

Traditional Fishing Systems In Manipur

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Abstract:

The occupation of fishing has been deeply intertwined with the historical and cultural fabric of Manipur, both before and after its formal state formation. This study delves into the diverse fishing practices employed by the early inhabitants of Manipur, highlighting the significance of its topographical and ecological landscape in fostering a rich fishing tradition. From the pre-modern era to contemporary times, fishing has not only served as a vital source of sustenance but also as a way of life for the Meiteis and other communities dwelling in the valley. Traditional fishing techniques such as scoop nets, plunge cover baskets, spike fishing, and long-line fishing have been meticulously passed down through generations, reflecting a deep-seated connection between the people and their natural surroundings. Moreover, the establishment of fishing weirs and canals under the patronage of local chiefs and leaders has played a pivotal role in augmenting fish capture and facilitating pisciculture. Through the lens of historical accounts and folklore, this study elucidates the intricate network of fishing weirs and canals, each bearing unique names and cultural significance. Furthermore, the integration of fishing into agricultural practices underscores its multifaceted role in Manipuri society. Cultivators, during the rice cultivation season, engaged in fishing within their fields, utilizing homemade nets and rectangular fishing tools to supplement their livelihoods. The study also sheds light on the seasonal dynamics of fishing, delineating between 'Akashoy' and 'Akumshoy' practices conducted during periods of varying water levels. Notably, the introduction of the 'Patchaba' system aimed at protecting designated lake areas further exemplifies the cultural reverence for fishing and its ecological significance. Overall, this research provides valuable insights into the historical evolution and cultural significance of fishing in Manipur, highlighting its enduring role as a cornerstone of livelihood and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Manipur, Fishing techniques, Traditional fishing methods, Fishing weir, Pisciculture, Cultivation and fishing, Shoy (weir) management, Ecological settings, Cultural heritage, Agricultural fields fishing, Topographical features, Seasonal fishing practices, Canal construction, Indigenous fishing tools, Patchaba system

Introduction:

In the annals of Manipur's history, the practice of fishing emerges as not merely an occupation but a cornerstone of cultural identity and sustenance. Long before the formalization of agricultural practices, fishing thrived as the primary livelihood for the early inhabitants of Manipur. The region's topographical and ecological diversity, characterized by sprawling lakes, meandering rivers, and lush marshlands, naturally beckoned its people towards the bounties of aquatic life. Through the corridors of time, Manipur nurtured a rich tapestry of traditional fishing methods, each meticulously crafted to suit the nuances of its varied aquatic landscapes. From the intricate artistry of scoop nets and plunge cover baskets to the utilitarian efficiency of spike fishing and long-line techniques, the ingenuity of Manipuri fishermen resonates through the ages. The Meiteis, in particular, embraced fishing as an integral aspect of their pre-modern way of life. Their small-scale commercial and subsistence fishing practices, steeped in tradition, underscored a profound symbiosis with the waters that sustained them. As the socio-political landscape evolved, so too did the dynamics of fishing in Manipur. The establishment of fishing weirs and canals, under the stewardship of local chiefs and leaders, not only enhanced fish capture but also reflected the intricate interplay between human ingenuity and environmental stewardship. Moreover, fishing transcended mere economic sustenance, permeating the

very fabric of Manipuri society. Legends abound of chiefs and rulers who, through the construction of fishing weirs and canals, not only sought to augment their fish yield but also to entrap animals, exemplifying the intricate interdependence between human communities and their natural surroundings. In the realm of agricultural pursuits, fishing is seamlessly integrated into the rhythm of life. Cultivators, during the rice cultivation season, turned their attention to the waters that enriched their fields, employing homemade nets and fishing tools to supplement their livelihoods. Throughout Manipur's history, fishing not only provided sustenance but also served as a conduit for cultural exchange and community cohesion. As the waters ebbed and flowed, so too did the rhythms of life in Manipur, perpetuating a timeless bond between its people and the aquatic realms that have shaped their identity for generations.

During the pre and post-state formation, the people of Manipur engaged in various occupations. Before field agriculture was properly introduced fishing was the major occupation engaged by the early people of Manipur. However, the topographical and ecological settings of Manipur would attract large people to engage in fishing. Most of the valley dwellers engaged in lake and river fishing. No doubt fishing is their way of life. However, natural water bodies like numerous lakes, canals, rivers, swampy and marshy areas etc would attract a large section of people to engage in fishing. Since the early times, Manipur has practised a wide array of fishing methods that have evolved traditionally. They perform various types of fishing like fishing with long gil (net) and il (net), fishing with spike, fishing with long-khonba, fishing with phum-thaba, fishing with a scoop net, fishing with long and short line, fishing with various sizes and box trap, fishing with making holes along with canals and ponds, fishing with establishing fishing wiers etc.

