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Thang-Ta and School Curriculum: A Manipur Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of *Thang-Ta* in Manipur is deeply rooted in the region's history, warfare and cultural life of its people. It has emerged from the combat system for survival and state administration. '*Thang-Ta*' is a composite word composing of '*Thang*' meaning 'Sword' and '*Ta*' meaning '*Spear*.'

The evolution from a traditional martial arts system to National sporting event and later becoming a specified school curriculum has a long history of its own. It was banned even from practice for long during the British Colonial Rule.

Revival of this art form is a post-independent people led phenomena. During the 1980s and 1990s many new associations and institutions were formed for its revival. Later, it was first introduced as an optional subject in HSLC (High School Leaving Certificate) exam conducted by BOSEM from 2014. This paper would be a plain attempt to bring out the emergence of this Game- Thang-Ta.

Key Words: *Thang-Ta, Martial Arts, emergence, revival, School Curriculum,*

Thang- Ta emergence

The emergence of *Thang-Ta* in Manipur is deeply rooted in the region's history, warfare and cultural life of its people. It has developed not just as a fighting system or warfare tactics, but as a way of life for the Manipuri people, Meiteis, in particular. This martial arts tactic is historically linked to Meitei community. The Meitei community of the kingdom which was the dominant ethnic group of the time developed this martial arts. The practice of this art was considered a social and moral duty of the residents. Children were trained from early age to safeguard their motherland, the people and their honor as a warrior.

From ancient times, *Thang-Ta* has emerged as a combat system in Manipur for survival by the people of this state and for its administration. '*Thang-Ta*' is a composite word composing of '*Thang*' meaning 'Sword' and '*Ta*' meaning '*Spear*.' It was practiced by warriors to defend the kingdom of Manipur from

invaders and internal conflicts. The defense system of the then, independent Kingdom of Manipur required various skills including armed and unarmed combats. Soldiers in Manipur were trained with these traditional martial arts skills for defending its kingdom from external aggression. Manipur in ancient times were known by different names like Kangleipak, Meitrapak, Sanaleibak, Poirei, Kathe, Meckley, etc.

Even the rulers of Manipur actively patronized *Thang-Ta* and included it as a part of the Military training. It was a part of the formal training received by the soldiers of the kingdom serving as the royal army too. Masters and gurus of the art were highly respected and held high social status. Practitioners were accorded the social recognition of 'Nationalist,' contributing to the defense and propagation of the nation. The spirit of Manipur Kingdom's Nationalism is often linked to learning of this skill. The capability to defend self was categorically metamorphosized with the capacity to defend the kingdom. *Thang-Ta*, thus has been understood the practical side of patriotism of the Manipur Kingdom. It is also played major role in community defense since the royal army could not protect everyone at all times, practice of the art by villagers and common folk also helped communities protect themselves and also helped in self-defense.

Moreover, the art of *Thang-Ta* also held deep connections with rituals and mythology of Manipuri history. It was never about fighting as one would perceive it also had close links with various rituals, festivals, and religious beliefs of the people. Many martial movements were integrated into dance like forms, blending art and combat. The practice also emphasized discipline and courage along with spiritual balance. The art is also a major part of many important rituals like Lai Haraoba, Kwak Tanba, Mera Hou (Hao) Chongba, etc.

Overtime, the art evolved into the cultural Martial art we all know today. The indigenous martial art combined armed combat (sword, spear, shields, darts, arrows, etc), unarmed techniques (sarit sarak, etc) and mental discipline and ethics. Overall, it emerged in Manipur as a warrior tradition shaped by warfare, royal support, community needs, cultural values, making it both a martial art and cultural heritage of the region.

Reemergence theory of *Thang-Ta*

The revival of *Thang-Ta* started after the Ban on its practice on 7th October 1934 by forming the Manipur Byalash Church Club. This Club was formed after a resolution was made on the 30th of May 1934 with many important individuals present including Maharaja Churachand, Hijam Irabot, etc. This resolution was one of 8 (eight) resolutions made on that faithful day which encouraged the practice of indigenous games such as *Thang-Ta* & Mukna Kangjei hence preserving the culture of Manipur.

Post independence cultural awakening (1950s-1970s) after independence of India in 1947, there was renewed interest in indigenous tradition in Manipur. Cultural Activists and elder Gurus began reviving *Thang-Ta* training. Demonstrations during festivals and cultural events helped bring it back to public.

The Gurus of *Thang-Ta* played major role along with the various cultural organizations of *Thang-Ta*. Dedicated masters systematized techniques and documented forms that were transmitted orally earlier. Also, cultural organizations started promoting *Thang-Ta* as a heritage martial art rather than only a fighting system.

During the 1980s and 1990s many new associations and institutions were formed for the revival of *Thang-Ta*. Establishment of bodies such as Manipur *Thang-Ta* Association provided a formal structuring for the Art form. Regular training camps, state level competitions and demonstrations were introduced and *Thang-Ta* began transitioning into sport format.

