



# YAOSHANG: A UNIQUE FESTIVAL OF RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

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## Abstract

Festivals are an expressive way to celebrate our glorious heritage, culture and traditions. They are meant to rejoice special moments and emotions in our lives with our loved ones. They play an important role to add structure to our social lives, and connect us with our families and backgrounds. They give us a distraction from our day to day, exhausting routine of life, and give us some inspiration to remember the important things and moments in life.

India has a rich culture and a large number of festivals are celebrated throughout the year in the various states of India. One such state in India is Manipur which is famous for its varied festivals. So much vibrancy can be seen in the various festivals celebrated throughout the year in the various parts of the state.

The most popular celebration is 'Yaoshang' (Holi), which is celebrated for five days, commencing from the full moon day of *Lamda* (February-March). 'Thabal Chongba', a type of Manipuri folk dance, where boys and girls hold hands and sing and dance in a circle, is primarily associated with this festival.

Along with the many festivals celebrated in Maipur, Yaoshang contributes to social bonding as Yaoshang is not only about religious festivities but also about games and sports that bring together people from all walks of life. It is like a mini Olympiad particularly in the valley districts of Manipur. Nowadays, indigenous events and academic activities for children have been introduced which also gives a platform to the young generation to nurture their talents. It is an event where people from all generation can come and spend meaningful time together.

The present paper is exploratory in nature with attempts made to study the origin, significance and contributions of Yaoshang as a premier festival of Manipur leading to social cohesiveness, with insights taken from available literature.

**Keywords:** *Yaoshang, Festival, Sports, Social cohesion.*

## Introduction:

A festival is an event ordinarily celebrated by a community and centering on some characteristic aspect of that community and its religion or traditions. Indian festivals are rich in culture, tradition, diversity, food and rituals. It gives us an opportunity to observe and celebrate a common cause that brings the whole community together. Festivals, as cheerful and happy occasions, have a powerful impact on the faith and belief of the masses and also have several consequences in the social, economical, cultural and artistic spheres. Society as a whole gains a lot by celebrating these festivals around the year.

Over time, these festivals which are joyous occasions for celebration have had powerful impact on the faith and beliefs of the masses. They have served to foster communal harmony and develop a feeling of universal brotherhood. Festivals generally help in bringing people from different social, economic and religious backgrounds together. As such, festivals help in contributing towards feeling of social cohesion.

Manipur, rightly called the 'Jewel of India' by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, a beautiful state in northeastern India, is a land of festivals. It is a land of diversity, where several cultures, ethnicities and religions co-exist. The Meitei ethnic group represents around 53% of the population of Manipur state, followed by various Naga tribes at 24% and various Kuki-Zo tribes at 16%. Tribals constitutes about 41% of the state population (according to 2011 census) and are distinguished by dialects and cultures that are often village-based. 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, Judaism etc. Hence, there are several festivals celebrated throughout the year and the state dons its best and brightest colors during festivals. Festivals are a symbol of religious, cultural and social aspirations for the Manipuris. It also helps in removing the monotony of life by providing physical diversions, mental relaxation and an emotional outlet.

The most popular celebration is 'Yaoshang' (Holi), which is celebrated for five days, commencing from the full moon day of *Falgun* (February-March). 'Thabal Chongba', a type of Manipuri folk dance, where boys and girls hold hands and sing and dance in a circle, is primarily associated with this festival.

People of our ancient India used to express all festive occasions through the words 'Samaja' meaning a gathering of people, 'Utsava' or festival and 'Yatra' or pilgrimage or temple chariot procession. Today sometimes, we use the word 'Mela' meaning 'Fair' instead of 'Samaja'. But over the centuries, festival traditions have gradually undergone some changes notwithstanding the fact that even today; festivals symbolically act as a link between the homes, the villages and a larger outside world.

