



Folk Song of Meitei Community



Saikhom Pinky Devi

Research Scholar, Dept. of Dance & Music, Manipur University

Abstract

Folk songs of Meitei community are an important part of the culture and history of Manipur. It is one of the oldest art form of Manipur. In Manipur, Folk Song is known as Khunnung Eshei. Folk songs are a type of oral literature. They show the traditions and way of life of different communities. These songs are passed down from one generation to another and are sung by different communities in Manipur. Folk songs are sung during Lai Haraoba festival as well as it is sung in different activities like farming, harvesting, hunting etc. and even during sad times. They tell stories about daily life, nature, love, bravery, and religious beliefs. But it is almost based on love stories. These songs are sung by both male and female. Folk songs of Meitei community are that they are often sung without music and also sung with music from traditional instruments, like the pena, an old string instrument. Today, these folk songs are slowly being forgotten because of modern changes and less use of native languages. But some artists, researchers, and cultural groups are working to save and promote these songs. They are recording, writing, and sharing them with younger generations.

Keywords: Folk Song, Lai Haraoba, Pena, Religious, Culture.

Research Paper

Introduction

“Surrounded by various mountain ranges and geographically culture with a strong individuality to flourish. The people venerated music as much as the gods they worshipped” (R.K S. Singh 1). This perhaps is the main reason that this tradition has not always been easy to understand and fully appreciate this art form. The Khunnung Eshei (folk songs) also form an integral part of Manipuri traditional song. As a form of oral tradition and literature, these songs embody the community’s history, values, and collective memory. Their significance lies not only in their artistic expression but also in their role in preserving intangible cultural heritage. This makes them an important subject of study and discussion.

Before we delve into the Khunnung Eshei (folk song) tradition of the Meiteis, it would be crucial to understand the general overview of folk song. Folk songs form a crucial part of oral traditions across the world. They serve as cultural texts that preserve the beliefs, emotions, and every day practices of communities. “Defined as songs of the people, transmitted orally from generation to generation, folk songs provide a unique lens into

the lived realities of societies” (Bronson 12). They not only function as entertainment but also as repositories of cultural memory, expressing themes of love, labour, devotion, protest, and social commentary.

The types of folk songs vary across regions and cultures. Broadly, they may be categorized into work songs, ritual songs, narrative ballads, and lyrical love songs. “Work songs are associated with agricultural and communal labour, often sung collectively to maintain rhythm and unity. Ritual songs, on the other hand, are tied to festivals, religious ceremonies, or rites of passage, invoking divine blessings or marking social transitions” (Campbell 87). “Narrative ballads recount historical events, heroic deeds, or tragic tales, functioning as oral history. Lyrical love songs, perhaps the most universal, explore human emotions such as affection, longing, and separation” (Nettl 53).

Within specific communities, folk songs also reflect localized variations. For instance, in Manipur, the Khunnung Eshei of the Meitei people are sung during festivals like Lai Haraoba as well as in daily life activities such as farming or mourning. These songs often emphasize love, spirituality, and connection

with nature, and may be performed either without instruments or with traditional accompaniment like the Pena. “Similarly, in Rajasthan, Panihari songs focus on women’s labor and experiences while fetching water, blending both work and lyrical traditions” (Joshi 114).

The variations in folk songs demonstrate how communities adapt a common oral form to their distinct cultural settings. While the structural patterns repetition, rhythm, and simple melodies remain similar, the content reflects local traditions, landscapes, and identities. Modernization and globalization, however, have endangered many of these oral traditions. “Yet, ongoing documentation, preservation projects, and performances by cultural organizations are helping to ensure that folk songs continue to be valued as part of the world’s intangible cultural heritage” (UNESCO 4).

Research Problem

Khunning Eshei, the folk song tradition of the Meiteis, is an ancient cultural practice passed down orally from one generation to another. However, in the present time, rapid modernization, digital media, and changing lifestyles are threatening its continuity. Many young people are less familiar with its significance and variations. While scholars have documented parts of it, a comprehensive study that explores its cultural, emotional, and social role in the community is still lacking. The research problem lies in understanding how Khunning Eshei has survived over centuries and how it can remain relevant in contemporary Manipuri society.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Explore the origins, forms, and classifications of Khunning Eshei.
2. Identify the different functions of Khunning Eshei in religious, social, and daily life contexts.
3. Understand the challenges the tradition faces in the modern era.
4. Suggest ways to preserve and promote Khunning Eshei as an important part of Manipuri cultural identity.

Research Methodology

The research will follow a qualitative methodology. Primary data will be collected through interviews with folk singers, elders, and cultural practitioners who are familiar with Khunning Eshei. Observations will also be made during festivals, rituals, and community events where such songs are performed. Secondary data

will include books, theses, journal articles, and other scholarly writings on Manipuri folk traditions. The songs will be studied for their themes, emotions, and cultural meanings. By combining oral narratives with written records, the study aims to build a comprehensive understanding of Khunning Eshei as a living tradition.

