

Traditional Games Of Manipur With Special Reference To *Sagol Kangjei* (Polo): A Fresh Survey

Dr W. Dhiren Singh
Asst. Prof., Department of History
NG College, Imphal West, Manipur
E-mail:wadhiren123@gmail.com

Dr Oinam Ranjit Singh(Corresponding author)
Associate Professor, Department of History
Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, BTC, Assam
E-mail:ranjitoinam09@gmail.com

Dr S. Jayalaxmi Devi
Asst. Prof., Department of History
NG College, Imphal West, Manipur
E-mail:jayasaolsem577@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper is a fresh survey on the indigenous games of Manipur with reference to *Sagol Kangjei*. The Meiteis of Manipur have keen interest in their indigenous games as it does ensure not only good health but also promotes in preservation of cultural heritage of the people. The genesis of the different indigenous games like *Kiyang Lamjel*, *Sagol kangjei*, *Khong kangjei*, *Kang* etc. may be traced in the ancient texts and other chronicles. The history of *Sagol kangjei* is vague. It is said that the playing of *Sagol kangjei* started during the reign of *Kangba* before the birth of Christ. *Kangjei* means *Kangba's* stick and *Sagol* means horse. *Sagol kangjei* literally means king *Kangba's* hokey on horseback. The ball used in playing *Sagol kangjei* is known as *kangdrum* or *Kangba's* round object (ball among the Manipuris). According to tradition two teams known as North team and South team led by *Marjing* and *Thangjing* respectively played *Sagol kangjei*. Judges were selected by the *Kangbural*, the head of the tournament committee which consisted of *Hantre Hunna Am* (one starter), *Matai Yengba Ani* (two line judges), *Panjal Paba Ani* (two goal judges), *Panjal Eba Ama* (one scorer) and *Moibung Khongba Ama* (one buglar). There are no goal posts in this game. Goal line determines the end of the two boundaries of the rectangular field. To score a goal the ball must cross the line. There is no offside in this game. The game is now played in two styles- the *Pana* (original Manipuris style) and the International style Polo. Though the claim of being the state of origin of the Polo or *Sagol kangjei* has been made by a number of countries in the world it is indeed a fact that the present international game Polo owes its origin to Manipur.

Key words: *Sagol kangjei*, *Manipur*, *Kangba*, *Panjal Paba*, *Polo*

Introduction

The history of Sport can be traced back to the existence of human civilization itself. It is an essential part of cultural identity and a mechanism for the protection and promotion of cultural diversity. The importance of indigenous games to our cultural heritage and the need for preservation has now been recognized by the United Nation Educational Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The Meiteis living in the state of Manipur have keen interest in their indigenous games, as it ensures not only good health but also promotes in preservation of cultural heritage of the people. They play different types of indigenous games like *Kiyang Lamjel*, *Sagol kangjei*, *Khong kangjei*, *Kang* etc. in leisure time as well as in their socio-cultural functions. The origin of these games may be traced in the ancient texts and other chronicles. The paper is an attempt to throw light on the *Sagol Kangjei* game; its origin and significance.

Method and materials

The necessary data of the present study have been collected from available primary and secondary sources. Chronicles and historical texts are the primary sources for the study and secondary sources consist of published works, souvenirs and articles. The study is purely ethno-historical approach.

***Sagol Kangjei* (Polo-game)**

The history of *Sagol Kangjei* is vague. It is believed that the playing of *Sagol Kangjei* began during the time of *Kangba* before Christ¹ (5000 B.C. to 3100 B.C). *Kangjeiron Puya* (a historical text) also mentions how the game itself evolved from *Mukna Kangjei*, an indigenous form of hockey where the players also physically wrestle for ball possession though the stick and the ball are the primary instruments of the game. The manuscript further narrates how the king on horseback did snatch the ball from among the wrestling hockey players and asked them to see him the following daybreak. On that day the king initiated the game of hockey on horseback. *Kangjei* means *Kangba's* stick and *Sagol* means horse. Thus, *Sagol Kangjei* literally means king *Kangba's* hokey on horseback. The ball used in playing *Sagol Kangjei* is known as *Kangdrum* or *Kangba's* round object (ball among the Manipuris). It is believed that *Sagol Kangjei* was played between *Loyalakpa's* team and *Khoriphaba's* team before the Christian era.² The first polo ground patronized by King *Kangba* in 3100 B.C is known as *Kangabung* located around 20 km from Imphal at *Kangmong*.³