Historically, festivals have been means to celebrate special occasions, markers of sacred time and space, ways to invoke the divine or nature in daily life, methods of marking the passage of time, and release for social unrest and discord. They can also be connected to life-cycle rituals performed to sanctify social bonds and transitions. For believers, Hindu festivals give moments of divine intervention into the routine realities of daily living wherein everyday occurrences take on a symbolic meaning. During such times, the Gods

become present, are made obvious, and intervene on behalf of humanity. Festivals include some combination of sacrifice, absolutions, offerings, and a wide variety of ritual practices and prayerful recitations. In some festivals, these actions are symbolic and in others, they are obviously material.

Festivals have always been a means to fulfill our social needs of belongingness since old days. Since India has a rich culture and heritage of celebrating various festivals, communities and individuals have always used it as a means to develop social interactions. Especially for women and children, festivals have served as a means of emotional catharsis that help them to find expression for their emotions, emotionally and psychologically.

Research has shown that festival attendance can create a sense of community, bringing groups together beyond the mere aggregate of people; a sense of common purpose and connection can emerge (Gibson and Connell, 2003). Martin Seligman, the father of modern positive psychology, emphasizes the importance of wellbeing, and suggests five quantifiable measures to reflect this construct. They are referred to by the acronym PERMA: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Improving measures like engagement is key to improve wellbeing. Low levels of wellbeing are costly to an individual's health, social interactions, and daily life, and also in terms of economy and productivity for society and organization (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005). Research has shown that festival attendance can create a sense of community, bringing groups together beyond the mere aggregate of people; a sense of common purpose and connection can emerge (Gibson and Connell, 2003). Australian researchers Packer and Ballantyne (2010) investigated the social wellbeing and psychological benefits of music festival attendance in a sequential, mixed-methods exploratory study. They reported that people experience senses of engagement and connection at festivals in ways that are not possible in even typical live music concerts. Not only is there much interaction with other attendees, especially in the context of multi-day events, but with artists themselves; the music festival allows for close proximity (Harrison, 2014). The individual is defined as a part of a larger social network rather than as a unique and separate entity in collectivist cultures like India. A fascinating picture of subjective wellbeing is emerging in which we can differentiate between a person's momentary feelings and thoughts about wellbeing and larger, more global constructions (Diener et al., 2002). The existence of a positive relationship between spiritual engagement and well-being is currently based on weak correlational evidence, generally in Western contexts. The study by Mellor et al. (2012) advanced the understanding through a naturalist, longitudinal study of 226 people, including Malays, Chinese, and Indians, experiencing the Hindu Thaipusam festival in Malaysia. They measured the subjective well-being of people with varying levels of engagement—from nonobservance or simply observing the festival to extreme engagement. Each person was assessed 3 months before, 2 weeks before, 2 weeks after, and 4 months after the festival. They found that the subjective well-being of those with the most extreme level of engagement was permanently higher than other groups. The well-being of those with a strong, but less extreme engagement rose at the time of the festival and remained

elevated. Brow et al. (2013) investigated the possible relationship between two spirituality variables (religious coping styles and spiritual well-being) and two psychological variables (anxiety and depression). Also studied were differences between those who self-disclosed a spiritual/religious identify and those who did not. Although a relationship was not noted between religious coping styles and the psychological variables, significance was reported in the relationship between spiritual well-being and both psychological variables. Overall, it was found that individuals reporting higher levels of religiosity and spiritual well-being may also experience a reduction in mental and emotional illness. Many researchers have demonstrated that spirituality plays a significant role in the lives of people, their thoughts, and behaviors. The effect of spirituality on mental health has been reviewed by Hodzic (2011). In order to make further advances in the field it is becoming increasingly important to (a) acknowledge the differences between the different religions; (b) develop context-specific definitions of spirituality, namely define spirituality in the context of a particular faith; and (c) construct the studies that will evaluate spirituality according to the context-specific measures. Miller et al. (2011) qualitatively studied to gain a better understanding of the subjective experience of prayer with a sacred object within the context of a significant life stressor. Ten individuals, men and women, from the Catholic faith participated in semi structured interviews. Interview transcripts were read thoroughly and descriptive meaning units were extracted and analyzed for common themes. In their narratives participants revealed three overarching themes: (a) contextual information on the nature of the significant life event, (b) the spiritual architecture of prayer with a sacred object, and (c) a spiritual relationship with the sacred. The experience of prayer with a sacred object is a rich and integral aspect of these participants' spiritual lives that ultimately supports a sense of life meaning within the context of a significant life stressor.

