

Wari Leeba: The Declining Storytelling Tradition of the Meiteis of Manipur and Tripura

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There is a popular notion that ‘literature’ is primarily written or printed. Another western concept is that it is the written word that is legitimate or valid and modern or progressive, whereas the spoken word is a representative of the primitive or uncivilized world. These notions have been challenged time and again by alternative textualities such as oral traditions, paintings and illustrations. The oral tradition of storytelling has been in vogue since time immemorial across many communities of India as well as the rest of the world. These stories would serve as a grand repository of memories and histories of the respective societies through the power of the spoken word. But with rapid urbanization, these stories are faced first with distortion and then with extinction, as the storytellers of the older generation pass away. This paper attempts to understand the storytelling tradition of Manipur, popularly known as the *Wari-Leeba* (that forms an integral part and parcel of the Meitei culture) as well to find out probable causes of its declining/deteriorating status in the adjacent state of Tripura that is a home to a good number of Meitei population.

Keywords: Tradition, Storytelling, *Wari-Leeba*, Manipur, Meitei, Tripura

Introduction

Written history allows a reader to experience stories of the past in isolation, while an oral tradition requires cooperation and inclusion (Storytelling, Oral Tradition, n.d. para.1). The western concept of equating the written word with modernity and progress and that of the ‘oral’ with primitive or non-literate world was based on the concept of dominance and power. Colonialism further helped to strengthen this contentious view that orality signified a mentality that was fundamentally different from that of the literate societies (Misra 2013: 14). We always tend to associate literature with written or printed materials but this notion has always been challenged by textualities such as oral text, painting, illustration, storytelling, film or hypertext (Park 2008). It is

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believed that in the history of mankind, speech came first and then came the act of writing. Long before the introduction of the writing system, it was the power of the spoken word that ruled the human societies in different parts of the world. People in early societies created stories and such stories were disseminated from one generation to the other, thus creating a storehouse of spoken words. Their words of mouth also included songs, chants, war cries, hymns, proverbs, riddles and several other forms of spoken words. This was probably how oral literature originated. The online free encyclopedia Wikipedia says that Oral Literature or folk literature corresponds in the sphere of the spoken (oral) word to literature as literature operates in the domain of the written word. Similarly, the Canadian Encyclopedia suggests that: ‘The term oral literature is sometimes used interchangeably with folklore, but it usually has a broader focus. The expression is self-contradictory: literature, strictly speaking, is that which is written down; but the term is used here to emphasize the imaginative creativity and conventional structures that mark oral discourse too. Oral literature shares with written literature the use of heightened language in various genres (narrative, lyric, epic etc.), but it is set apart by being actualized only in performance and by the fact that the performer can (and sometimes is obliged to) improvise so that oral text constitutes an event’.

Oral narratives are cultural materials and documents transmitted verbally from one generation to another in speeches or songs that later take up the form of folktales, folksongs, ballads, sayings or even chants. No doubt, the origin of this tradition may date back to stone age when men knew not the art of writing yet watermark their every deed for their forth coming generations (Darlong 2014). A common form of oral tradition is the art of storytelling passed down from one generation to the other. One of the main purposes of these stories is to reflect upon ‘traditional’ values of the past in order to make sense of the moral changes of the present (Imchen 2004: 119). This paper has two-fold objectives. Firstly, it looks into the *Wari-Leeba*, a popular storytelling tradition practiced by the Meitei community of Manipur, a state located in the north-eastern region of India. Secondly, it makes an attempt to understand the possible reasons behind its declining popularity in the Meitei community of Tripura, especially among the young Manipuri men and women of the present generation. It is to be mentioned at the very outset that this paper is neither all exhaustive nor without limitations since it is based mostly on online information available in the form of blogs, news reports, videos and photographs on the *Wari-Leeba* tradition and also on the researcher’s personal experience of growing up as a Meitei in the state of Tripura, which is home to at least twenty-five thousand Meiteis. The words Manipuri and Meitei have been used interchangeably in the present paper.

