military system of the Manipur kingdom was very efficiently organized. It was well-equipped and disciplined. It is generally believed that there was no regular army, the masses forming the militia in times of necessity. Though Manipur was a tiny independent kingdom since ancient times, the war department was there as it had a long history of war and battles. During the monarchical period, it was compulsory for all to learn martial arts and take up military for their own defense from invasions and wild animals. Military service was rendered by all the communities of the kingdom. T.C. Hodson mentioned that the state was at first organized solely for military purposes.¹ As there were frequent clashes among the clans, tribes and other neighbouring states, the people were always in alert of it. So, the military administration of the state was carried out in such a way that, every male member got involved in it. Among the three organizations of the village administration i.e. Keirup, Singlup and Leirup, the Keirup was the military organization in the village level. They were the messengers of war in the village and went for the battle-field as well. They were responsible for catching tiger whenever needed as they were village guards. Singlup (sing means firewood and lup means club) introduced by King Khagemba (1597-1652), was an organization for providing wood at cremations. It is formed by several houses of the leikai joining together. The officials are Gopal Sanglakpa, Gopal Hanjaba and Gopal Hidang. Singlups also lend money on interest.² The members looked after one another when they are ill or death.³

The Manipuries were brave fighters. They had developed their own system of warfare. Earlier every able bodied person had to render military service in times of need and the masses formed the militia in times of necessity. We came to know the existence of a well-organized military system began from the time of king Punshiba (1404 to 1432 C. E.). According to 'Shang Panabagi Mashin', King Punshiba established a department known as 'Shingchep Meira Haijouroi', which literally meant wedge torch swingers. During the reign of king Khagemba (1597-1652), one Khagi or Chinese cannibal attacked the kingdom leaving the people in great distress. When the Manipuri warriors killed those cannibals, the king praised them for saving the land from the turmoil and thus rewarded with food and clothing. Later due to

shortage of daily provisions, they were allotted paddy fields instead of rice and Waithou Lake was allotted for their fish consumption. Hence for being leaders in hunting and fighting, they were called lanmi.⁴

Other duties of the soldiers were also mentioned in the puya 'Shang Panabagi Mashil' like cutting of trees, bamboos, reeds, looking after royal horse and elephant stags, robberies and thieves were to be handled as well as guard them. They had to follow the king whenever he went out and also had to guard him in the nights with torches. The same duties were also mentioned in the puya 'Masillon'. From the above discussion it is clear that they worked as police at the peace time while they worked as army in the war times along with the king.⁵

The Manipuri army was mainly consisted of infantry (Khongmi-Lanmi), cavalry (Sgol-lanmi), Navy (He-lanmi) and elephants in the later phases. The cavalry was the strongest and most effective organ of the army. In fact, the kings acquired superiority over the troops only because of their horses and it was natural for them to concentrate on cavalry. The horsemen were armed with swords, a dagger, arambai, catapult moreover a bow and arrows. The army was headed by a commander-in-chief appointed by the king or king himself for military expeditions. However during the major expeditions, the king himself led the army. The soldiers used cloths of different kind for protection. Their offensive weapons were chiefly consisted of bows and arrows, swords, spears, shield etc. The arrows were made of bamboos and reeds. Poison arrows were also known to them. Swords of various types were also known to the people. Spear and lance were the important weapons used by the soldiers. A special weapon called 'Arambai' was used for fighting from the back of the horse. The head of arambai weapon was covered with iron or iron heated. Its tips were poisoned. For protecting their bodies the soldiers used shields. Canon and guns were also used in the battle. Horses were specially trained for the purpose of battles. There were superintendent of horses, elephant and infantry. The nobles and kings fought from the horses and the common people fought on foot. Banners and drums were used during the war. Whenever the people went on war they usually evoked (invoke) blessing of their gods before and during the war against their enemies. The military expenditure was maintained by the king. King Khagemba, Kyamba and Garibaniwaz personally undertook the military campaign against the Burmese several times.

The Manipuri soldiers never attacked the unarmed enemy and sleeping person, women, children and physically weak people. The cavalry, which was the important wing of the forces but the infantry, was the backbone of the army. The foot soldiers fought with straight sword. The defensive weapon of the foot soldiers was shield which was made from the hide of the Mithun. They also possessed a navy. They used boat to cross the great River and lakes of neighbouring areas. Fortification formed an important part of the military organization. Forts were consisting of three types i.e., brick wall, mud rampart and moat. Most of the forts of the ancient times have been perished. The practice of taking the prisoners of war was in existence. The prisoners were not massacred, but they were allowed to settle in different parts of the valley of Manipur.

