

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 Louta Ishei, Louyallshei, Nonglao Ishei, 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.

Keywords: Agrarian, Louta Ishei, Loy al Ishei, Non glao Ishei,

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.¹ 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.² 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."³

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".⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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*⁷ 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.⁸ Manipuri society has also various folk songs associated with the agricultural activities. The followings were the agricultural folk songs which were sung by the people of Manipur valley from the time immemorial:

i. *NonglaoEshei* or Rain making song

Nong O chutharo
Lanjingmatonthumhatlo
Paso inurabitaotharo
Wunampakhangkhunjaro
Koupakoununong o
Loichingloiyangong o
Yirenyikhamnong o
Thangchingkoirelnong o
Wangprelkhanchaobanong o
Sampumaharapanong o
Chingkhainongponkong o
Haokapchingshangnong o
Khunphamngangchenngong o
Leirionglihouro
Leikhongnongkhongnem o
Koroukhontumkhonglak o
Mallemlerumpilumkhatlak o
Laijayithapinangthapirak o
Laijayikhaipinangkhairak o⁹

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 *Iril*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 TillingSong**

PoreiKhunjahup
Tayumnaija tin
Yotleinon gthan gkup
Thpurilisangtoi
Tengpaklallusa
Harunonggafou
Porommata sham
Kaihetmarutup
Yupakhuman tan
Yangdoumamei sham
Wahikoktaitup
Lourishundayan
Pirenmachikhom

Khaleingamthungle.¹⁰

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.¹¹

iii. *LouyanEshai*¹²

Epabouniy alluhe
Hey yanse
Epulouniy alluhe
Hey yanse
Leipakmaratap nabalouniy alluhe
Hey yanse
Ningthoupunsinabalouniy alluhe
Hey yanse
Khunjaoleichaolouniy alluhe
Hey yanse
Maheimarongchumnabalouniy alluhe
Hey yanse
Punshinungsan glouniday alluhe

Hey y anse
Shougrimayangba louniday alluhe
Hey y anse
Lombafad i gomlouniday alluhe
Hey y anse
Phourelphoujaolouniday alluhe
Hey y anse
Singkhasin g humlouniy alluhe
Hey y anse.¹³

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 may angba
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.¹⁴

iv. PhousuEshei or Pounding Song

Hayummy an bathoudangkok
Shingch all akuhairaga
Phouपुरakpay annaba
Nangnachakpuhairaga
Phougakch ajikn amthiba
Chakpusanap ijage
Nangnay en gshab ghairaga
Laphuyendemthumnamdabi
Yengshan gbusanapijage
Nangnan gabuhairaga
Khongbandagun gachakna
Ngabupijage
Nagnathumbuhairag
Phaklangleibakoinamba
Thumbusanapijage
Hayummy anabakoudran gko.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

Another *PhousuEshei*:

Mishigisumbalmaipakpi
Sheyisuktitunanbi
Leihousintaktunanbi
Leihousintakpathetla
Monugiyangkokmangdatham
Sheyishuktitunanbi
Khurakleikayenta pai
Hayumgikoloitoy nashon
Sheyisuktitunanbi
Korouthaktathangkatle
Monugipukshithuithapna
Malemleidathadare
Nuragikhwangdipolhainei
Hayumkoloishonduna
Pathougishuman gmathoupung'chen gmain goutanshido.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

V. PhoukouEshei¹⁹

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.²⁰

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!²¹

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.²²

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 *Laiharaoaba* 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. *Laiharaoaba* 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 *Laiharaoaba* festival such as *Loutarol*, *Louyallshei*, etc.

Notes and Reference

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⁵ E. W. Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur*, Delhi, Vivek Publishing House, 1975, p.5.

⁶ N. Joykumar Singh, *Emergence of Manipur as a Nation State (From Prehistory to Mid Eighteenth Century)*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 102

⁷ *Khullak* means village and *Ishei* means.

⁸ Maria Leach (Ed.), *The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Methodology and Legend*, Vol. 2, New York, 1950, p.1034

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- ⁹ Dr. Ksh. Premchandra Singh, Tracing Lost Tunes of Manipur in *Souvenir of Shum Hongba Festival*, Peoples' Museum, Kakching, 2016, pp. 11, 12
- ¹⁰ N. Khelchandra Singh, *Ariba Manipuri Sahitiyagiltihas*, Imphal, 1969, p. 8
- ¹¹ Dr. Ksh. Premchandra Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 8
- ¹² *Lou* means paddy field and *Yan* means to dig or till and *Eshei* means song.
- ¹³ Dr. Ksh. Premchandra Singh, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 9
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11
- ¹⁹ *Phou* means paddy and *Kou* means calling.
- ²⁰ HuiemBehari Singh, *op.cit.*, 1985, p. 324
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 349
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