The Art of Storytelling

It is impossible to trace exactly when, where and by whom the first ever human story was told. Perhaps it happened in a dark isolated cave, in a dense forest or at the bank of a river at the wake of human civilization. Perhaps it happened during the evening or late at night. Perhaps the first story was told by a mother to her child, by a husband to his wife or by an old hunter to his friends. Nobody has got any answers. But it may

be assumed that the practice of storytelling started as soon as human beings realized their capacity of speech. It is not difficult to assume and believe that people might have started the practice of storytelling as a medium of entertaining themselves which then gradually became a part of their daily activities that they started following religiously, year after year, only to make the practice a ritual or a custom inevitable to that particular group or society. Stories came in a wide range of varieties-myths, legends, fairytales, fables, horror stories, tales of hero-worships and epics. During the course of time, as civilization progressed and people from one society began interacting with those of other societies, these stories travelled and spread across cultures, thus making them more popular by virtue of being retold innumerable times, which in turn reaffirmed the status of the contents contained in the tales as worthy of being passed on to others who had not heard of them before.

Stories not only entertained people but also served the purpose of educating them. Slowly, they became the preservers of the culture and social customs of different communities. Almost all oral literature is rich in cultural aspects. They reflect a society's history, religious bases and value system. Such works of oral literature, whether the educative aspects conveyed explicitly or implicitly, play the role of educating and socializing a member of the society (Myeong 2011). While Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* depict the issues of relationships and duties, the *Kalevala* of Finland and the *Kalevipoeg* of Estonia served to bring up the sense of nationalism among the people (Myeong 2011). It is believed that the oldest surviving tale of oral literature is the epic *Gilgamesh*, relating to the famous Sumerian king Gilgamesh and his tales of adventure and immortality.

Before the advent of print culture in India, literature existed in its oral form and even after the arrival of it, the importance of and role played by oral literary traditions such as storytelling cannot be denied till date. The very mention of the word 'storytelling' - be it in a classroom situation or anywhere else, instantly brings to our minds the picture of a man/woman assuming a central position and a group of people/children seated surrounding him/her. That is probably a typical storytelling setting in India, the land of storytellers or *kathakaars*, where each region seems to have its own style of storytelling. Besides the situations where stories are told by the eldest member of the family such as the old grandmother to the children of the house who would listen to her without any disbelief, stories are also performed in front of an audience who gets connected to the storyteller or performer on a psychological level. These storytellers as performers are people who are blessed not only with a good memory but also possess the skills to persuade the audience to keep them engaged till the performance is over. The use of an apt vocabulary, correct voice modulation and proper body language are the prerequisites of a good performer. In India, we have many traditions of storytelling, such as the *Purana-Pravachana* (a serious form of storytelling where the narrator is an expert in the *Puranas*), *Kathakalakshepa* (it incorporates songs and compositions in languages like Sanskrit, Tamil, Marathi and Hindi), *Burrakatha* (prevalent in Andhra Pradesh, where gypsies narrate stories beating the *burra* or a drum resembling a human skull). Besides, there are other forms of storytelling through performance such as the *Pandavaani* (Chhattisgarh), *Kottu*

(Kerala), *Keertan*, also known as Harikatha in many places, etc. The region of India popularly known as the 'north-east' comprising of eight states i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim is rich in literary traditions. It was not very long ago that the practice of publishing or printing of literature in this region has become popular. Before that, literature in this region existed only in the oral form. Most states of the region have a heritage of a rich oral literature in the form of the storytelling traditions, chants, rhythms or melodies practiced by the several ethnic groups since time immemorial.

Storytelling in Manipur

Manipur is one of the eight states of North East India with a history of more than two thousand years. It is bounded by Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, and Assam to the west; Burma lies to its east. The state covers an area of 22,327 sq km. *Meiteilon* (Manipuri) is the native tongue of the state. It is said that in the ancient times, the state was known by names such as *Kangleipak*, *Meitrabak* etc. and that the present name was given to it under the impact of Vaishnavism during the reign of King Garibniwaz or Pamheinba, in the beginning of the 19th Century. Manipuri is the only language among the Tibeto-Burman languages of India, which has long and profound literature, and cultural heritage, which is more than two thousand years old. It is accepted that writing in Manipuri began by the middle of 7th to the beginning of the 8th century A.D. This argument is supported by the copper plate inscription of king Khongtekcha (Report on Archeological Studies in Manipur, Bulletin I. 1935) and by the bronze coin inscribing in Manipuri script of King Ura Konthouba's period, 560-658 A.D. (Singh 2013). *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, *Panthoibi Khongul*, *Numit Kappa* etc. are important texts of Manipuri literature.