### **Objective of the study and methodology:**

With the background into the positive effects of religious festivals, an attempt has been made in this paper to highlight Yaoshang as one of its kind which has been contributing positively towards developing social cohesiveness among every generation of Manipuri society. Attempt has been made to study how a religious festival has been transformed into an event that nurtures sporting and other talent in Manipuri society, also bringing about social well being among people.

The present paper is exploratory in nature with attempts made to study the origin, significance and contributions of Yaoshang as a premier festival of Manipur leading to social cohesiveness, with insights taken from available literature.

**Yaoshang:**

Yaoshang is the premier festival of Manipur. Because of its closeness of the Indian celebration of Holi, it is regularly referred to as the 'Holi of Manipur'. It is a unique form of the Holi festival that incorporates old traditions of the local Meitei people - who dominate the state, and the deep influence of Vaishnavism in the region. The Yaosang as the festival is called in Manipur, not only connects the past with the present, it also seems to highlight on how to stay relevant, forever. It is celebrated with full exuberance and is counted amongst the top festivals of Manipur. Whether young or old, everyone takes part in the festival and solemnize it with their traditional songs and dance performances. Like Holi, it is also a festival of rejoicing that depicts the triumph of good over the evil. According to the legends, Lord Krishna was very fond of colors. At that time the colors were made of natural items such as flowers (especially Palash). Lord Krishna used to apply colors on his beloved Radha along with other Gopikas. This was a very part of his merry making and having fun. Later on, the application of colors became a custom and took the form of a festival.

It will be noted that the Manipuri observance of Holi differs slightly from the normal Hindu pattern. While the basic Hindu features of the festival are present, the Meiteis have given it the added significance of its being a commemoration of Shri Chaitanya's birth.

From calling it Yaoshang to singing 'holi' at Govindajee and Mahabali temples and localities to Nakathengba (asking for money from different households) to Shelmunba (asking for money by young girls mostly outdoors) to Thabal Chongba to Yaoshang sports, the festival carries both religious and secular fervour.

The way the festival is celebrated marks its ancient roots. Celebrated over 5 days the very name Yaosang, indicates the agrarian origins of the festival. The word Yaosang literally translated in Manipuri refers to a small hut used for keeping sheep (Yao- sheep, Sang – shed). Like ancient spring festivals across the world, the Yaoshang also revolves around the full moon day or '*Lamda*' in March, from when celebrations start.

The people engage themselves in building a bamboo hut or Yaoshang, especially by the wayside on the initial day of the festival. This day is also celebrated as the birthday of 'Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu' who was a Vaishnav. An image of Gauranga 'Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu' is positioned inside the hut by a local priest or Brahmin in the evening. A puja is offered to the idol that is followed by the singing of holy songs such as 'Kirtans' accompanied by the cymbals and drums. Narrations are also chanted from the sacred books of Hindus.



Photo: Devotees offering Puja outside the hut. (Photo courtesy: Facebook)

On the last day of the festival, devotees take part in processions and proceed towards the main temple of Lord Krishna called the GovindaJi temple to perform traditional and cultural activities and celebrate the festival. The procession is known as Halanka, and usually numbers several thousands. Each kirtan party in the procession has its own distinctive mark, usually the colour of the head-dress and a flag. On arrival at the open ground near the temple of Govindaji the various kirtan parties perform song and dance dramas of the life of Krishna.



Photo: Devotees taking part in procession. (Photo courtesy: Facebook)

At the end of the five days of celebrations, the idol is taken out from the hut and the hut is put on fire with the shouting of words such as 'Hari Bol'. The ashes from the fire are considered to be auspicious and therefore are put on the doorway of the houses and the foreheads of the devotees as a mark of good luck.

