

“ Lashing Lei-Ballad Flower Symbolising A Well Being In Manipuri Society”

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Abstract :

In the creation of this Universe unique form of flora and fauna, are created and can be found in the verdant state of Manipur, nestled amidst diverse mountain ranges, blooms a flower, deeply intertwined with the rich tapestry of Manipuri tradition and culture, holds significance beyond its vibrant petals. Within Manipur, where flora is not botanical but a part of everyday life, the *Lashing Lei* (cotton flower) stands out. Its presence is felt in ritual performance, ornamental adornments, medicinal remedies, and even culinary delights. Despite attempts to assign foreign labels to these indigenous blooms, the wisdom of our ancestors preserved their true essence in Lai Haraoba songs, as evidenced by the ‘*Leirol*’ - an invaluable account detailing their qualities and significance. Central to this floral narrative among many flowers the hymn of the *Lashing Lei* (cotton flower), echoing the essence of its origin, cultural protocols, and economic importances. Yet, the rhythmic melodies of its song, lyrics, graceful dance forms, ‘*Sinnaipham*’ – livelihood occupation are fading, threatened by the passage of time. Now, as the winds of change sweep across Manipur, there arises a pressing need to safeguard the *Lashing Lei* and others indigenous flower. Beyond its aesthetic allure, this flower serves as a bridge linking the towering peaks to the fertile valleys, symbolizing the resilience of tradition amidst nature’s evolution. This paper attempts to understand the dance and songs of Manipuri culture which describe the value and quality of ‘*Poncheprung’s lashing lei*’ - (beautiful floral basket with full of cotton flowers) that extends beyond mere admiration. This paper embarks on journey to reveal the essence and allure of this flower, exploring its inherent value and sublime quality in Lai Haraoba of Manipur the ritual performance. Through poetic inquiry, it unveils the mystique of its origin, weaving a tapestry of beauty and wonder. Above all it aims to highlight its intrinsic value and role in shaping Manipur’s history. From cultural practices to artistic expressions, this flower weaves through the fabric of our identity, reminding us of our roots even as we embrace the winds of change.

Key Words :- Lai Haraoba, Resilience, Tradition, Ritual performance, Rich tapestry, Lashing Lei (cotton flower), Rhythmic melodies.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The origin of the genus *Gossypium* flowering plants is dated to around 5-10 million years ago. Cotton is the primary natural fibre used by human today. There is an aura of religion and romance around cotton-weaving in Manipur. The cotton flower is known as a lucky symbol in many parts of the world. It is said to bring good health and fortune to the person who possesses it. Hence, cotton flowers are often gifted to wish someone a happy and prosperous life. Perfect for a wintry holiday message the posy carries to its recipients! In the language of flowers, cotton represents; fortune, give and take, gratitude, receiving of a blessing, cherish, and well-being. Again, perfect for a holiday posy, where we often reflect on the year’s blessings, and accept some hardships we must learn to give and take. And we also think and try to manifest good blessings for the upcoming year. There was one site that regarded the symbolism of cotton as fortune, and a blessing.

Plants and flowers historically derived their meanings based upon several things, either the plant aesthetics itself, it's growth characteristics, or in cotton's case, it is representative of it's variety of impacts on human life. Cotton is a promise of wealth and well being in your life. Be assured there will be plenty and more, to continue doing the work you are doing in the world. The Divine realm: Angels, God, Ascended Masters, ancestors and Spirit guides, commends us for the work we are doing in the world. And wish to congratulate us on further rewards and financial responsibility. In the ancient manuscript of Manipur '*Leisemlon*', '*Pudin*' the genesis of life-of trees, flowers, fruits, and all verdant growth-is depicted with poetic precision. It is narrated that flowers, radiant and fragrant, were created from body hair parts of the very essence of reversed Atiya Guru Shidaba (immortal Sky God), cementing an eternal bond between humanity and floral beauty in the tapestry of Manipuri culture. In the traditional of Manipur different types of flowers take a great role are mention in '*Leinol*', '*Numit Kappa*', '*Panthoipi Khongkul*', '*Loiyumba Sinyen*', etc ancient literary texts. Among these texts, *Leinol* stands as a masterpiece, a vivid tableau of the diverse flora that adorns Manipur's landscape and infuses its traditions with vibrant hues. These blossoms, steeped in the annals of Manipur's history, have become inseparable from the indigenous people's existence, intertwining with their daily rhythms and cultural practices. In *Leinol*, each flower is bestowed with a name that resonates with the spirit of the land, and the chronicle delicately unveils the stories behind these names, adding depth to their significant in Manipuri lore. Thus the pages of *Leinol* not only recount the origins of floral beauty but also weave a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, where every petal whisper tales of bygone eras and enduring traditions. Furthermore, the melodious strains of *Pena Seisakpa*- string musical instrument players and the resonant voices of *Khongjom Parva* minstrels have echoed the tales of these flowers. These ballads, woven with romance and the essence of floral beauty, find their inspiration in the pages of *Leinol*. Within *RK Sanahal's Leinol*, the essence of over a hundred flowers is meticulously captured. Among them, the names of *Nongleishang*, *Khongumelei*, *Takham Tonu Sanalei*, *Leikham Nongjupan*, *Kwaklei*, *Engelei* etc, dance gracefully across the pages, each imbued with its own unique allure. Moreover, the relationships between various tribes and the Meiteis people-such as *Meitei*, *Khuman*, *Moirang*, *Heirem Khujan*, *Kharam*, *Tarao*, *Thangal*, *Anal*, *Tangkhol*-are intricately depicted within the book. These relationships, alongside descriptions of Manipur's interactions with neighboring states, are painted with the beauty and quality of flowers, while ceremonial naming ritual are meticulously chronicled. In shaping the rich tapestry of Manipuri culture and tradition, dance and music, particularly the *Lashing Lei*, play a pivotal role. Within this hymn, all the vibrant images of our society are vividly portrayed. *Khongjom Parva* and *Pena Eshei* the songs inspired by these flowers serve as precious gifts to our generation, preserving the essence of our heritage. Ibeni produced synthesized, soft mellifluous tones of Vaishnava spiritualism in the songs-both heralding a definite phase in the development of this fictive genre of ballads in the state. The *Khongjom Parva* style of ballad singing became popular since its introduction from peculiar circumstances of the tragic sacrifice of the sons of Manipur in the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891. Thus, safeguarding and delving into the historical traces of these traditions become imperative to ensure their preservation for generation to come.