Since the focus of the paper is on the storytelling tradition of Manipur emphasis will be given to the oral tradition of the state. Oral tradition is an important characteristic of folklore. If the oral tradition and anonymity of the writer are considered as chief characteristics of folk literature, most of the literature of Manipur from the early time down to the middle of the 19th century may well pass off as folk literature (Dutta 1998). A child born and brought up in a typical *Meitei* household grows up listening to popular ballads such as "Tha Tha Thabungton/ Nacha Morambi pobige/Pobi Sanam Nambige" and "Ting Ting Chaoro/Napa machum taro/napu machum taro/thabi na karingei kahouro", proverbs such as "Ahan Mathina Chaphoo Melli; Angang Mathina Rocket Sai" rhymes such as "Tung Tung tungdumbi/chagrik nakrik hawaibi/ thoi thoi koubina/temu temu matonda", "Sey Sey sebotti/nanga eiga kaonasi/kanana ngamge yeng nasi" (K. Rajendra 2013). Oral performances like *Lai-Haraoba* (the Pleasing or Merry-making of Gods), *Khubak-Ishai* (A form of group song), *Shumang-Lila* (A popular form of theatrical performance) and *Thaang-Taa* (Martial Arts) etc. are considered as inevitable in the life of a Manipuri youth who grows up watching those and even starts performing them after attaining a certain age. Along with these spoken-word forms, children of the house are exposed to the tradition of the *funga-wari* or folk tales. Legend has it that around two thousand years ago, a man named Poireiton had brought a 'sacred fire' to the land of Manipur. Popular belief goes that till date the 'sacred fire' has been preserved in the Andro region of the state. Apart from the sacred fire of Andro, every Meitei household made it customary to have a clay-oven in the south-west corner of the house and keep the fire burning in it all day and

night. This type of oven made of clay is called 'funga' in Manipuri. Elders of the family would sit near the *funga* or fire in the evening and tell stories to the children of the house. These tales became popular as the *funga-wari*, 'wari' meaning a story. *Hanuba Hanubi Paan Thaaba*, *Pebet Amasung Hoidong Lamboiba*, *Lai Khutshangbi*, *Keibu Keoiba*, *Ita Thamui*, *Tapta* etc. are some classic examples of these folk tales that every Meitei child could relate to (Singha, Birmangal 2012). It may be assumed that these stories were told and passed on in a light non-serious mood for the purpose of entertainment as well as to instill fear in the minds of the children to make them obey societal as well as family norms without questioning them. On the other hand, the *Wari-Leeba* tradition of Manipur is a rather 'serious' form of storytelling in which stories are not 'told' but 'performed' in front of an audience. As discussed earlier, *Wari* means Story and *Leeba* is the act of telling or saying something. It is a narrative form of storytelling and is performed in *Meiteilon*. It has been a tradition for many centuries in Manipur. It is believed that the roots of *Wari-Leeba* tradition are closely associated to the advent of Hinduism in Manipur and can be traced back to the times, when the Pong King Chaopha Khe Khomba had gifted an idol of Lord Vishnu to the Meitei king Kyamba around 1470 AD. King Kyamba of Manipur started worshipping the idol at Lamlangdon, which later came to be known as Bishnupur or the abode of Lord Vishnu. It is believed that the practice of telling stories about the power of Lord Vishnu started from those times. The Manipuri Royal Chronicle *Cheitharol Kumbaba* also mentioned about the appointment of some Brahmins for the worship of Lord Vishnu in Manipur, during the time of Kyamba. Ironically, it is difficult to ascertain whether king Kyamba was initiated to Vaishnavism or not. Indeed, Vaishnavism remained in the court of Manipur as a religious faith and a way of worship. However, the king never disturbed the traditional of faith of the mass (Singh, E. Nilkanta 1993). According to yet another popular belief, *Wari-Leeba* tradition got momentum during the reign of King Pemheiba (1709-1748), popularly known as Garibniwaz, his Hindu name. Hinduization of Manipur was one of the biggest events during his rule. In 1720 A.D. a Vaishnava Saint from Narshingtola of Sylhet, named Shantidas Adhikari came to Manipur with his followers Bhagawandas and Narandas (Singh, N. Khelachandra 1969). They belonged to the Ramanandi sect of Vaishnavism and successfully convinced the Meitei king to declare it as the state religion of Manipur against the indigenous religions such as *Sanamahism*. It is said that the king was so overpowered by the new religion that he almost became a fanatic demanding all his subjects to follow the new religion and that images of traditional deities such as the *Umang Lai* (the forest-god) were destroyed and a number of valuable ancient literary texts and scriptures written in Meiteimayek (old Manipuri script) were burnt upon his instructions. The court scholars of King Garibniwaz began translating the epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* into *Meiteilon* and soon began enacting episodes or stories to popularize the new faith. Thus, *Wari-Leeba* is a type of oral recitation that 'paints pictures through words' and is based mainly on episodes of the *Mahabharata* (Dharwadker 2009: 184) Renowned historian of Manipur E. Nilkanta is, however, of the view that tradition of *Wari-Leeba* was introduced during the reign of King Jai Singha (also known as Rajarshi Bhagyachandra), as a gift from the culture of Assam. Jayaram Sharma (also known as Jeeuram Thakur) from Assam narrated the tenth chapter of *Bhagavatam* for the first time. In course of time, this intensely dramatic art of narration took up themes from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and other *Puranas* (Singh, E. Nilkanta 1993) It is said that Sharma arrived in Manipur in the year 1776 A.D and reinvented the tradition of storytelling.