Later during the 1990s *Thang-Ta* started to be recognized at National and International Levels. *Thang-Ta* was showcased in National Cultural festivals and Martial art events across India. It gained visibility through platforms supported by bodies like the Sangeet Natak Akademi which recognized it as a tradition performing it. This recognition legitimized *Thang-Ta* beyond Manipur.

After the 2000s *Thang-Ta* began to be included in Education & Self-Defense programs Schools and Collages started including *Thang-Ta* as extracurricular activities. Self-defense training especially for women was promoted and it also got included in Indigenous sports and martial arts.

During modern times there has been an increase in youth participation and due to previous standardization rules, protective gears and competition have made the art Youth Friendly. Social media and cultural life have increased awareness among young generations.

The Reemergence of *Thang-Ta* in Manipur was driven by post-independence cultural revival, dedicated Gurus institutional support, national recognition and its adaptation as a modern sport and self defence system.

KIMACs initiative in School Curriculum

Kanglei Indigenous Martial Arts and Cultural Society initiatives aims to revive and mainstream *Thang-Ta* by systematically introducing it into the school curriculum of Manipur, aligning indigenous knowledge with modern education.

KIMACs is a cultural and martial arts organization of Manipur dedicated to preservation, promotion and education of *Thang-Ta* and related indigenous practices of Manipur. Despite *Thang-Ta* being a rich cultural heritage, has remained outside formal schooling for quite some time. KIMACS recognized the importance of early exposure through schools for the long-term survival and growth of the art form.

Under the initiative of KIMACS, *Thang-Ta* has begun to be taught as a part of physical education, health and wellness programs and co-curricular activities. The main focus during these times was on basic hand movements, sword and spear drills (with safety adaptations), discipline, coordination and mutual focus while also keeping mental focus. This organization trains certified instructors to teach *Thang-Ta* in schools. A graded age-appropriate syllabus is developed for primary, middle and secondary levels. Emphasis is placed on safety, ethics and cultural context of the art.

The objectives of teaching *Thang-Ta* to students also lines up with the NEP 2020 policy. The art promotes Indian Knowledge system of integrating indigenous sports and martial arts. The core influence of *Thang-Ta* to its practitioners like disciplined mind and healthy body directly shares the same goals with the new educational systems.

Until today, KIMACS 's initiative in promoting and preserving this age-old traditional martial-arts is appreciative. It is through the remarkable promotional activities of this organization that this art form gained recognition and approval for streamlining as formal part of the school curriculum in Manipur.

Real Scenario in school syllabus

The current situation of *Thang-Ta* in Manipur is very underwhelming. It has only been partially implemented in school and college educations and is still taken by very few people despite strong policy support and cultural importance.

As of now only a few schools offer *Thang-Ta* as an optional subject and rural or hill area schools have limited access to the subject due to lack of instructors and infrastructural constraints along with lack of equipment, proper space for training, protective materials etc. The Various limitations hinder the spread of the artform to these rural areas. Currently due to there not being regular posts for *Thang-Ta* teachers in government schools it also hinders the implementation of the art in school at these rural and far off

areas. Many schools also have to improvise the education of the students by making the Manipuri/Meitei Mayek Teacher teach the theory part and calling gurus to teach practical part through workshops like sessions instead of regular classes due to lack of teachers.

Thang-Ta was first introduced as an optional subject during the session of 2014 and in 2016, it was included for the first time in HSLC (High School Leaving Certificate) exam conducted by BOSEM (Board of Secondary education Manipur). In this there was a total of 388 students who appeared in the examination who took this subject as optional. After this on 2nd April 2015, The Syllabus committee for introducing *Thang-Ta* into Class 11 and 12 was formed and in 2018, with *Thang-Ta* as an optional subject taken by 55 students, the Council of Higher Secondary Examination Manipur conducted the examinations for class 12. On May 17th, 2015 Manipur University of Culture formed the syllabus committee for including *Thang-Ta* as a subject for higher studies for the first time.

As of the year 2025-26, there were 170 schools offering *Thang-Ta* as an optional subject for 10 according to official lists of schools for BOSEM *Thang-Ta* Practical Examination for the HSLCE 2025-26. There was a total of 4721 students that appeared for the Class 10 HSLCE 2025-26 while there was a total of 561 students for the council of hr. secondary examination by COHSEM for Class 12 scattered across 17 Schools.

Though the art has been incorporated into school syllabus, there are several limitations that still hold back the development of *Thang-Ta* in today's generation. Yes, the syllabus in school curriculum is enough to stay fit to a certain extent but if we want to pursue this art form to a much higher level these syllabuses in classes 9 to 12 are not sufficient. Also, when one encounters a unforeseen event the sarit sarak styles taught to the students may fall short in some cases.

The objectives of teaching *Thang-Ta* to students also lines up with the NEP 2020 policy. The art promotes Indian Knowledge system of integrating indigenous sports and martial arts. The core influence of *Thang-Ta* to its practitioners like disciplined mind and healthy body directly shares the same goals with the new educational systems. This is a very important fact that should be considered as *Thang-Ta* is not yet a fully widespread subject and is only limited to schools under Manipur state boards and Council of Higher secondary education Manipur. At university level, The art is studied as a subject only in Manipur University of Culture and nowhere else as of 2026. Though it is still not fully incorporated into Universities outside Manipur, in 2026 with *Thang-Ta* as a sport Association of Indian Universities organized the 'All India Inter University *Thang-Ta* (M/W) Competition, 2025-26' from April 6th to 9th 2026 where 30 Universities Participated.