It is also said that *Sagol Kangei* was played to mark the special occasion of *Loukhatpa* (acceptance) of *Laisana*, the wife of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*⁴ by the family members and relatives of her husband.⁵ *Laisana* and her brother *Poireiton* were considered aliens. To observe this occasion *Loukhatpa*, a *Sagol Kangjei* match was played seven a side of the important chiefs and patriarchs of the time.⁶ Two teams known as North team and South team led by *Marjing* and *Thangjing* respectively played *Sagol Kangjei*.⁷ There are seven players in each team. North team

has *Marjing* (*Pakhangba* or full back), *Khamlangba* (*Pangachang* or half back), *Irum Ningthou* (*Pallak* or mid-fielder), *Ikop Ningthou* (*Langjei* or centre), *Irong Ningthou* (*Pallakchang* or mid-fielders), *Nongshaba* (*Panjeichang* or no.2 forward), and *Panthoiba* (*Panjenba* or forward). South team consists of *Thangjing* (*Panngakpa* or full back), *Khoriphaba* (*Pangakchang* or half-back), *Wangbren* (*Pallak* or mid-fielder), *Yangoi Ningthou* (*Langjei* or centre), *Nambul Lakpa* (*Pallakchang* or mid-fielder no. 2), *Oknarel* (*Panjenchang* or no. 2 forward) and *Loyalakpa* (*Panjenba* or forward).⁸ On the first Saturday of *Lamda*, Manipuri lunar month which falls in March/April in 48 A.D., the *Loukhatpa* function was held in presence of the Gods and Goddess at the *Kangla*.⁹ The *Sagol Kangjei* play returned after changing sides and continued to play till the equal numbers of goals were scored by both the north and south teams.¹⁰ All the players are the leaders of hordes of Manipuri ancestors and they are now being worshipped as *Umanglai*, Sylvan Deities among the Manipuris. The polo ground where the first seven a side organized match was played in the first century A.C. at *Kangla*. In *Lai Haraoba* festival, the Deities are addressed as *Ebudhous* for 'Him' and *Ebenthou* for 'Her' meaning Great grandparents. Of the objects offering made to these Deities, *Kangjei* is one. Symbolic play of *Sagol Kangjei* is still an inseparable in the festival. It is a must in the case of *Lai Haraoba Irum Ningthou*.¹¹

According to T. Tomba Singh,¹² "The polo game is influenced by fecundity principle which had been taking the role of a nucleus in the formation of traditional particles and oral compositions being forced by the social and economic conditions- very small groups with very little population with less production-of those days of yore when nomadic and semi-settled militarist horseman had to frequently attack the peace loving people (*Khoining Manbi Tamna Manbi* in the early folk parlance)." He further states that "the sperm was considered to be of spherical shape and it was represented by polo ball like the formation of *Pena* musical instrument that was constructed with the hair of mane and tail of the horse wherein fecundity principle is dominated. The negative side effect of horseback rider and polo game player on horseback was also taken to be against vitality of man. The mathematics, geometry and philosophy of nature and society embedded in the polo game need not to be elaborated without proper knowledge of the subjects, how so ever primitive it appears."¹³

It was also a village game for the common people. A man from about 15 years of age to sometime 80 years of age plays the game in Manipur. This is called *Khun Kangjei* played within the village. In the month of *Mera* (October) when the paddy fields were lush and maturing, when the south-western monsoon was petering out and agricultural activities were at the minimum, then the Manipuris knew the season of *Sagol Kangjei* has arrived. On an auspicious day decided by the elders and prominent men, veteran players thronged at the village polo ground and initiated novices to the finer arts of *Sagol Kangjei* and matches were played among selected players. As the season progresses, more serious inter and intra village games, the *Khun Kangjei* were organized in the afternoon. The driving force for all the players was the ultimate

goal of being recognized by the king as a distinguished *Sagol Kangjei* player with eminent rewards, prestige and prosperity. Distinguished player got rewards including agricultural land grants known as *Mana Lou*, besides entering into the close circle of the king and queen.¹⁴ *Chak Kangjei* is played among the villagers as friendly match after a lunch invited by the host village. During the reign of King *Erengba* (984-1076) A.D. *Sagol Kangjei* was well popular when the four *Jatras* strongly supported their *Panas* in the play.¹⁵ Then it was again played during the reign of King *Kyamba* (1467-1508). It was during his reign stable was established for keeping horses.¹⁶ It is stated in *Ningthourol Lambuba* that King *Kabomba* (1524-1542) before his departure for a raid, played *Sagol Kangjei* at *Palalu* village.¹⁷ In 1606, during the reign of King *Khagemba*, *Sagol Kangjei* was developed and *Pana Kangjei* was introduced for the first time in Manipur at *Mapal Kangjeibung* in the month of *Mera* (which falls in September/October).¹⁸ It was also known as *Mera Kangjei*. *Chare Kare (Pana Kangjei)* was also introduced during his reign. There are two *Panas* in each group and divided into two groups for 4 *Panas*. It was played by the 4 *Panas*.¹⁹ *Sagol Kangjei* being a village and common men's game was facilitated with the maintenance of some 20 (twenty) polo grounds strategically located across the valley regions of the country.