He was honored with the *Kathavachaspati* award for his contribution towards the revival of the *Wari-Leeba* tradition. Notable pioneers of the tradition in the later years include Shri Warepam Chaoba Singh, Shri Kshetrimayum Deband Singh, Shri Thokchom Tonghlen Singh and Shri Shanglakpam Tamphajao Sharma. It is believed that Shri Tamphajao was the best performer of *Wari-Leeba* during the reign of Maharaja Churachand of Manipur (1819-1941 A.D.) and there was none to beat him in the art of *Wari-Leeba*. Contemporary artists of *Wari-Leeba* include Haobijam Amutombi Singh of Sunusiphai Makha Leikai, Bishnupur district who is a senior artist and *guru* of this art form and Takhellambam Shyamkanhai of Chethabi Leirak of Manipur, who is one of the youngest and most successful names in the tradition. He has won numerous awards and honors and performed across the country and the world.

The Performance of *Wari-Leeba*

Konthoujam Kunjo Singh, an exponent of the *Wari-Leeba* tradition, opines that this narrative form of storytelling enables common man to understand the concepts of *Rajneeti* (politics) and *Dharmaneeti* (ethics) inherent in epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Much like the *Paanchali* or *Vrata-Katha* tradition observed by the Bengali community, it is believed that if one listens to the *Wari* with dedication and respect towards the narration, all sins of the previous birth would be washed off. But the entire onus is not on the listener. The *Wariroi* or performer should perform with a pious heart observing and offering all nine forms of *bhakti* to the Lord, i.e. *Shravana* (hearing), *Kirtana* (singing) *Smarana* (remembrance), *Pada Sevana* (serving the Lord's feet), *Archana* (worship), *Vandana* (prayer), *Dasya* (slavery to the lord), *Sakhya* (friendship with the Lord) and *Atma-Nivedana* (self-surrender to the Lord). He should so perform to the satisfaction of his audience/listeners that they are overwhelmed with emotions and in there lies the success of a genuine performer. The performer is usually a male with great knowledge of the epics and has an inimitable style of storytelling (although online portals such as YouTube has videos where a certain P. Ronibala Devi of Manipuri is seen performing the art).

In what follows, I shall describe what goes during a typical *Wari-Leeba* performance in Manipur, although it is quite different from the practice followed in the neighbouring state of Tripura, and in recent times, some variations in the performance have been observed in Manipur as well:

1. Place of Performance: The performance is usually carried out in a *mandap* or hall which is built for performing cultural as well as religious activities weddings, *Shumang-Lila*, *Nata-Sankirtan* and so on. In fact, a *mandap* is an essential part of the Meitei culture. It is a place where elders of the community meet and take decisions and make policies for the respective *Khul/Khun* (area wise division of the *Meitei* community headed by a Chief). It may be a permanent construction or sometimes even a temporary one depending on the purpose for which it has been built. A temporary *mandap* is generally built of bamboos and is further decorated with white papers cut and pasted in various shapes and sizes on the bamboo poles. The *Wari-Leeba* performer sits in the *mandap* surrounded by an audience.

