

Revisiting the Traditional Agricultural Implements of the Meiteis of Manipur

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to document the various implements of agriculture used by the Meiteis. Endeavour is also made to some extent to show the development of these tools from the early period. This study is carried out by conducting field survey in different parts of the Manipur valley, and by basing on the literatures – published and unpublished. Informations are collected through personal interview and group discussion with the farmers. In each stage of social development the tools got improved. 17th century is the turning point in the history of agriculture that plough drawn by bullock or buffalo was introduced for the first time during the reign of Khagemba (1597 – 1652 A.D.). Different kinds of agricultural tools were used extensively along with animal power. They are still in use in Manipur side by side with the modern tools and many people depend on them. Traditional tools and implements dominate over the modern equipments in some remote areas of the Manipur valley

Keywords- Meiteis, Manipur valley, History, Agriculture, Tools

INTRODUCTION

Manipur which lies in north-eastern part of India has three major ethnic groups – the Meiteis, the Nagas and the Kukis. The Meiteis are the dominant community and they mainly inhabit the valley areas while the Nagas and the Kukis are the hill dwellers. Agriculture is the main occupation of the Meiteis, and is an old practice. Its related knowledge has been passed down by the forefathers from generation to generation. Agriculture also consists of implements. Without proper use of them agriculture must not complete at all. In the Manipur valley, it has been carried out using different types of implements along with animals.

DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL TOOLS

Early literary works speak of the practice of agriculture in ancient Manipur. According to a text called *Panthoipi Khongkul*, rice and some kinds of vegetables were cultivated by Panthoibi, a girl of *Mangang* clan in the Nongmaiching hills¹. Hoe was used in clearing, levelling and digging the land. *Maputhipa*, an old text, says that Shoubol Yairel Chanu and Sanakhongnang Leima, the two daughters of king Puthiba who ruled Manipur in the proto-historical period were engaged in rice farming using hoe in a place known as Chenglei Unungta². Their father is said to have used a plough made by use of the beak of crane traditionally known as *Wainu*³.

In early Manipur, Shifting cultivation locally known as *Pamlou* was carried out successfully. *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba* refers to the agricultural development during Naothingkhong's reign (663-763 AD.). The *Ningthoujas*, the *Khumans* and the *Luwangs* took to wet rice cultivation while the Shelloi Langmai tribes of Nongmaiching hills were devoted to shifting cultivation⁴. A Manipuri chronicle, *Ningthourol Lambuba* mentions the use of flail made of a tree called *Wupan*, large basket known as *Sangbai* and threshing mat⁵. Agricultural tools such as axe, dao and iron hoe were used. Axes and daos were the implements used for felling trees and clearance of jungle. Iron hoe was meant for digging soil⁶. Mention is also made of the use of mortar and pestle. It is recorded that one day Hemtoui Iwanthaba who ruled Manipur from 1162 to 1194 A.D. happened to see pounding of rice on the mortar by *Khuman* clan girl, Poncheng Ngambi and her friends⁷. People of Manipur also used a flat circular basket traditionally known as *Yangkok*, for winnowing rice. It is mentioned in the literature, *Khongchomnupi Nongkarol*, of giving order to Haoshi Namoinu, a girl of *Luwang* clan by her step-mother to winnow rice.⁸ Granaries were constructed by the kings at different places to store food grains. For instance, Mungyamba established granaries at different places such as

Mongsangkei and Chajing.⁹The Manipuri word for granary is *Kei*. Khagemba also established *Kei* at Kakyao, Langpok Leihao, Tingri, Koirengkei, Monsangkei, Kiyamkei, Wangoo and Yiharei *Kei* to store food grains for distributing to the people during famine, drought or other calamities.¹⁰ Mention is not made in the early literatures of the use of iron plough drawn by bullock or buffalo. Sumerians in Mesopotamia, according to H.J. Hopfen, are believed to be the first in the world who used plough in about 3600 B.C. and Egyptians followed it in about 3000 B.C.¹¹ In the Rigvedic period, plough drawn by cattle and horses were used.¹² In the Later Vedic period (1000 – 600 B.C.), it is said that six, eight, twelve and twenty four oxen were yoked to the plough.¹³

Plough drawn by bullock or buffalo began to be used in Manipur during the reign of Khagemba (1597 – 1652 A.D.). In 1606 A.D. a combined force of the Cacharis and the Muslims invaded Manipur, but they were defeated by the Meitei king. Many Muslims were captured. The Muslim captives were settled that different parts of the Manipur valley. These Muslims introduced plough in Manipur.¹⁴ Agriculture was more developed that people could cultivate crops in a large scale. The number of agricultural tools was increased in the subsequent centuries.