During the reign of king Garibaniwaz (1709-1748), the army was organized into three divisions as (i) Khong Lanmi, the Infantry, (ii) Sagol Lanmi, the Cavalry, and (iii) Hee Lanmi, the boat army or Navy. During his times, the cavalry force was the most important division of army among the three. The king had 13 thousand well equipped foot soldiers and another seven thousand foot soldiers as standby as auxiliary forces. More than that every able-bodied male member of the age between eighteen and sixty years were trained to become an accomplished soldier by attending lallup service whenever war occurred. The foot soldiers were equipped with sword, spear, oblong shield etc.⁶ The cavalry used swords, spears, Arambai, Lance, Hunnata (spear to hurl), Taronta, Timenta, whip etc. The king also maintained an adequate number of boats on the Ningthi River in the east and on the Barak River in the west.⁷

The cavalrymen were expert in defeating the opponents within no time with their intelligence by encircling suddenly so as to surrender and beg for their lives. The methods they used were to strike, slash, pierce, and block to defend themselves moving in circles and by leaping back and back to overwhelm the enemy. A horseman would wear his dhoti tucked up to the knee wearing a half sleeved shirt, a pair of gauntlets and greaves moreover a lanphi on the right shoulder across the body with a pair of sandal made of wood (khurum). He wrapped a turban on the head and tied the ends of a turban with a silk thread so as to cover his mouth and chin. A sword was tucked inside the lanphi on the left of the waist furthermore a shield was hung over the chest on the right side and taronta on the right side moreover a timenta was held. On the both sides of the saddle were tucked quivers full of Arambai darts along with whips.⁸ The Manipuri soldiers also used gun and gunpowder against the enemy. Mungyamba (1562-1597) brought guns as war trophies from Khamral (Burma or China), after a war with Khamrals in 1584 C.E. Khagemba (1597-1652) used guns against the Mayangs (Cachar and Tripura). In Pamheiba's (1709-1748) time bell metal canon (Sen Kamran) were used.⁹

The army of Manipur was organized in the decimal system like that of the Mughals. The appointment, retention, promotion and dismissal depended solely on the arbitrary will of the sovereign and no incident of the dignity was heritable. A force of 1000 Manipuri soldiers made a regiment known as 'Tuli' which was commanded by Luchingba. The Manipur army consisted of thirteen Tulis. A Tuli was divided into several lups with many officers headed by Luplakpa.¹⁰ Before the reign of king Khagemba (1597-1652) the number system of the army was done in the decimal form of 10, 50, 100, and 1000. One regiment consisting of 1000 army which was called as 'Lanmi Tengol'.¹¹ But after the battle of Yangoi, Bishnupur in 1606 C.E. against his brother Shanongba, there were certain changes in the military and gave much impact in the society. One Lanmi Tengol was started to name as one Fauji or one Doli, later deviated into Tuli which is a regiment. So, one Fauji or Tuli is equal to a collection of 1000 soldiers. The leader of a Fauj was called Lallup Chingba and also Subedar, Jamandar. The leader of a Tuli was known as Tulinaha major. In a Tuli, seventeen company were there mainly but made of seven company were also existed. So, seven to seventeen companies in a regiment existed. The soldiers were expert in use of all types of weapons including gun, bomb, etc.

There was also another department known as Ningthousenba Loishang which was sole department to guard the king exclusively. They seemed to be the personal bodyguards of the king. pibas belonged to the Ningthousenba Loishang. The piba introduced by the king Naophangba (428-518), was the hereditary head by primogeniture, of the Sagei (family or clan). He settled disputes among the sagei and could also expel anyone from it for bad conduct. A man who has married a widow or a woman who has been divorced cannot be a piba of a sagei.¹² The head of each family or tribe furnishes the proper persons for the different services required for that tribe. The head of the family or the tribe is near the raja, acting as Ningthouseba or personal attendants. The second has to perform in the leikai. The third has the lalmee and the fourth as the sangsaroi.¹³