2. Color and Attire: The colour 'white' is considered as the symbol of happiness, peace and prosperity in many cultures. This color is taken as a symbol of piousness

and so the presence of the colour 'white' is ubiquitous in almost every Meitei tradition. For example, it is mandatory for the performers in *Nata-Sankirtan*, *Khubak Ishai*, *Nupa Pala* etc, to wear white clothes. Married elderly Meitei women wear white *Inafi* (clothing for the upper body) on social and religious occasions. Colours such as light pink and yellow may also be worn by few but the number is negligible (the mandate does not apply for young girls who are allowed to wear bright colored *inafi*). *Kabok* (parched rice of white color) is an important ingredient in all Meitei rituals and festivals. The use of white sandalwood paste is also compulsory in Meitei rituals. The *kundo-pareng* (garlands made of a white flower belonging to the Jasmine family) used in weddings is also white in color symbolic of the peace and prosperity of the occasion as well the people involved in it. *Wari-Leeba* is also not an exception to it. The performer sits on a mat covered with a white cloth. This is known as the *Vyasa Aasana*. It is sometimes referred to as 'saiympras' by many scholars. The performer wears a white *pheijom* (dhoti) and carries the *gayatri lugun* (sacred white thread) across his chest. The *gunja* (part of the dhoti pleat) of the *pheijom* must be tucked in at the waist of the wearer and the *naamei-phijin* (tail of the dhoti) should not be made visible and must be tucked in properly at the back so that it does not come out.

3. Props used in the performance: Unlike other performances where Manipuri performers use instruments like the *Mridangam* (a long drum), *Kartaal* (cymbals) or *Dholak* (a flat drum), *Wari-Leeba* does not make use of any musical instrument. Instead, one of the most important props used in the performance of *Wari-Leeba* is a pillow, usually white in color. The pillow is kept on the *Vyasa Asana* close to where the performer sits. He occasionally beats it with his hands in order to draw the attention of the audience as well as to make the performance look more dramatic. In addition, a wooden stool covered with a white cloth is used to keep the book on it. The performer reads aloud the episodes from the book and enacts it. The present practice of worshiping the sacred book on a stool was introduced by Shri Jiuram Sharma (Ram Katha in Wari Leebal Style from Manipur, n.d).

4. Rituals to be observed before the beginning of the narration: If the performance takes place in a *mandap* where Hindu idols are installed, then first the idols are worshipped which is followed by the *Lairik-Puja* (worshipping of the sacred book). Thereafter, water in a copper/bronze container containing *tulsi* leaves (basil) is sprinkled on everything around (symbolizing an act of purification of body and soul). On small pieces of decorated banana leaves known as *tanggda*, *tulsi* leaves, *heiruk* (a fruit), *Pana-kwa* (betel-leaves and betel-nuts) and *kundo* flowers are offered one by one to the *Bhagwat-Gita*, *Vyasa Asana*, and finally to the *Vaishnav-Asana* (members in the audience). *Lei-Chandan* is an essential part of the event where sandalwood paste and a *kundo* flower are offered to all members in the audience (also known as *Bhabok*/listener). Before occupying the *Vyasa Asana*, the performer offers *Shastanga Pranaam* (a form of veneration where one lies down on his stomach stretching his body completely on the ground) to all the *bhaboks* individually.

5. Performance of the narrator: The performer should be one who keeps his listeners in awe till the performance is over and maybe even after that. He is ex-

tremely well versed in the language, articulate and employs all his non-verbal communication skills along with the words of mouth. He is not only a master of facial expressions and hand gestures, but also knows the art of voice modulation. Such is the great power exercised by the master story tellers over audience that they weep and laugh almost at the same time (Singh, 1993). The body language of the performer changes according to the emotional consciousness that he deals with. In the Indic traditions of storytelling, this emotional consciousness is *Rasa*, the aesthetic that is the 'juice', heartbeat and essence to all performance arts – dance, music, storytelling, and theatre (Naidu 2012).

