

## **Agricultural Folk Songs of Manipur: A Historical Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Folksong can be regarded as the one of the most important sources for the reconstruction of early history of Manipur. In the early Manipuri society, people usually recorded the important events in the form of folksongs. Every agrarian society was associated with rites and rituals to boost the productive forces. Manipuri society has also various folk songs which are associated with the practice of agriculture in Manipur valley since time immemorial. They are LoutaIshei, LouyallIshei, NonglaoIshei, etc. The present tries to highlight the agricultural folksongs of Manipur and its importance for the reconstruction of history of early agrarian society of Manipur.

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**Keywords:** Agrarian, LoutaIshei, Loyal Ishei, NonglaoIshei,

Folk songs have always been an integral part of the oral tradition of agrarian societies across the globe. It passed down through generations. Every region of the world has its own set of songs that usher in different phases of the cultivating cycle such monsoon, sowing and harvesting. A folksong is a lyrical, simple, not too artistic, rhythmic of the folk. It is not an expression of the sophisticated mind. It generally reflects the social heritage, the environment, the joys and sorrows, problems and worries of the life of the folk living in a particular territory. Its chief characteristic lies in a fine blending of its wordings in unison with the tune in which it is sung. It is characterized by a spontaneous simple, but natural melody that springs from the emotion of the common people – an emotion caused by the natural surroundings. It has its

literature embedded in the oral tradition which is transmitted from one generation to another orally.<sup>1</sup> Folksongs provide us with knowledge, knowledge not only of the words, tunes and background of a specific song, but of the historical which that song expresses.

Folksongs are part and parcel of the life of the people of Manipur. The unsophisticated songs of the boatmen and the peasants, which are pregnant with spontaneous utterances and characteristic expressions of their feelings without the influence of any conscious art constitute a beautiful genre of folklore material of the Manipuris.<sup>2</sup> According to Bowers, “Manipuri singing itself has a unique flavor and quality which differentiates it from any other related art. In folksongs . . . the peculiar genius of Manipuri vocal methods is strikingly demonstrated.”<sup>3</sup>

Manipur was formerly a sovereign kingdom ruled by its kings having a magnificent history of about two thousand years. The present state of Manipur is bounded on the north by Nagaland, on the south by Mizoram and Burma, on the east by Burma. There is rich natural flora and fauna and the state had been described by the Britishers as the “plant hunters paradise”.<sup>4</sup> Agriculture is the main occupation of the people of Manipur. According to the 1881 census, out of 2, 21, 070 people engaged in different occupations, about 1, 03, 937 were agriculturalist.<sup>5</sup> Agriculture is not only the main source of livelihood of the overwhelming majority, but also a tradition and a way of life that moulds the socio-economic status of the people.

Manipur has a unique cultural heritage. There are various written sources dealing with the history of Manipur but these sources provide us mostly the political history. We came across little information dealing with agriculture. However, the Manipuri chronicles and ancient Manipuri literatures called *Puya* records the discovery of paddy, invention of agriculture, practice of shifting cultivation and land revenue system. But the information mentioned in *Puyas* cannot be verified scientifically mainly because of the serious absence of archaeological findings.<sup>6</sup> Further from the agricultural rites, ritual songs and folktales, we can reconstruct the agrarian society in Manipur valley.

In the early Manipuri society, people usually recorded the important events in the form of folksongs. Folksong is known as *KhullakIshei*<sup>7</sup> in Manipuri. Manipuri folksongs can be categorized into: songs of religious and rituals, songs of love and yearning, songs sung in

connection with certain ceremonies, work songs and lullabies, rhymes and game songs. Every agrarian society was associated with rites and rituals to boost the productive forces. Songs connected with agricultural activities include various types of work songs, such as those for harvesting and threshing; songs connected with the cultivation of different plants, and the songs accompanying the task of the winter.<sup>8</sup> Manipuri society has also various folk songs associated with the agricultural activities. The followings were the agricultural folksongs which were sung by the people of Manipur valley from the time immemorial:

**i. *NonglaoEshei* or Rain making song**

Nong O chutharo

Lanjingmatonthumhatlo

Pasoinurabitaotharo

Wunampakhangkhunjaro

Koupakoununong o

Loichingloiyanong o

Yirenyikhamnong o

Thangchingkoirelnong o

Wangprelkhanachaobanong o

Sampumaharapanong o

Chingkheinongpoknong o

Haokapchingshangnong o

Khunphamngangchengnong o

Leirinonglihouro

Leikhongnongkhongnem o

Koroukhontumkhonglak o

Mallemeleirumpilumkhatlak o

Laijayithapinangthapirak o

Laijayikhaipinangkhaipirak o<sup>9</sup>

*Translation:*

Pour down O rain  
Submerge the top of *Langching*  
Wash down the girls of *Patsoi*  
Collect the young men of *Unam*  
Rain of the *Kobru* hills  
Rain of the foothills and hillocks  
Rain of the *Iri*river  
Rain of the *Thangching* hills  
Rain of *WangbrenThanachaoba*  
Rain of *ShambunMaharaba*  
Rain of the east  
Rain of the hill ranges of *Haokap*  
Rain of the *KhunphamNgangjeng*  
Sprout rainclouds in heaven and earth  
Lower the firmaments of the sky  
Bring the roaring thunders  
Make the sky heavier than ever  
Come down O *Laijaethabi*  
Pour down O rain.