During Yaoshang the youth of the village visit the doorways of the houses for 'Nakathengba' that means asking for money. Donation is collected by the girls especially outdoors from the people of the roadsides and this is known as 'Shelmunba'. The collection of this money is used for the purpose of making merry and enjoying.

In the daytime people play with different bright colours either in the powdered forms known as 'Gulal' or liquid colours filled in 'Pichkaris'. In the evening 'Thabal chongba' dance is performed by the young girls and boys during the five nights of Holi or Yaoshang festivities. The word 'Thabal' means moonlight and 'Chongba' means dance. In other words it is a dance performed in the moonlight. The youth join hands and dance together with the singing of folk songs accompanied by the beating of drums. The dance pattern consists of rhythmic foot-steps that include moving a step forward, bending the knee to sway the body sideways and then taking a step back.

In earlier times boys used to wear 'pheirom' (dhoti) and girls 'phanek' (loincloth worn by female Meitei) in the Thabal Chongba. Nowadays with the changing of times boys may or may not wear the dhoti for the folk dance but the girls still continue to wear the phanek.

In earlier times, this dance was only performed in the moonlight but over time some changes were made and as such Paraffin Gas lamps also known as Patromax and lanterns were introduced in the performance of the Thabal Chongba dances.

Gender segregation is strict in the Meitei society of Manipur. This is why many young boys and girls, who otherwise would not dare express intimacy in public, are allowed, during the traditional dancing festivities, to hold hands and dance with a boy or girl of their choice in front of parents and society, without fear of being reprimanded.

### **Origin of Yaoshang:**

The famous Muslim tourist Ulberuni (A.D. 1030) has mentioned about Holikosav in his memories. Other Muslim writers of that period have mentioned that Holikosav was not only celebrated by the Hindus but also by the Muslims. In Bengal and Orissa, Holi Purnima is also celebrated as the birthday of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (AD 1486-1533). Yaoshang as a unique form of the Holi festival, reflects the deep influence of Vaishnavism in the region. Vaishnavism took centre stage in Manipur during the reign of King Meidingu Pamheiba (1690–1751) of the Ningthouja dynasty. During the early 18th century, Hindu preachers from Sylhet (in present day Bangladesh) arrived in Manipur to spread 'Gaudiya' Vaishnavism founded by the 15th century Bhakti saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The King made Hinduism the official religion, and converted a large majority of the Meitei people to it. The celebration of Yaosang, as a Hindu festival dedicated to Krishna, began during this time. Before this, the Yaosang was a harvest festival.

Meitei '*Yaoshang*' is believed to have its ancestral origin from the '*Ougri Hangen Chongba*' of pre-historic times. When the two sons of Godly King '*Atiya Guru Shidaba*' were asked to complete the '*Nongkhong Koiba*' for succession to the throne, the elder son '*Sanamahi*' started the journey. However, the younger son '*Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*' being a small boy was apprehensive that he could not complete the journey. Meanwhile, with the invaluable advice of his mother, '*Pakhangba*' went round the royal throne of the King in no time and claimed to have completed the '*Nongkhong Koiba*' before his brother '*Sanamahi*' came back after going round the whole land physically. When the elder brother came back, he was so furious that he swore to avenge the person who revealed the modus operandi to '*Pakhangba*' in order to be the king of the land.

If it were a man, he would be killed and if it happened to be a woman, he would marry her – this was Sanamahi's promise. Surprisingly, '*Sanamahi*' realized that it was none other than his mother who had stealthily helped the younger brother to become the king. '*Sanamahi*' had to keep his promise by marrying the mother. In every Meitei household we now see '*Sanamahi*' and '*Leimaren*' residing together, but with a wall separating them.