Agricultural operations were performed using buffaloes, bullocks, and different kinds of implements. In agriculture, animal power was used in ploughing, harrowing, and pulling sledge and cart. R. Boileau Pemberton recorded that buffaloes were much prized and most suited cattle for agriculture. One buffalo of Manipur could do twice the work that two Bengali bullock performed. Bullocks used in Manipur were also much superior to that found in Bengal. Agricultural implements such as axe, dao, hoe and plough were made in Manipur.¹⁵ T.C. Hodson, in his book, *The Meithei*s, enumerates the various types of implements which were employed by the farmers in agriculture. The different kinds of implements employed by the Meiteis in carrying out farming were – spade (*yot*), plough (*langgol*), large dao (*thangjou*), smooth harrow (*ukai ananba*), toothed harrow (*ukai samchet*), sickle (*thanggol*), paddy spoon (*phouintop*), fan used for winnowing the paddy (*humai*), flail or paddy thrasher (*cheirong*), threshing mat (*yeina phak*) and sledge (*kangpot*).¹⁶ These tools got modified in the following decades to make more effective.

Though the first half of 20th century witnessed the use of bullock cart it was in the second half of the same century that this tool was used in a large scale in the Manipur valley.

AGRICULTURAL TOOLS

Spade (*Yot* or *Yotpak*) - It is a tool used in preparing agricultural field. It is used in digging up the land, making bunds and ridges, and also in digging irrigation channel. It consists of a long bamboo or wooden handle of about 110 to 130cm long and a metal blade usually of iron (Fig.1).

Plough (*Langgol*) - It is an important farming implement with sharp ploughshare which is pulled over the soil to turn it over (Fig.2). It has a wooden beam of about 3m long by which the plough is connected with the yoke. This implement is pulled by two bullocks or one buffalo. If it is to be dragged by the later two bamboo poles are fitted laterally instead of single wooden beam. To turn over the uppermost layer of the soil is the most important purpose of ploughing.

Beetle (*Tokshu*) - It is a simple tool for breaking clod. It consists of a bamboo handle (about 1.37m long) fitted to a short wood log whose length and diameter are about 25cm and 11cm respectively (Fig.3). Instead of wood root of bamboo may also be used.

Large Dao (*Thangjou*) - This implement comprises of a sharpened iron blade whose length ranges from 40 to 50 cm and width is about 6cm in the middle attached to a bamboo handle. For agricultural purpose, it is used under the name of *Louri Thang* which has a long bamboo handle of about 1 to 1.5m long, for clearing land and trimming the ridges with the clearance of grasses growing on it (Fig.4).

Digging Hoe (*Karni*) - It is a small agricultural implement. For constructing it, a small iron blade of dustpan shape is inserted to one end of a small bamboo whose length varies from 30cm to 66cm (Fig.5). The working area is only around 7cm wide and 16cm long. This implement is very effective in loosening soil, planting vegetables, weeding and harvesting root crops.

Smooth Harrow (*Ukai Ananba*) - For constructing this type of harrow, two bamboo poles are fitted to a plank of about 2m long and 26cm wide (Fig.6). These two poles are fixed to the yoke to be drawn by animals. This implement is used to pulverise the clod and level the ground.

Toothed Harrow (*Ukai Samchet*) - It is a type of harrow in which bamboo pegs for penetration into the soil are fixed at regular intervals of about 10cm (Fig.7). This implement is meant for breaking the masses of clay and, uprooting and destroying the grasses. Another use of it is for covering the sown seeds. If a farmer wants to cover the seeds this tool is dragged just after they are sown in the earth.

Basket (*Thummok*) - It is made by weaving bamboo strips. The largest basket known as *Sangbai* not only acts as a traditional unit for measuring the quantity of paddy but also it is used in carrying paddy and soaking paddy seeds in the water for allowing sprouting (Fig.8). It's height is 34cm while the diameter of the mouth is 48.5cm. A smaller basket so called *Laitang* (height-20.5cm, diameter of the mouth-37cm) is also employed by the farmers as a carrier of paddy seeds while sowing.