According to E. Sonamani,²⁰ there is much enthusiasm among the people of Manipur when *Sagol Kangjei* is played as *Pana Kangjei*. There are *Panas* of higher status viz., *Naharup*, *Ahallup*, *Khabam* and *Laipham* and 2 *Panas* of lesser status viz., *Hidakphanba* and *Potshangbam*. It was introduced by King *Khagemba* (1597-1652) in 1606 in Manipur. *Pana Kangjeis* are played between the 4 *Panas* of higher status and also between the two *panas* of lesser status. But no game can be played between a *Pana* of higher status and a *Pana* of lowers status. When two teams of seven best players each selected from two *Panas* each play the game, it is known as *Khare-kare* play. As the divisional *Sagol Kajei* indeed, distinguished *Sagol Kangjei* players were pooled and weekly tournaments on every Thursday or Sunday were played among these selected players at the historic *Mapal Kangjeibung* on the Imphal Polo ground. During the Polo season another form of *Sagol Kangjei* was interpreted between the formal tournaments. This was known as the *Pakchan Kangjei* or Mass polo. There was no limitation of numbers of players on each side, the bearing capacity of the polo ground being the only limiting factor. Irreverent youths and old hands played together and many would end the game without even having touched the ball once. War-like Group movements in one direction involving heavy physical contact was the main feature of the match crossing, slashing at the opponents mallet, picking up the ball from the ground and use of brute physical force were all part of the game that was intended to be a simulation of battlefield situation within a game of Polo. According to *Cheitharol Kumbaba*,²¹ such a match during the reign of King *Charairongba* (1697-1709 A.D.), where ten players played against hundred including the king and the ten players won the game. During the reign of *Garibniwaz* or *Pamheiba* and *Bheigyachandra* the *Sagol Kanjei* was not much encouraged as Hindu element entered in the Manipuri society. It was during the reign of

King Chourajit Singh (1803-1813) a new bell ball locally called *Kangdrum Sarik Thangba* was introduced in *Sagol Kangjei* and they played with it.²² During the seven years devastation (1819-1826) there was no play of *Sagol Kangjei* in Manipur valley but it was played at Cachar (Assam) as they took shelter there due to the Burmese invasion in Manipur. This clearly indicates that *Sagol Kangjei* game began to play outside the state of Manipur. The Britishers also witnessed the *Sagol Kangjei* play at Cachar and began to lean playing with the Meiteis.

Sagol Kangjei being a national game of the Manipuris, some ritual meanings are attached to it. Hence, there is a period in a year when the game is not allowed to play. Thus it cannot be played during the period of *Laicheppa* or when the God is sleeping from *Ingel* (June/July) till the wake up of God in the month of *Mera* (November/December.).

Sagol Kangei is played seven a side on grounds of about 225 yards in length and 110 yards in breath.²³ There are no goal posts and a goal is scored when the ball crosses the end breath of the ground marked by two flags. The duration of the game depends upon the pre-decided number of goals which may vary according types of matches. For example, a seven goal game is played where the first team to score four goals is declared the winner of the game. The polo field is rectangle of turf 300 yards long and 160 yards wide. It is almost the same size of the *Sagol Kangjei* field which is 160 *Sana Langjei* long and 80 *Sana langjei* wide.²⁴ However, *Sagol Kanjei* may be played in smaller field also as occassion demands. According to Maibam Iboton Singh,²⁵ a veteran Polo player during the reign of Sir Churachand Singh, the size of the field is 210 yards long and 100 yards wide. Unlike the traditional *Sagol Kangjei* in which the whole wide line of the field at its end is the goal but the modern polo has a goal 8 yards wide at each end and marked by posts.