The furious '*Sanamahi*' after coming back from '*Nongkhong Koiba*' chased '*Pakhangba*' to beat him while the women of royal palace defended '*Pakhangba*' by joining hands and singing the song "*Ke Ke Ke Mo Mo, Yangen Samba Sao Sao, Tokpaga Kambaga Keiga Yenga, Yenkhong Phate Chasillu, Laigi Yenni Chaphade, Ke Ke Ke Mo Mo ...*". It is believed that '*Thabal chongba*', '*Phee Munbi*', '*Sen Munbi*' etc. which are parts of contemporary '*Yaoshang*' had their origin from the tradition of '*Nongkhong Koiba*'. Hence, Meitei '*Yaoshang*' had its own origin as different from the '*Holi*' of the Hindus. As time goes by, '*Yaoshang*' has been changing its facets year after year, decades after decades and centuries after centuries. To the present generation, '*Yaoshang*' is synonymous with games and sports. It is indeed like a mini Olympiad particularly in the valley districts of Manipur. All the ugly scenes and traditions of earlier '*Yaoshang*' have been subdued to bring in constructive sports festivals in almost all Manipuri localities. Historically, like-minded youths of the 1940s at some specific localities of Imphal started organizing games and sports during Yaoshang. The attempt was solely to divert the energy of the youths from indulging in ugly and useless spends of traditional Yaoshang to promoting healthy and disciplined social life. An example was set at Akampat in Imphal east around 1946 by the elders of Singjamei Kshetri Leikai, Bamon Leikai and Khongman by organizing games and sports during Yaoshang. This may historically be termed as the origin of Yaoshang sports festival in Manipur. Most of the people of the time involved in this endeavor have either expired or are too old to appear in social events. But their vision and objectives have been successfully achieved nowadays, as almost all the localities of valley organize Yaoshang sports with varied events and disciplines. Various games including indigenous events such as *Mukna* (folk wrestling) and *Laphu Kabi* (banana stem climbing competition) are seen to be popular during Yaoshang sports. Apart from sporting programmes; academic events like debating competitions, extempore speech, symposium



competitions, essay writing, song competitions, mathematics competitions, recitations etc. are organized in the interests of students.

### **Significance of Yaoshang:**

An intellectual transformation of Yaoshang from being a festival of colors to festival of sports has been occurring in modern Manipur during the last many decades. Yaoshang Sports has become a foundation of socialization with multifaceted benefits. It serves as a platform for cultivating personality development and hunting young talents. Kids get the opportunity to expose themselves to various competitive events and it also inculcates discipline among youths. Besides providing an avenue for recreation to the ageing people, it promotes organizing skills among the youth, increases sense of social togetherness and reduces crimes & unwanted behavior in society.

Apart from being a festival, Yaoshang has rightly served as a useful platform for promoting sporting spirit and hunting talents of young people in varied fields of personality development. Nowadays, for the youngsters, the Yaoshang is mostly about the sports. The greatest highlight of the festival is the variety of matches that take place in almost every town and valley across Manipur. On the first day of Yaoshang, local clubs organize and visit the sacred Kangla Fort, at Imphal, for lighting of the torch to inaugurate the sports meet. The sport celebration ends with a half marathon.

During the five day festival, children are given enough opportunity for exposure to various competitive events. For the elders, 'Yaoshang' serves as a valuable recreation item by breaking the monotony of ageing life.

The entertainments like 'Sumang Leela', a traditional theatre or music concert during Yaoshang educate the people of all walks with values of life and society. It is a meaningful meeting place where local people of all ages meet, interact, and exchange views and ideas among themselves. It helps in reducing unwanted behavior, crimes, substance abuse and drugs. It also helps create mutual understanding, co-operation and respectfulness among the youths. Yaoshang sports also serves in reducing the generation gap in the society, thereby helping in shaping a well-disciplined social life in Manipur. Money, which otherwise would have been spent in the fun and extravaganza of the festival, has been put to productive events. No doubt, many sports stars of the state were once participants of Yaoshang sports. Ksh Thoiba Singh, an Olympian of Manipur state was said to be a very dynamic young player during Yaoshang sports in his locality. Famous debaters, politicians, academicians and sports persons owe their origin from local sports festivals. Credit goes to the right thinking elders who conceptualized and materialized the idea of organizing sports festivals during Yaoshang. Yaoshang sports, in fact, are the right platform for socializing the youths of Manipur particularly the Meiteis/ Meeteis. It is said that Muslim and Christian communities have the right platform for public gathering and positive discussion in their weekly religious sermons. Thus, they have opportunities to keep their unifying and disciplinary tendencies active and alive. However, the Meiteis