Manipuri settlements in Tripura: An Overview

Like Manipur, Tripura is an ancient princely state of India. Like the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (the court chronicles of Manipur), Tripura has her own royal chronicles by the name of *Sri Rajmala* or simply *Rajmala*. Although historians opine that the *Rajmala* was compiled by the court poets of the royal family of Tripura in order to please their patrons and gain their favour, and that its historical authenticity is doubtful, yet they are of the view that the events described (in the book) fifteenth century onwards are similar to the historical findings and therefore, may be treated as valid (Singha and Ray, 2007). According to *Rajmala*, the royal family of Tripura had its origin in the Lunar dynasty and it was Druhyu, the son of king Yayati who laid the foundation of Tripura dynasty. The kings of Tripura began to suffix the title of 'Manikya' from the reign of Ratna Fa or Ratna Manikya (Singha, 2014). But from 1765 to 1947, Tripura was under indirect control of the British India and it finally joined the Indian Union on 15 October 1949. The state of Tripura has an area of 10,491 sq.km, and is bounded on the north, south and west by Bangladesh and on the east by Assam and Mizoram. There are as many as nineteen ethnic groups in the state with *Kokborok* as the commonly spoken indigenous language. The indigenous communities of the state include Tripuris, Mogs, Jamatias, Noatias, Reangs, Murasings etc. to name a few. Besides, the state also has Manipuri and Bengali population, and the Bengali speaking group being the largest ethnolinguistic group of the state.

Although it is not possible to trace the exact date when Manipuri settlers came to Tripura, it is assumed that the early migrations took place during the Burmese invasion of Manipur during which a number of Manipuris began to leave their motherland and emigrate to Assam, Cachar, Sylhet and Tripura. Later, matrimonial relations were established by the people of Manipur with the royal family of Tripura. Manipur was ruled by Burma between 1819 and 1825 and one-third of the *Meitei* population was forced to disperse to these neighbouring states. According to a report by the Tribal Research Institute under the Government of Tripura, the Manipuri population of the state was 12,851 in 1905 A.D. The figure rose to 19,120 in 1931, but according to the census report of 1991, the population was reduced to 17,794. It may, however, be assumed that twenty years later, the Manipuri population of the state could be around 25000 by 2011. *Rajmala* mentions that to the east of King Druhyu's kingdom, there situated a state called 'Mekhli'. This was the name given to Manipur by the people of Tripura in the early period. Similarly, Manipuris called Tripura by

the name of 'Takhel/Takhen'. The word 'Takhen' has come from the Bengali word 'Dakhin' which means South. The people of Sylhet used to call Tripura 'Dakhin' which was pronounced by the Manipuris as Takhen (Singha, 2014). It is said that these two ancient princely states of Manipur and Tripura were involved in trade as well as warfare. For instance, *Cheitharol Kumbaba* mentions the bringing of elephants to Manipur from Tripura. As regards warfare, the history of Manipur claims that King Garibniwaz was also known as *Takhel-Ngamba* (Conqueror of Tripura) because he had conquered Tripura in 1727 and 1733 A.D, although there is no mention of any such victory or defeat in Tripura's royal chronicles. Apart from such occasional trade and conflicts, matrimonial alliances were one of the reasons that had brought these two states close to each other. The earliest example in this case being the wedding of 43rd King Taidakshin of Tripura to an unnamed princess of Mekhli (Manipur). It may be mentioned here that it is only *Rajmala* that tells of such a wedding since there is no other historical reference that the matrimonial alliance between Taidakshin and the Manipuri princess was solemnized. Nevertheless, one of the most important matrimonial alliances between Manipur and Tripura took place towards the end of 18th century when Tripura King Rajdhar Manikya II married princess Hariseswari, daughter of King Bhagyachandra of Manipur. The Mekhli or Manipuri princess Hariseswari brought along with her the idol of 'Shri Radhamadhav' which began to be worshipped by the people of Tripura, the present place of worship being the Radhamadhav Jew Temple at Agartala, the capital of Tripura. It is said that keeping in view the name Mekhli (Manipur), the first Manipuri settlement began at a place called Mekhlipara. Thereafter this tradition of marrying Manipuri princesses by Tripura kings continued; for instance, King Kashi Chandra Manikya's marriage to Manipuri princess Kutlakshi, King Krishna Kishore Manikya's marriage to Manipuri princesses Chandrakala, Akhileshwari and Bidhukala. It is notable that in the later years, the Tripura kings married Manipuri girls even from ordinary families. For instance, King Ishan Chandra Manikya (1849-1862 A.D) married three Manipuri *khsatriya* women by the name of Mourangthem Chanu Muktabali, Keisam Chanu Jatiswari and Khumanthem Chanu Chadreswari. Matrimonial alliances between Tripura and Manipur has helped promote not only political relations between the two states but also enabled the promotion and development of *Meitei* culture in Tripura. Maharaj Birchandra Manikya (1862-1896 A.D) is considered to be the maker of modern Tripura who encouraged the spread and development of Manipuri culture in Tripura. It is said that his second wife, Maharani Rajeshwari Devi of Manipur had started the popular *Lai-Haraoba* festival at the temple of *Pakhangba* at Tripura. Another notable figure was Manipuri Maharani Tulasibati (queen of Maharaja Radhakishore) whose contribution to the emancipation of women of Tripura through education is remarkable. The presence of Manipuri women in the royal palace of Tripura, their knowledge of the *Meitei* language and its culture helped enhance its use and popularity among the masses through the observance of Manipuri (Hindu) festivals such as *Holi/Yaoshang*, *Raas-Leela*, *Basanta-Raas*, *Rath Yatra* (known as *Kaang* in Manipur), *Jhulan*, *Rawkhaal* etc. The presence of number Manipuri women in the royal family and their knowledge of the language as well as their efforts to