**ii. *LoutaEshei* or Tilling Song**

PoreiKhunjahup  
Tayumnaija tin  
Yotleinongthangkup  
Thpurilisangtoi  
Tengpaklallusa  
Harunonggafou

Porommata sham  
Kaithetmarutup  
Yupakhuman tan  
Yangdoumamei sham  
Wahikoktaitup  
Lourishundaiyan  
Pirenmachikhom  
Khaleingamthungle.<sup>10</sup>

*Translation:*

Gathered are the village folks  
Attendants are also assembled  
Lighting spades strike  
Conquering the length of the earth  
Crushing the land into crumbles  
Grass covered earth is dried  
And, the grass are hewed  
Useless plants are destroyed  
Digging what is dug up again  
Repeating the strikes of the spades  
The heads of *wahis* are chopped off  
The edges of the *Louri* are cleaned  
And, the grass are collected and dumped  
The earth thus is covered.<sup>11</sup>

**iii. LouyanEshei<sup>12</sup>**

Epalouniyalluhe

Hey yanse  
Epulouniyalluhe  
Hey yanse  
Leipakmaratapnabalouniyalluhe  
Hey yanse  
Ningthoupunsinabalouniyalluhe  
Hey yanse  
Khunjaoleichaolouniyalluhe  
Hey yanse  
Maheimarongchumnabalouniyalluhe  
Hey yanse  
Punshinungsanglounidayalluhe  
Hey yanse  
Shougrimayangbalounidayalluhe  
Hey yanse  
Lombafadigomlounidayalluhe  
Hey yanse  
Phourelphoujaolounidayalluhe  
Hey yanse  
Singkhasingthumlouniyalluhe  
Hey yanse.<sup>13</sup>

*Translation:*

My father's field it is  
Let's till  
My forefathers' field it is  
Let's till  
Till the field for a peaceful kingdom  
Let's till

Till the field for the king's long life  
Let's till  
Till the field for a prosperous kingdom  
Let's till  
Till the field for bountiful crops  
Let's till  
Till the field for sougri and mayangba  
Let's till  
Till it for it is the field for lomba and fadigom  
Let's till  
Till it for the field for phourel and phoujao  
Let's till  
Till it for it is the field for singkha and singthum  
Let's till.<sup>14</sup>

**iv. PhousuEshei or Pounding Song**

Hayumyanbathoudangkok  
Shingchallakuhairaga  
Phoupurakpayannaba  
Nangnachakpuhairaga  
Phougakchajiknamthiba  
Chakpusanapijage  
Nangnayengshabghairaga  
Laphuyendemthumnamdabi  
Yengshangbusanapijage  
Nangnangabuhairaga  
Khongbandagungachakna  
Ngabupijage  
Nagnathumbuhairag

Phaklangleibakoinamba  
Thumbusanapijage  
Hayumyanabakoudrangko.<sup>15</sup>

*Translation:*

Told you to collect firewood  
But brought paddy instead  
So, when you demand cooked rice  
Will offer in its place  
Stinky phougak leftover  
When you want cooked vegetable  
Will treat you  
Salt less laphuyendem stew  
When you want fish  
Tadpole from a drain  
Will be offered instead when you say salt  
Tasty earth from the earthen wall  
Will be given as a substitute.<sup>16</sup>

*Another PhousuEshei:*

Mishigisumbalmaipakpi  
Sheiyisuktitananbi  
Leihousintaktunanbi  
Leihousintakpathetla  
Monugiyangkokmangdatham  
Sheyishuktitananbi  
Khurakleika yenta pai  
Hayumgikoloitoydashon  
Sheiyisuktitananbi  
Korouthaktathangkatle

Monugipukshithuithapna  
Malemleidathadare  
Nuragikhwangdipolhainei  
Hayumkoloishonduna  
Pathougishumangmathoupung'chengjamaingoutanshido.<sup>17</sup>

*Translation:*

Broad faced marta made from mishi  
Clean and shining pestle made from sayi  
A round winnowing fan of Leihousintak  
Placing a woman's winnowing fan in front  
Clean and shining pestle made from sayi  
Holding it by both the hands  
Praising *Hayum*, the Almighty God name repeatedly  
Clean and shining pestle made from sayi  
She raises it in the sky  
Her belly getting squeezed  
Lowers it towards the mortar  
A woman's hips move to and fro  
Praising the name of god  
Turning the father's courtyard into a workplace  
Let's pound to produce the whitest rice.<sup>18</sup>