Fishing was the way of life of the Meiteis during the pre-modern period. But their fishing is kind of small-scale commercial or substantial fishing practices using traditional techniques such as Long-thrai (scoop net), Long-ooop (plunge over basket), Long-Khonba (scoop basket), Long-thinba (Spike fishing), Khoishang-thaba (long line fishing), Khoi-chopa (pole line fishing), Khoiya-thaba (short pole line), Khoitek Thaba (short pole line), Phum Namba (encircle fishing), Taijep-lu (box trap), Kabo-lu (tubular trap), Shouraru (conical trap), Nupi-il (lift net), Lang-thaba (gill net), Iljao-thaba (dip net).

Long-thrai (scoop net), this gear is circular in shape and knitted by the village net makers by using cotton thread and small tools like Kata and tem made of bamboo pieces. A net is put on the round frame made of bigger bamboo strips and it was tied with thread. A long bamboo handle measuring about 9 feet long is fixed across the round frame. It is mainly operated from a boat by a fisherman.

Long-ooop (plunge cover basket): it is made of prongs of bamboo sticks and can strip after proper polish. It is a bell-shaped basket having 3 ½ feet in height and diameter of about 6 ½ feet and a top opening diameter of 5". The top opening of this tool is tied with cane strips. In the middle part, there is a line of bamboo strips tied with a cane. A similar strip is made to the foot of the basket. Usually, it is used by both men and women.

Long-Khonba (scoop basket): This gear is a smaller circular in shape having about 2' height made of smaller bamboo strips. The top of the basket is rounded with two strips of Kanam extract from bamboo and it is tied with cane strips. This basket is mainly handled by women in the marshy and swampy areas and swallow lake areas during the dry season.

Long-thinba (spike fishing): A round 7-9 prongs of small bamboo sticks thoroughly polished with tin point at the tips. The prepared sticks are fixed to a bamboo pole having about 10' long with cane strips. It is handled by man to fish during the dry season. Sometimes they use it as a tool to protect from snakes and other wild animals dwelt in the fishing areas of the lake.

Khoishang -thaba (long line fishing): It is one of the important gear done by the male section throughout the year. A long thread measuring about 90-100 m long is arranged and multiple hooks are knotted to the thread by making an interval of 2m. Before setting angling or long-line fishing area of the lake is cleaned. It is normally operated from the boat. However, one end of the thread is tied firmly to the bamboo pole. While setting long line fishing, the hooks can be dressed with lures or baits by the fisherman. The operation of this gear is done during the evening and after an interval of a night fishermen set forth to collect fishes.

Khoiya and Khoitek thaba (short pole line): Tou (Phragmites karka) is cut into 3' long and a thread is tied to it. At the end of the thread a hard part piece of bamboo known as Kanam was fixed. It is again dressed with lures or baits. It is the oldest form of short pole line fishing in Manipur practised by the fishermen. Later on, Khoiya was renamed a Khoitek (short pole line). Besides, the traditional hard part of the bamboo piece was also replaced with a modern harpoon. Normally, short pole line fishing was done early morning. It is operated by the male section alone from the boat [1].

Fishing in agricultural fields is another pattern of fishing pattern by the Meiteis since the commencement of field agriculture in Manipur. Such a pattern of fishing was done by the cultivators in their respective fields. When the fields were covered with enough water to grow rice, fishing was usually carried out by the cultivators. This system of fishing was commonly practised in many of the cultivable areas of the valley. The cultivators fished in such areas by using homemade nets and lu (rectangular fishing tools made of bamboo pieces and either cane strips or plastic strips).

However, during the reign of Luwang chief Shapaina, Lamphel Shoy Wier was established. They planned it not only to catch plenty of new and fresh fish but also to entrap animals. He was responsible for digging two different pisciculture of Ngaroi fish (*Crossocheilus burmanicus hora*) [2]. Mkubi Shoy (weir) was built under the complete supervision of Luwang Salai Hanba. It was particularly prepared for fishing. Nambul Shoy (weir) was given to Yumburembi of Kanglei as a dowry when she was married to Thangyi Ningthouba of Luwang. They had three sons like Naoremton. The management of this Shoy (weir) was handed over to their eldest son Pathang Ahanba. The two types of fishing such as Aka Shoy (fishing during the flood season) and Akum Shoy (fishing during the winter of the dry season) were done in the aforementioned Shoy in two alternative seasons. During the rainy season, various number of fishes were caught in this Shoy. Another form of fishing like Akum Shoy was carried out during the winter season in which particular Ngashep fish (*Mysrus bleekeri*) were caught in such Nambul Shoy. Later on, the right of management of this Shoy was passed to their youngest son Naoremton at the instigation of his mother. However, Nambul Shoy was given different names i.e., Lumpu Shoy, Hekap Shoy, Heshgotpan Ngashep Leikang-Ee, Akum Lairak- Ee and Lanloi Chingareng Khamla Loukhnong Shoy [2].