disseminate the Meitei culture across the state certainly helped in the development of Manipuri culture in Tripura. Thus, it may be said that Manipuri settlements in Tripura grew as a result of Manipuri queens in the royal house of Tripura as well as other Meitei settlers who migrated to the state during the Burmese invasion of Manipur.

Declining popularity of the *Wari-Leeba* Tradition among the present generation Meiteis of Tripura (Agartala)

After an elaborate discussion on the *Wari-Leeba* tradition it is quite disappointing to comment at this juncture (based on my own experience as a Meitei in Tripura) that the performance of *Wari-Leeba* as a tradition does not really exist in Tripura. Instead, what we have here is a tradition of storytelling at our disposal which is quite different from the performance that those artists carry out in Manipur. This tradition is popular by the name of *Lairik Taaba* (the act of listening to stories). This section attempts to understand the reasons behind the declining popularity of the tradition of storytelling in question among the present generation (young) Manipuris of Tripura, especially in the capital city of Agartala,

The present state of Tripura is divided into twenty-three subdivisions and eight districts. Manipuri settlements are found in the sub-divisions namely Dharmanagar, Khowai, Kamalpur and Kailashhar as well as at the outskirts of the city such as Nalgaria, Bishalgarh, Golaghati, Bamutia and Lalsingmura. In addition, the capital city of Agartala has its own share of Manipuri population in areas such as Dhaleshwar, Math Chowmuhani, Radhanagar and Abhoynagar to name a few. Manipuri population in Tripura is generally identified by their surnames, for instance, the last name 'Singha/Singh' is used by Meiteis, 'Sinha' is used by Bishnupriya Manipuris, 'Choudhury, Datta, Karmakar' used by Kirtania Manipuris and last but not the least, last names such as Bhattacharjee, Banerjee etc. are used by Manipuri Brahmins (the researcher is not sure whether such a division exists in Manipur). Although Bishnupriya Manipuri language is quite different from the *Meitei* language in which *Wari-Leeba* is performed in Manipur, the Manipuris of Tripura irrespective of their linguistic differences strive to protect the culture and heritage handed down to the present generation by their forefathers. Some of the well-known places of worship of Manipuri population of Agartala include Radhamadhob Jew Mandir at Radhanagar, Paakhangba Temple at Math Chowmuhani, Pagla Debota Baari at Abhoynagar and Kishori Lal Mandir at Palace Compound. In addition, many dance schools such as Chaturanga Dance Academy have come up in the recent times for the development of Manipuri heritage and culture through the teaching and learning of Manipuri Classical dance, *Pung Cholom* etc. that are performed from time to time on occasions such as *Lai Haraoba*, *Raas-Leela* and *Yaoshang* celebrated among the Meiteis spread across the city as well as the state although the rituals followed in these events might differ according to the working of the respective *Meitei khuls*. A *khul* (also known as *khun*) may be understood as a 'locality wise division of the Manipuri population of an area', (although there is no exact equivalent term of it in English). However, families from distant areas may also join a *khul* outside if they so wish. For example, Abhoynagar is a Manipuri dominated area of Agartala and is divided into two *khuls*.