Relevance of the Study

The study is relevant because it focuses on preserving a cultural tradition that is at risk of being forgotten. Folk songs like Khunning Eshei are not only artistic expressions but also historical records of community life, emotions, and values. By documenting and analyzing them, this research will contribute to cultural preservation and education. It will also help future generations understand the richness of Manipuri heritage. Furthermore, the study can provide insights for scholars of oral literature, performance studies, and cultural studies, making it significant both for academic knowledge and cultural continuity.

Hypothesis

The study assumes that Khunning Eshei is not just a form of entertainment but a cultural expression deeply woven into the everyday life, belief system, and emotions of the Meitei community. It is hypothesized that despite modernization and changing lifestyles, Khunning Eshei continues to remain relevant because it carries universal human emotions and values. The hypothesis further suggests that if documented, preserved, and promoted properly, Khunning Eshei can continue to thrive as an important cultural marker and serve as a bridge between generations, strengthening community identity in both rural and modern contexts.

Khunning Eshei as Folk Song

Khunning Eshei can be translated into English as folk song. It is a refined genre of songs that carries its own taal (rhythm), matra (beat), tune, and style. Folk songs exist in almost every community across the world, each sung in its own language, and they serve as a cultural identity for the people who sing them. When discussing what Khunning Eshei means, scholars offer different interpretations. Usharani Sharma, in her book Cachargi Manipuri Khunning Eshei, defines it as:

In English, folk song is a part of folk poetry. This is a song that is not too long but a complete one, having tune, *chanda*, *taal*, *matra*, lay, etc. of a particular community (1).

Similarly, Kshetrimayum Rama Singh observes:



Khunnung Eshei is a typical Manipuri folk song commonly sung by valley-inhabitant Meiteis in villages (74).

From these definitions, it becomes clear that folk song is a tradition found in almost all communities. While sung in different languages, the essence remains the same. It is passed down orally from generation to generation and continues to shape the cultural identity of a community.

The origins of folk songs are very old, so much so that it is impossible to trace when they were first introduced. They have existed since time immemorial, long before the spread of formal education. As an oral tradition, folk songs do not follow written guides or formal teaching; instead, they are transmitted naturally within the community, often shaped by the style of the singers.

These songs express the full range of human emotions love, anger, sorrow, joy, bravery, and longing. In this connection, Usharani further explains:

On a serious note, *Khunnung Eshei* is something which cannot be separated from human life. It is also a part of the Manipuri lives in their eating habits, belief systems, language systems, love and breakups, emotions, happiness, religious systems, bravery, sorrow, knowledge systems. All these are mirrored in the *Khunnung Eshei* of the Manipuris.”

Thus, *Khunnung Eshei* is deeply rooted in the everyday lives of the Meitei community. It reflects their worldview, emotions, values, and traditions, making it an inseparable part of their cultural identity.

Types of Folk Song

Communities across the world differ in terms of geography, culture, and belief systems. Because of this diversity, the folk songs of one community often differ in style, theme, and purpose from those of another. There is no universal rule governing the types of folk songs, by different scholars classify them in different ways.

Taking all these perspectives together, a broader classification can be drawn, which includes:

1. Songs of the religious system
2. Songs of festivities and ceremonies
3. Songs of daily life and activities
4. Khulang Eshei (reciprocation songs)
5. Lullabies
6. Naothem Eshei
7. Children's play songs

This wide variety of classifications highlights the richness and diversity of folk song traditions. While the

categories may differ from scholar to scholar, they all emphasize how folk songs mirror the lived experiences, emotions, and cultural practices of a community.

Songs of the Religious System

Since ancient times, many songs have been sung as part of religious traditions. These songs play an important role in the daily life and belief systems of communities. In Manipur, they are especially significant in the Lai Haraoba festival. Examples include Yakeiba, Paosa, Ougri, Khencho, Anoirol, and Hijan Hirao.

Among these, Yakeiba is a song based on the Pena (a traditional instrument) and is performed during Umang Lai Haraoba. Such songs reflect the deep connection between ritual, music, and community life.

Manipur is a land rich in festivals and songs, and these traditions have existed since time immemorial. Even before the advent of Hinduism, festivals like Lai Haraoba provided occasions where numerous *Khunnung Eshei* (folk songs) were performed. For example, in the famous legend of Khamba and Thoibi, songs are sung to narrate their story. One such song goes:

...numidangwaignai matamni

Numitnaga chingyana thanglakpa...

After the spread of Hinduism in Manipur, new festivals were introduced, yet folk songs continued to flourish. As Usharani Sharma notes, festivals such as Krishna Janmashtami and Thourani Janma involved singing folk songs during games like Likkon Sannaba, where participants sang freely according to their wishes. Devotional chanting of “Hari” was reciprocated with “Jai Hori,” and festivals such as Thabal Chongba included lively singing and dancing (Sharma 17–18).