Sickle (*Thanggol*) - The literal meaning of *Thanggol* is curved knife (*thang* means knife, *gol* means curve). It is a short handled tool with a semicircular blade having a rough edge, used for cutting crops such as rice, wheat, mustard, and grasses (Fig.9).

Paddy Spoon (*Phouintop*) - This implement is of dustpan shape having a long handle of about 1.55m (Fig.10). It is carved out of a single wood. The working area of it measures only about 18cm in length. The function of this wooden tool is to push, scoop and upturn the paddy while winnowing.

Winnowing Fan (*Humai*) - It is a rectangular sheet woven from strips of giant reed, and length is 61cm while the breadth 46cm (Fig.11). Chaps are separated from the grains with the help of it.

Flail (*Cheirong*) - This simple harvesting tool is made of tree branches. It is a device consisting of a wooden staff with three or four short sticks in one end (Fig.12). *Cheirong* is used for threshing harvested rice, wheat and mustard plants.

Threshing Mat (*Yeina Phak*) - It is a large mat made by weaving fine strips of giant reed (Fig.13). This implement is also known as *Phaklen*. Commonly used implement is 5.27m long and 4.82m wide. Threshing of rice, wheat etc. is performed by spreading out the mat in the field.

Sledge (*Kangpot*) - This tool is a buffalo or bullock pulled vehicle with no wheel, and made of bamboo or wood (Fig.14). Two main parts constitute it – body on which the things to be carried are put and two wooden beams for drawing it. The entire length of sledge is about 3.97m while the breadth is 1.22m. It is used for carrying agricultural commodities and other goods.

Bullock Cart (*Sangari*) - Bullock cart is a two wheeled vehicle drawn by a pair of oxen; it has no roof (Fig.15). Cart dragged by a single buffalo is also used in Manipur. Though an iron rim is fitted around the large wooden wheels with 16 spokes and radius of 63cm, for making other parts, bamboo and wood are the main components. The whole length of this vehicle is around 4.80m while the width in the middle 1.76m. It serves as a transporter of cow dung, agricultural implements, produce and other articles.

Boat (*Hi*) - This transportation tool is made by hollowing out of a tree trunk. It can also be constructed by joining planks (Fig.16). Nowadays, boat of 49cm wide and 5.49m long is the most common. It is very

significant for carrying fodder, agricultural implements and produce. It also provides a platform for reaping *Taothabi*, a kind of paddy which generally grows in the water.

Granary (Kei) - It is a structure in which threshed grains particularly rice grains are stored. This building constructed on raised platform of 1-3 feet above the ground is made of wood, bamboo, giant reed and thatch (Fig.17). The width varies from 3.05m to 4.58m and the length from 4.72m to 7.32m. There is also small granary constructed inside the residential house. An earthen pot is usually kept inside the *Kei* as a mark of Phouoibi, goddess of paddy.



Fig.1. Spade (*Yotpak*)



Fig. 2: Plough (*Langgol*)



Fig. 3: Beetle (*Tokshu*)



Fig.4: Large Dao (*Louri Thang*)



Fig.5: Digging Hoe (*Karni*)



Fig. 6: Smooth Harrow (*Ukai Ananba*)



Fig. 7: Toothed Harrow (*Ukai Samchet*)



Fig. 8: Basket (*Sangbai*)



Fig. 9: Sickle (*Thanggol*)



Fig. 10: Paddy Spoon (*Phouintop*)



Fig. 11: Winnowing Fan (*Humaï*)



Fig. 12: Flail (*Cheirong*)



Fig. 13: Threshing Mat (*Yeina Phak*)



Fig. 14: Sledge (*Kangpot*)



Fig. 15: Bullock Cart (*Sangari*)



Fig. 16: Boat (*Hi*)



Fig. 17: Granary (*Kei*)

CONCLUSION

Meitei people of Manipur used various kinds of traditionally developed agricultural tools by adding technique and design from time to time to suit the changing condition. These economically and feasible tools were easily made by using locally available materials. They are still in use not in a large number along with modern tools and technology. Extensive use is not reported from most parts of this state. But these environment friendly implements dominate over the modern equipments in some rural areas though they are not preferred by many people may be because of their lower efficiency and causing tiredness to the operator. If the traditional farming tools are standardized considering the economy of the rural people they may be viable thereby helping in solving unemployment problem in Manipur to some extent. As they do not affect environment, use of them should be encouraged for the betterment of present and future generations.

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