2.1. LALLUP

During the reign of king Loyumba (1074-1122), the valley of Manipur was divided into six Panna or Lup (division).¹⁴ Each pana sent a team of workers to work for the state as Lallup. All the adult male member of the kingdom were to serve the king by attending the Loisang (office) in the palace ten days in every forty days which was commonly known as Lallup.¹⁵ The Lallup was a military organization, but in the piping times of peace it was made to play a part in the economic life of the country. Indeed, the change which came over it was completed by the introduction of modern weapons, which involved the employment of trained soldiers. Gambhir Singh, who raised and commanded the Manipur levy which operated with success against the Burmese, in the campaigns of 1824-26, maintained the levy as a separate organization, though adhering to the principle which formed the pristine base of the earlier Lallup, mainly, of so many days service and a grant of land. The members of the levy were called lalmi, or men of war and formed a separate division or section of the community. To secure the due and efficient working of the lallup, the six panas were minutely sub divided, the total number of the divisions reaching the high figure of 107, exclusive of the military divisions or regiments and the loi and Naga villages.¹⁶

2.2. ASSIGNMENT OF LANDS

The payment system of the soldiers is very necessary to discuss as the land assignments and grants were closely related to it. Between 1074 C.E. to 1819 C.E., the lalluplanmi didn't get any salary or wages. But, they work it as their fundamental duty towards the state. But, if any lalluplanmi performed some extraordinary task for the State, then they were rewarded with certain types of cloths, one potma of salt along with one or two pari of land which is rent-free. These types of assignments were known as Pangal lou or Manalou. But all the members of the lalluplanmi got their lands assigned to them in lieu of their services according to its position in the system. But, each lalluplanmi were assigned one pari of land.

The emperor of the kingdom regarded himself as the heir of all his subjects and ruthlessly seized the entire property of every deceased official, whose family had to make a fresh start except some consideration for the deceased widow or minor son. The Manalou grant descent from father to son.¹⁷ However, A. A. Howel believes that rent-free land is held during the life of the person to whom it was granted. If his heirs (wives) continue to own these lands, they must pay revenue on them at a rate of not more than twelve pots of dhan per pari. If not, the land reverts to the Raja.¹⁸ In case of Sepoylou / Siphailou, According to G. Kamei's lectures on Manipur History, after the sepoy's death, two sangams of land were given to his son(s) to feed the family. However, if he only had daughters, the land was taken by the king, leaving

nothing behind. It is due to the fact that the son was required to join the army after becoming an adult.¹⁹ As a customary gift from the king, a Brahmin received a pari (hectare) of land as Brahmin lou.²⁰ If he dies, his widow is entitled to two sangam for her support and the support of her children. The rest was returned to the state.

Panggallou is also a type of Manalou that was given as a reward. It is a reward given to those who have excelled and contributed in the field of warriors, according to N. Khelchandra. Around 200 people possessed Panggallou at the time of British annexation of Manipur in 1891. With the increase in population, King Khagemba (1597-1652 C.E.) replaced land grants with the award of a special cloth-like robe as a form of honour known as Pariphi (Awarded prized cloths of special design in the presentation of one pari.) It lasted until 1851.²¹ "Sir James Jhonstone wrote that one part of the Manipuri system, every structure as very admirable and I tried always to encourage it; that the system of rewarding services by honorary distinctions. The permission to wear a peculiar kind of turban, coat, or feather or to assume a certain title was more valued than any money reward and men would exert themselves for years for the coveted distinction."²²

According to A.A. Howel's account on land revenue in Manipur the land assigned to military officials according to hierarchical orders are given as:

- 1) a Rahila receives 6 paris of land
- 2) a Subedar receives 4 paris of land
- 3) a Jamadar receives 3 paris of land
- 4) a Kotwal receives 2 ½ paris of land
- 5) a Havildar receives 2 paris of land
- 6) an Amaldar receives 1 ¾ paris of land
- 7) a Kotondar receives 1 ½ paris of land
- 8) a Sepoy receives 1 ¼ paris of land

2.3. MILITARY COURT

There was a military court known as top garod. Senapati was the head of this military court. The military court is composed of the eight senior army officers, named majors and other officers of the army. In it all cases in which sepoys concerned are heard; it also occasionally takes up other cases.²³ The eight lallupchingbas of the eight regiments were also officers in this court. The military court department was stationed at Imphal. The decision made by this court could be defiled to the cheirap court. During war times the sessions of the military court could be conducted only by the two officials namely Senapati and Ayapurel as the other eight officials were stuck to the war.