However, there are several factors that may have affected this such as difference in policy and practice, limited coverage, and many more. Unfortunately, *Thang-Ta* is just an optional subject in high school and not compulsory It mainly comes under co-curricular/extracurricular activities or as a part of Physical Education (PE) also the implementation mainly depends on whether the school administration's interest and availability of trained instructors. Though there is no strict requirements of facilities, a small/ empty room for freely practicing during practical classes help a lot in the development of the student's body and mind.

***Thang-Ta* and its decline during colonial rule**

The decline of *Thang-Ta* after the Anglo-Manipuri War was closely connected to political suppression, colonial control and the dismantling of traditional military structure of Manipur.

The decline of *Thang-Ta* in Manipur was due to various political, social and cultural factors. After the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891, the British saw that *Thang-Ta* was a warrior art and thus the colonial government of the time banned its practice and ordered that none shall keep any swords, spears, etc.

Before and during this period, the practice of *Thang-Ta* was supported by the King of Manipur and the royal family so it had been a major part of the army training of Manipuri soldiers. After the ban and the fall of Manipuri Monarchy, the art started to decline automatically, meanwhile the influence of western culture introduced a new form of education and modern jobs which reduced the interest of youths towards traditional martial arts. They preferred mainstream sports and academics over traditional systems. Because of these factors many Masters and Gurus passed away without being able to document the techniques, leading to loss of this knowledge.

Unlike other martial arts like karate, taekwondo, etc. *Thang-Ta* became modernized only recently and due to this reason, it lacks reach in schools, universities and competitions leading to its marginalization.

During the British rule, the art gradually shifted from Battlefield-oriented discipline into a largely ceremonial and performance-based form. This transformation did help preserve what was left of the art after the ban but, this also contributed to a decline in its practical combat function and widespread public practice. However, these performance like transformation still held explosive combat-based movements meant to act as a means of self defense in wars and other times. The core essence of the art was still there but the once flourishing form of defense of the Manipuris was reduced to a mere performance for others to watch. To preserve the art and tradition under colonial scrutiny, many were also training discreetly within families and local communities.

The decline of *Thang-Ta* after the Anglo-Manipuri war was largely the result of colonial suppression and the weakening of the traditional warrior structure that had sustained the kingdom for centuries.

Relevance in real life with youth

Thang-Ta remains highly relevant in contemporary society, particularly for the upcoming generations because it contributes not only to physical health but also to mental discipline, cultural awareness and personal development. In an age increasingly shaped by sedentary lifestyles, digital dependence and psychological stress, traditional martial arts such as *Thang-Ta* provide holistic model of growth that combines physical activity with character formation.

The art promotes comprehensive physical development through dynamic body movements, coordinated footwork, weapon drills and endurance-based practice. Unlike many sedatory recreational activities, it actively improves agility, flexibility, balance, cardiovascular endurance, muscular coordination and reflexes.

Its training methodology aligns closely with modern concepts of functional fitness, where emphasis is placed on movement efficiency and full body conditioning rather than isolated muscle development alone.

Researchers in sport science have noted that functional movement-based training improves athletic performance and long-term physical health more effectively than purely isolated exercise systems in many contexts (*Behm & Colado, 2012*)

The practice of *Thang-Ta* contributes to the development of youths by imparting discipline and self-control. The art requires regular practice, concentration, patience and precision. These qualities encourage emotional stability, perseverance, confidence and mental resilience.

CONCLUSION

Thang-Ta has significant educational, cultural and physical value for the Manipuris. Its inclusion in the school curriculum contributed greatly to not just the physical fitness of youths but also in the self-defense during unforeseen events. This also helped in the preservation of Indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage of the Meiteis. As a traditional Martial Art deeply connected to the history and identity of the Kingdom of Manipur, *Thang-Ta* provides the students from new generations with a means to develop discipline, confidence, coordination and respect for their cultural roots.

The Incorporation of *Thang-Ta* also line up with the goals of the New Education Policy of 2020. The policy gave emphasis to holistic developments through physical activities, mental discipline and value-based learning. At a time when many young people face increasing deskbound lifestyles and weakening connections to traditional culture, the practice of *Thang-Ta* serves as a meaningful bridge between modern education and indigenous heritage of the younger generations.

Though the incorporation has helped in the revival of *Thang-Ta* and its promotion among the youths, the things learnt at schools about the art is not sufficient enough in times of grave dangers. Yes, the art teaches some self-defense techniques to the students but during real life situations those few are not enough to properly neutralize the threats to the student's life. The syllabus in schools gives a brief view of the art and helps students stay fit but they cannot replace vigorous training and the disciplined practice in long run. In conclusion, the art has developed significantly after the incorporation in school curriculum though they are not enough for combat efficiency during self-defense.

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