The ball of *Sagol Kangjei* is made from seasoned bamboo root and the size of the ball is about 100mm in diameter and weight about 150 grams and is painted white. The ball in Polo is made of willow and it is 3 inches in diameter and weight not more than 5 ounces and is painted white.²⁶ Four feet and six inches long mallets (known as *Kangdrum*) are used to hit the white ball.²⁷

When the play is about to begin the players of the teams assembled in the centre of the field in such a way that the team which is about to heat towards south direction in a row with their faces towards the east and that of the other team towards the west opposite to each other. Judges were selected by the *Kangbural*, the head of the tournament committee which consisted of *Hantre Hunna Am* (one starter), *Matai Yengba Ani* (two line judges), *Panjal Paba Ani* (two goal judges), *Panjal Eba Ama* (one scorer) and *Moibung Khongba Ama* (one burglar). There are no goal posts in this game. Goal line determines the end of the two boundaries of the rectangular

field. To score a goal the ball must cross the line. There is no offside in this game. The game is now played in two styles- the *Pana* (original Manipuris style) and the International style Polo. Though the claim of being the state of origin of the Polo or *Sagol kangjei* has been made by a number of countries in the world it is indeed a fact that the present international game Polo owes its origin to Manipur.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Meiteis of Manipur have many indigenous games which ensures not only good health but also promotes in preservation of cultural heritage of the people. The history of *Sagol kangjei* is not clear. It is generally accepted that the playing of *Sagol kangjei* started during the reign of *Kangba* before the birth of Christ. In playing the game, round object known as *kangdrum* (ball among the Meiteis) is used. Two team having seven players in each side play the game under the supervision of judges. Goal line determines the end of the two boundaries of the rectangular field because there are no goal posts. There is no offside in this game and to score a goal, the player must hit the ball with the *Kangjei* to cross the line. Nowadays, *Sagol Kangjei* is played in two: the *Pana Kangjei* and the International style Polo. It is indeed a fact that the present international game Polo owes its origin to Manipur.

NOTES OF REFERENCES

-
- ¹ Sanajaoba, N. (Ed). (1991). *Manipur Past and Present*, Vol. 2, Mittal Publications: New Delhi, p. 188.
 - ² Singh, L. Joychandra. (1997). *Origin of Polo game*. N.D. p-1.
 - ³ *Souvenir, 7th Manipur Polo Invitation 2013*, 23-28 Nov., Imphal.
 - ⁴ *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* is the first historical King of Manipur who ruled in 33AD.
 - ⁵ *Kangjeiron Puya* (M.S.)
 - ⁶ Sanajaoba, N. (Ed.). op.cit. p.188.
 - ⁷ Sonamani, E. (2000). *Polo or Sagol Kangjei, Souvenir, International Invitation Polo Tournament 26th Nov. to 3rd Dec., 2000*.
 - ⁸ *Kanjeiron Puya* (M.S.).
 - ⁹ *Kangla* is the seat of the Manipuri monarchies throughout history.
 - ¹⁰ *Kanjeiron Puya* (M.S.).
 - ¹¹ Sonamani, E. op.cit.

-
- ¹² Singh, T. Tomba (2009). Myth behind Equussy Traditionin State level a paper presented in seminar on *Sagol Kangjei and Manipuri Pony*, 17th and 18th February, 2009 at Manipur State Guest House, Sanjenthing, Imphal orgnised by Manipur Horse Riding & Polo Association.
- ¹³ Ibid
- ¹⁴ *Souvenir, 7th Manipur Polo Invitation* 2013, 23-28 Nov., Imphal.
- ¹⁵ Singh, Thockchom Kamal. (1985). *Meitrabak-ki Mukna Kangjei Amashung Hourakpham*, Mayang Imphal, p. 35.
- ¹⁶ Singh, L. Saratchandra. (2016). *Sagol Kangjei*. Imphal. P. 15.
- ¹⁷ Singh, O. Bhogeshore. (1968). *Ningthourol Lambuba*. Imphal, p. 23.
- ¹⁸ Singh, N. Khelchandra & Singh, Ibungohal. (1967). *Cheitharol Kumpaba*. Imphal, p.22.
- ¹⁹ Sonamani, E. op.cit.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Singh, N. Khelchandra & Singh, Ibungohal. op.cit. p.123.
- ²² Ibid, p. 202-203
- ²³ As measured by Lord Curzon in 1901.
- ²⁴ A Sana Langjei is equal to 6 feets.
- ²⁵ Singh, Maibam Iboton. (1971). *Sagol Kangjei in Article Ritu*, Vol 41, 1971, p. 2
- ²⁶ E. Sonamani op.cit.
- ²⁷ Singh, L. Joychandra. op.cit.