**V. PhoukouEshei<sup>19</sup>**

O Goddess, *Phouoibi*, the goddess of paddy  
Come, come, come  
Make for us heaps of *ThangyiPhou* (paddy)  
Come, come, come  
Bless us with hills of *ThangyiPhou*(paddy)  
Come, come, come

Goddess *Phouoibi*

Come, come, come.<sup>20</sup>

There are also some work songs related with agricultural activities. One of the popular work songs is *Ha UritNapangbi*. Generally it is sung by the women while guarding the paddy from the birds. A portion of *Ha UritNapangbi* song is as given:

Ha! Uritnapangbi

Namanakouwetadabi

Napanakouwetadabi

Yaya ho

Yaya ho!

*Translation:*

Ha! Tailorbird, a deaf bird,

No response to the call of your mother.

No response to the call of your father.

Yaya ho

Yaya ho!<sup>21</sup>

The history of Manipuri folksongs could be said to be as old as the history of Manipur language and culture. In Manipuri society, folksongs play an important part in fulfilling the ritual functions of various rites, and ceremonies. They are also sung in praise of gods and goddesses. Besides, they are sung while observing certain festivals. Folksongs in relation of agriculture are one of the traditional assets for Manipur. It describes the various features of nature in general and agriculture in particular for understanding them in a comprehensive way. It simply shows the close relationship of the local inhabitants with the natural phenomenon.<sup>22</sup>

The practice of primitive agriculture is also evident from the various agricultural rites, ritual songs and folksongs in the valley of Manipur. The recording of important events in songs or in the form of folktales were very popular in the early Manipuri society. In the last day of *Laiharaoba* festival, a dance ritual known as *Pam Yanbais* performed. It demonstrates the

practice of shifting cultivation. Lai Haraoba is a most popular festival of Manipur which is linked with the tradition, ritual and belief of the Manipuri society. It displays Manipuri way of living, tradition and customs as well as it is the original source of dance, music, rites and rituals, indigenous games and primitive live of Manipur. *Laiharaoba* serves as the most authentic source for the reconstruction of history of early Manipur. Regarding the practice of agriculture in early Manipur, various folksongs are also sung in the Laiharaoba festival such as *Loutarol*, *LouyalIshei*, etc.

**Notes and Reference**

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- <sup>1</sup>HuiremBihari Singh, A Study of Manipuri (Meitei) Folklore, Ph.D. Thesis Manipur University, 1985, p. 313
- <sup>2</sup> L. Birendrakumar Singh, 'Manipuri Folk Music in *The Assam Academy Review*, Spl. Volume Focus On Folklore No. 1, 1983-84, p. 78.
- <sup>3</sup> F. Bowers, *The Dance in India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1953, p. 185.
- <sup>4</sup> M. Bhattacharya, *Gazetteer of Manipur State*, Anushilan Press, Calcutta – 13, 1963, p. 16.
- <sup>5</sup> E. W. Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur*, Delhi, Vivek Publishing House, 1975, p.5.
- <sup>6</sup> N. Joykumar Singh, *Emergence of Manipur as a Nation State (From Prehistory to Mid Eighteenth Century)*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 102
- <sup>7</sup>*Khullak* means village and *Ishei* means song.
- <sup>8</sup> Maria Leach (Ed.), *The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Methodology and Legend*, Vol. 2, New York, 1950, p.1034
- <sup>9</sup> Dr. Ksh. Premchandra Singh, Tracing Lost Tunes of Manipur in *Souvenir of Shum Hongba Festival*, Peoples' Museum, Kakching, 2016, pp. 11, 12
- <sup>10</sup> N. Khelchandra Singh, *Ariba Manipuri SahitiyagiItihas*, Imphal, 1969, p. 8
- <sup>11</sup> Dr. Ksh. Premchandra Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 8
- <sup>12</sup>*Lou* means paddy field and *Yan* means to dig or till and *Eshei* means song.
- <sup>13</sup> Dr. Ksh. Premchandra Singh, *op.cit.*, pp. 8, 9
- <sup>14</sup>*Ibid*
- <sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 10
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid*
- <sup>17</sup>*Ibid*
- <sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p.11
- <sup>19</sup>*Phou* means paddy and *Kou* means calling.
- <sup>20</sup>HuiremBehari Singh, *op.cit.*, 1985, p. 324

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 349

<sup>22</sup> A.K. Bhalerao Bagish Kumar, A.K. Singha, P.C. Jat, R. Bordoloi, A.M. Pasweth Bidyut, C. Deka, *Agricultural Folk Songs of Manipur*, ICAR - Atari, Zone – III, Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Umiam, Meghalaya, 2016, p. 4