Probably, at Kanglei Wakhei Kon of Turel Langmei Pung (Heipok River), there was a shoy owned by Theba Nahakpa. The Kanglei chief exercised his power over this shoy (weir). He allowed Heirem-Khunjam clan women to catch fish at the Heipok River. Khaba Shokchrongba is also fully prepared to catch fish in this river [3]. Heirem Khunchem erected a 'Pn' or dike across a canal fallen into Konte Pat or lake. Here, he created a shoy by using Kharai (made of knitted bamboo pieces). Metal shoy was owned by Thingkonpa, a young man of Heiren [4]. The chief of the Heirem was responsible for making the Heirem Nongyai Khong canal mainly for fishing purposes. This canal was also known as Ngakha Khong (*Puntius puntio*) This fishing canal was developed typically. When a cow went through it, the cow's tail did not touch the water of this canal; when a pig crossed it, the entire body of the pig could not be covered by the water of the canal; when a dog passed over it, dog's belly did not touch canal water [5]. It was mainly meant to allow the fish to grow and multiply this canal. It developed as an indigenous method to culture fish. During the reign of Puriklai, fishing 'Shoy' (Weir created across the canal or stream to catch fish) was established at Ungamel near the confluence of the Khuga and the Manipur River. Its main object is to catch plenty of fish. Ningthou or Chief Puriklai Miyom Michaoba of Moirang unearthed Moirang Nongkangkhang at Khoiritak particularly to trap animals. In order to facilitate fishing, he initiated to set-up of the Laphu Khumtam Shoy (Weir) Keke Kokpa Naoremthong Huithouba canal was built for fishing purposes. Chief Yoirel Tompokpa accomplished to create Khuyon Penba Shoy not only to catch Pengba Fish (*Osteobrama belangeri*) but also to get a water transport facility [6]. Sanathoibi Shoy is located between the Khuman clan and Heirem Khuncham clan territories and was owned by Kege Moirang Leima Angom Ningol Sanathoibi [7].

Meitei Leima Koubaron Taipongambi took part in considering with her husband King Khagemba to catch fish like Penba and Ngawa easily whenever they needed. With this idea, she initiated to dig of a fishing canal called Leima Taipombi Lemlei Ngayok Khong [8].

It is significant to explain that during the off-season water of the lake, swamps and marshes were drained through the canals and the streams to make it convenient for cultivation and settlement. Presumably, a low-level Pn or dike was built across the rivers and streams were made by using clay, wood and bamboo. When the inundated water backs through the canals, with the help of big and small 'Shouraru' (a kind of cone-shaped fishing tool made of bamboo and cane pieces), different varieties of fish were caught abundantly. Such a system of catching fish is known as Shoychaba who looks after the work of fishing of the 'Shoy' area (where the Pn or fishing wier constructed across the canals or streams). The system was divided into 'Akashoy' (done during the rainy season when the water level increases) and 'Akumshoy' (done during the winter season when the water level decreases). Some of the important 'Khongs' dug under the initiation of the state are Nongmaikhong, Ungamel Marin, Nganan Marin, Komnakhong, Phabakchao Khongjin,

Shamushang, Maramba Marine, Nahakhong, Mahrani Khong etc. Shoy or wiers were set up in these aforesaid canals. There were a number of streams like Irumbi Streams of Naransena, Moirang Turel (river), Yangoi Turel, Langkambi Marin etc, which were maintained by the 'Shoychaba' (who looked after or owned of fishing wier), particularly for fishing purpose. With the introduction of the 'Patchaba' (Pat=lake, Chaba=person who looks after the protected lake area) system, some portions of different lakes of the kingdom were made as protected fishing areas.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the Meitei kings collected fish as revenue in the early, medieval and late 19th centuries from reserved lakes and state-owned shoys. Fish is a compulsory preferable supplementary diet of the Meiteis. Probably, the Meitei kings were involved in making fishing Shoys, canals, dredging swamps etc to catch plenty of fish. Therefore, an organised fishing system was an inevitable task of the Meitei kings to maintain the proper economic condition of the Kingdom.

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