do not frequently meet and discuss their social welfare on regular basis. So, it may be rightly said that Yaoshang sports is the only regular opportunity for the Meities to meet and discuss issues for social good. Contemporary Yaoshang is both festive and sportive. To the Manipuris, Yaoshang has become a Mini-Olympiad which preserves the indigenous games of the state. Yaoshang sports serve as a useful platform not only for channelizing the young talents but also for effecting harmonious socialization among the Manipuris.

The addition of a variety of games in the Yaoshang festivities began as early as during the pre-independence period. Although there is obscurity on the exact origin of Yaoshang Sports, it is believed that the organization of sporting events during Yaoshang in 1946 at Akampat in the present Imphal East district was the first of its kind in the state. As part of Yaoshang festival, the local adults of that time organized the Yubi Lakpi (indigenous football game played using coconut) event by selecting a King. Written accounts named one Thokchom Bhubon from Singjamei Kshetri Leikai (Irengbam Leirak) who acted as the King. He was made to sit on a bullock cart that staged a procession from Thiyam Leirak of the locality via Kongba road to reach Akampat. A number of men, women and youths accompanied the procession and witnessed the Yubi Lakpi. Programmes in the form of Fancy Dress were also conducted. This may be considered the pioneer in the Yaoshang Sports movement which was witnessed and participated by locals of Singjamei Kshetri Leikai, Khongman, Bheigyabati Leikai etc. The second edition of the games was held in 1947 at Akampat again. More events like Arithmetic Competition for children, Chaphu Pubi Race (Pot balancing race), Laphu Kabi and Blind Hit were added to the meet. One person known as Maiba Amuba who hailed from Kabo Wakching Nambol and was staying with Yumnam Komol (said to be the driver of Budhachandra Maharaj) at Yumnam Leikai took the role of King in Yubi Lakpi that year. Thus, was born the Yaoshang Sports of today. The Annual Yaoshang Sports organized at Bamon Leikai Basketball Ground is also one of the oldest of its genre.



Photo: People of all generations taking part in sporting event of Yaoshang.

The sports festival is a mix of various competitions as the organizers make efforts to arrange many interesting games such as freeze dance, tug of war, foot races, musical chairs as well as football. More events like Arithmetic Competition for children, *Chaphu Pubi Race*, *Laphu Kabi* and Blind Hit have been added to the event.

Taking into account the increasing replacement of *Yaoshang* festival by a variety of games and sports in the nook and corner of Manipur, it may be optimistically assumed that *Yaoshang* Festival of the Manipuris has gradually become a beneficial event day by day. It has been rightly termed as an intellectual transformation from festival of colors to festival of sports, which has been occurring in modern Manipur during the last few decades.

### Conclusion:

From being an ancient tribal festival, to a celebration of Vaishnavism and now sporting all the characteristics of a modern day campus youth festival - the popularity of the *Yaoshang* is growing from strength to strength. The rich heritage of festivals and events in Manipur is not only a social changing agent which has been bringing together the societies in the unity of senses and activities leading to overall wellbeing of people but can also be a source of tourism development in Manipur. There is no doubt that *Yaoshang* Sports festival is playing and will continue to play its constructive role in the making of a unified and strong Manipur. Hence every locality in the state must endeavor to tap the inherent potential of *Yaoshang* Sports in the making of a strong Manipur.

The state government, mainly the sports department can put some thought on its widespread encouragement and improvement even to the extent of devoting provisions in the state sports policy.

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