Under each *khul*, come seventy or eighty families located in the area of Abhoynagar. But Manipuris from another area, say Dhaleswar, may also join any of the *khuls* of Abhoynagar. Each *khul* is headed by a leader called *Khul-Mapu* who, along with the male members of the *khul* takes important decisions regarding the well-being of the *khul* and also regarding the observance of different festivals under their jurisdiction. Every *khul* has a dedicated *mandap* where all the social meetings and rituals take place from time to time.

An interesting, yet unfortunate, thing to note here is that there is a lot of difference between the Manipuris of the two states, namely Manipur and Tripura. There is a considerable difference between the *Meiteis* of Manipur and Tripura in terms of rituals of birth, wedding and even death. It is therefore, quite obvious that the tradition of storytelling in these two state states would have a lot of differences, which makes the title of this paper quite ironical in the sense that how a tradition that has no existence in reality, could face a declining status. As said earlier, *Wari-Leeba's* Tripura equivalent may be called *Lairik Taba*. Although the intricate details observed in the former are not followed so strictly in the latter, the two traditions have some commonalities as well. For instance, both *Wari-Leeba* and *Lairik Taba* are performed by men on occasions such as birth, wedding and death. In most cases, *Lairik Taba* is performed in the *khul mandap*, but the performance may also take place even in the courtyard of any Manipuri man or woman belonging to a particular *khul*. Like *Wari-Leeba*, *Lairik-Taba* is also based on episodes on *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. As regards the performance, *Lairik-Taba* is performed by an elderly man and the presence of young men taking it up as a profession is rarely seen in Agartala. This is because unlike Manipur, such formal training in the tradition does not take place anywhere in Tripura. Besides, the present generation Manipuris of Agartala are too occupied in their professional lives to explore the long lost traditions. The passing away of those who had an expertise in this field or knowledge in this domain is also another reason why the young men and women are not even aware of such a tradition. But having said that, the fact remains that the present generation of young Meiteis of Tripura, especially those residing at Agartala, have never seen a real *Wari-leeba* performance (as the one described in the preceding pages) in Tripura until October 2016 when the Repertory of *Wari-Leeba*, Manipur, led by Konthoujam Kunjo and T. Shyamkanhai came to Tripura to perform in different Meitei dominated districts of the state such as Dharmanagar, Kailashahar, Kamalpur, Khowai and Abhoynagar. This was done in collaboration with the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad of Tripura which is actively involved in the welfare of the Manipuri community of the state through the spread of Meitei language and literature to the people of the state. So the 'absence' of the tradition is one of the biggest reasons of its unpopularity in our state. Another probable reason why the young men and women do not find the tradition of storytelling in *Meiteilon* less or not -appealing could be the difference in the *Meiteilons* spoken in Tripura and Manipur respectively. As a matter of fact, the *Meiteilon* (Manipuri language) spoken by the present generation Manipuris of Tripura is very different from what is spoken in Manipur. The difference is prominent in terms of pronunciation, accent and even vocabulary. It cannot be denied that Manipuris of Tripura have been under the influence of Bengali and Kokborok speakers of the state

for a considerable period of time now, and therefore, they have been borrowing words (especially from Bangla) to express themselves. Tripura born Manipuri children, teenagers and even adults in most cases, cannot read the *Meitei* script and are used to read or write Manipuri using the Bengali letters of the alphabet. In fact, the difference between the Manipuris of these two states is clearly evident in the fact that it is compulsory for the Manipuris of Manipur to use their family name/ *yumnaak* before or after their names, but Manipuris of Tripura are not bound to do that. These days, however, a trend is being noticed that young Manipuri men and women of Tripura are using their *yumnaaks* in their social media profiles and are becoming a part of Meitei forums and communities online to explore more about their 'lost' culture. In this paper, an attempt has been made to delve deep into the storytelling tradition of Manipur and to find out why this tradition is not very popular in the neighbouring state of Tripura. In this sense, the paper may have some autobiographical undertones since the researcher herself is a Tripura-Manipuri (Manipuri born and brought up in Tripura) and has been trying to negotiate with the absence of authentic Manipuri traditions in the state of Tripura.

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