Thus, from pre-Hindu traditions like Lai Haraoba to later Hindu festivities, folk songs have remained inseparable from the cultural and religious life of Manipur. They not only accompany rituals but also preserve the collective memory, beliefs, and emotions of the community.

Songs of Daily Life and Activities

It is all about the song that is sung during manual works to reduce tiredness and boredom. This type of song is sung by a single individual or can be reciprocated. This type of song has a lot of types like grinding of rice (Phousu Eshei), during rice plantation, Moithap Maiba, etc. Taking example of Phousu Eshei:

Heiyum yanaba thoudangkok

Singbu challak u hairaga...

Chakpu Saana ho pijage.....



Khutlang Eshei

Khutlang Eshei is considered one of the oldest song styles of the Meiteis. According to their belief, this form of song has existed since the very creation of the universe. Loitongbam Sanajaoba Meitei, in his thesis Manipuri Meitei Khunnung Eshei, writes:

Khutlang Eshei is one of the oldest songs of the Khunnung Eshei style that was prevalent from the time of the creation of the universe (21).

This style of song is deeply rooted in themes of love and human relationships. It explores a wide range of emotions such as affection, hatred, sorrow, joy, beauty, and even ugliness. These feelings are expressed with remarkable depth and subtlety, making Khutlang Eshei a significant cultural form.

The style can be broadly divided into two categories:

1. Reciprocation style – where songs are sung in response, often between two individuals or groups.
2. Solo style – where a single singer performs, expressing personal emotions and experiences.

Thus, *Khutlang Eshei* reflects not only the emotional life of the Meiteis but also their ancient worldview, linking music and song to the very origins of existence.

Reciprocation Style of Songs

In this style, the song is performed as a dialogue or exchange between lovers—a man and a woman. Through this reciprocation, they express their feelings of affection, desire, likes and dislikes, and other emotions connected to love and relationships. The songs are often sung in a loud, clear tone so that the beloved can hear and respond. A typical example goes as follows:

*Haaa ebemma nuragi chenglou ubadi pakhang paiba
pukning nungolli ningol ngbu ubadi*

*Haaa panthou sumangdi mathoubung leirang mana
pomlaga lupagi kondum manbi lei...*

Nupi

*Haaa ningol pukning hubadi ebungngo leikaigi echem
enemna pakhang ngbu mai mui pamde maktabu
hairabasu...*

In such performances, the young man and woman take turns singing, answering one another in song. This back-and-forth exchange creates not only a lyrical conversation but also a reflection of the emotional bonds and social interactions within the community.

Solo Style

This style is performed while an individual is engaged in everyday activities such as collecting firewood, tending cattle, or doing other forms of labor. The singer usually performs alone, often in a way that ensures others do not overhear. In these songs, the performer reflects on personal feelings or narrates particular experiences, using the act of singing as both expression and companionship during solitary work. For example:

*Haaaa nura ene macha pamubi nuraga chenglou di
Thambal manbibu nujani nuragi maithong yenglaga...*

Naothem Eshei

This style of song is sung to console a crying baby or to put the child to sleep. In Manipuri, it is known as Naoshum Eshei, and in English, it is referred to as a lullaby. Traditionally, these songs are mostly sung by women, especially mothers, as part of daily childcare.

An example of such a lullaby goes:

Tha Tha Thabungton

Nacha Morambi Pobige

Heibong charong amata

Thadabirak u thabungton

Songs like this are performed gently to soothe and comfort the child. Beyond lullabies, however, there exist many other styles of folk singing, each reflecting different aspects of Meitei life and culture.

Children's Play Songs

This is a song sung by small kids during their playing hours. This song is being sung since time immemorial. Example,

Se Se seboti

Laishram Macha Bhuboti

Nanga eiga kaonasi

Kanana ngamge yengnasi...

Discussion

The study of Khunnung Eshei highlights its role as both a cultural expression and a form of oral literature. It reveals that these folk songs are not only artistic but also serve as living records of social life, emotions, and traditions of the Meitei community. The different categories of songs like religious, festive, daily-life, and lullabies show the richness and diversity of this tradition. However, modernization, migration, and reduced interest among the youth pose serious challenges to its



survival. Therefore, conscious efforts in preservation, documentation, and promotion are needed to ensure that Khunning Eshei continues to remain relevant in contemporary society.

Conclusion

Khunning Eshei, as a rich repository of the Meitei cultural heritage, embodies the lived realities, emotions, and spiritual practices of the community. Rooted in oral tradition, these songs are not merely artistic expressions but carriers of history, memory, and identity. Whether in rituals, daily labor, festivities, or childhood play, Khunning Eshei provides rhythm and meaning to life. Its diverse forms which include religious, reciprocal, emotional, or lullabies reflect the breadth of human experience while reinforcing collective bonds. As an inseparable part of Manipuri culture, Khunning Eshei continues to preserve tradition, transmit knowledge, and sustain the community's cultural identity across generations.

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