The Manipur levy was born (out of the Manipur national struggle against the Burmese rule during the seven years devastation 1819-1826). Maharaja Gambhir Singh (1825-1834) was the creator of the levy and with it he liberated Manipur from the Burmese. David Scott, the agent to the governor general for the north eastern frontier extended help in the operations against the Burmese. And the force of 500 soldiers was originally named Raja Gambhir Singh Levy. By July 1824 recruitment was completed and military training was imparted to them at Badarpur, Cachar which was supervised by one Col. Inns along with Gambhir Singh and Nara Singh. The recruitment was from amongst the Manipuri and some Kacharis. The original Levy consisted of the following categories and ranks.

1) Cavalry: 40

- Sardar: 4
- Troop: 36

2) Infantry: 460

- Subedar: 5
- Jamadar: 10

- 3) Havildar: 10
- Nail: 23
 - Sepoy: 412.24

The Manipur army committed to loyalty, patriotism and devotion to duty. They were solely dedicated to their services for the king without thinking for their own benefits. There were senses of unity regardless of their caste, creed or religion etc. They fought hand in hand for their motherland regardless of their lives. So, the British officials in Manipur mocked them for their devoted and unbeneficial services to their kings and commented that they work only for some rack of clothes and feathers. The army in Manipur was not just a body of mercenaries, men who served only for what they would get and ready at any moment, when things went badly, to desert or transfer themselves to the higher bidder. They lived for the welfare of the state. The kings believed in pure merit and made no distinction between the soldiers on the basis of religion. Manipuris had no system of taking women during their military campaigns. The soldiers who distinguished themselves in meritorious services were given specific rewards and honours further promoted accordingly.

3. CONCLUSION

The Manipuries were brave fighters. They had developed their own system of warfare. For them war was an important institution. They not only fought against the neighbouring countries and tribes but also frequently fought with other clans of the same tribes before the absorption of other clan to the Ningthouja clan. The military was very efficient organized and well-equipped and disciplined. Under the powerful Ningthouja dynasty many military officials were appointed to run the revenue administration. They received land in the form of salary for their service to the state according to their responsibility. Military service was rendered by all the communities of the kingdom. The army was mainly consisted of infantry, cavalry and Navy headed by a commander-in-chief appointed by the king. During the major expeditions, the king himself led the army. The soldiers used cloths of different kind for protection and weapons Fortification formed an important part of the military organization. They never attacked the unarmed enemy, women, children and physically weak people. The prisoners were allowed to settle in the valley of Manipur. The military expenditures were maintained by the rulers. Because of all these system the Manipuri kings effectively controlled a large territory between India and Burma/Myanmar from the first century to the nineteen century C.E.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- T.C. Hodson, *The Meiteis*, 1999, Delhi, Low Price Publications, p.93.
 J.C. Higgins, *Notes on Meithei (Manipuri) Beliefs and Customs*, 1998, p. 89.
 J.C. Higgins, 1998, op. cit., p. 110.
 N. Indramani Singh, *The Socio-Cultural and Historical Accounts of Manipur*, p.182, and mashil.
 A. Chitreshwor Sharma, *Meitei Lairik Masillon*, 2020, p.91.
 N.Indramani Singh, op. cit., p.195.
 Ibid., pp.196-197.
 Ibid., p. 183.
 J.C. Higgins, 1998, op. cit., p.109-110.
 Ibid., p.196.
 R.K.Sanahal, *Satjal*, pp.82-83.
 J.C. Higgins, 1998, op. cit., p.86.
 T.C. Hodson, 1999, op. cit., p.63

- S. Dharmen Singh, 2005, *Hindu Temple Architecture in Manipur*, Ph. D. Thesis, p. 61.
- Ibid, p.61.
- T.C. Hodson, 1999, op. cit., p.60.
- N. Birchandra Singh, Proceeding of MHS, 8th session, 2015, p. 208.
- A.A. Howell, *Land Revenue in Manipur*.
- Dr. S. Sanatombi and Dr. P. Nabachandra, & N. Khelchadnra, op. cit., p. 2.
- G. Kamei, op. cit., p. 50.
- W. Jibonlata, op. cit., p. 46.; N. Ibobi, op. cit., p.176.
- J. Jhonstone, *My Experiments in Manipur and the Naga Hills*, 1896, p. 142.
- R. brown, *Statistical accounts of the native states of Manipur and the hill territory under its rule*, 1873, Calcutta, p.92.
- Souvenir: Historic peace march of the Manipuri Diaspora; Prof. Gangmumei Kamei: *The Glorious Exploits Of the Manipur Levy*, 1824- 35, p.7.