II. Myth Story :

The sight of flowers brought to people's countenances, filling their hearts with happiness. Among them, the *Lashing Lei* stands out, its multifaceted beauty everlasting, blooming in the *Maring Khunbilok*. Myth has that *Tampha Lairembi* ascended the mountain to seek flower for an offering to God *Wangbren Khana Chaoba*. Amidst the verdant trees, she prayed for a flower to illuminate the mountainside, and her supplication was answered. The following lines are describing of how they planted it:

“*Tamphana kana uhandana*
malanggi mashak louraga lakle.
Hada pari nungshiba
Ngasi numitta emana
Leirang char pige
Chingu khoiyum lainingthou

Khana chaoba wangbren da
Emana leirang amatta
Khudol katke khanjaba
Pari nangna tharaga
Khoiyum tubi wangbren da katchageko
Ebemmana fajaba
Khutsha tara tingthokpada
Heirang heiru oina
Leirang gi leiru oina thorakle". (Page 118)

When the wakening skies pray to the morning light, *Maring Pakhang Tomba* discovered flower at 'Pamlou' (Hill Paddy Field) deeply rooted in the earth, and he tended to it with care. *Tampha Lairembi* plucked the bloom flower and put into *Ponchepnung* (floral basket) offered it to *Wangbren Khana Chaoba*. Thus, the myth of *Panthoipi Khongkul* and *Leirol* unveil the origins of flower names.

"Ha leirang leinungshi
Leiranggi leicha amana
Leichu chama thokpa lei
Sinouna lashing leirangse
Lairembi emana thonbani". (Page. 122)

In the *Lai Haraoba*, the merry making of God and Goddess, we witness the process of reaping paddy, seasoning it, and extracting cotton fiber from *Lashing* flower to fashion clothes. *Panthoipi Khongkul* narrates how *Panthoipi* herself cultivated the land, planted *Lashing* flowers, and spun thread from them for clothing. Through these tales, the rich cultural heritage of Manipur is preserved, enterwind with the timeless beauty of its flora. Each process and design is highlighted by a legend and connected with special functions, dances, and ceremonies. *Ningthou phee* (King shawl) are based on snake motifs and the design is worn by royalty. These designs are mostly found on the phaneks (worn by women on the waist). Tradition has it that when a weaver used to sit down to weave the *Ningthou phee*, the royal design. A characteristic feature of the *Moirangphi* chaddar is the triangular form along the border. Phi means cloth in Meitei and *Moirang* is the name of a place in Manipur. *Moirangphi* woven in white or soft colours carry (temple top) (*Moirangphi hakpa*) on the border with dotted patterns on the body. There is a belief that this pattern was created by the Goddess of *Moirang*.

III. Kanglei Haraoba :

In the *Kanglei Lai Haraoba* of Manipur, we are transported to a world where the planting of *Lashing Lei*, the crafting of threads and garments from their blooms after their season of splendor, and the subsequent offerings to the gods are depicted with rhythmic steps. In the *Lai Haoraoba* process ritual performance of the 'Lai Haraoba' 'Laipou' is the important fundamental ritual sequence which the *Maibi* and the other performers will enact the whole process of the life on the earth. In 'Laipou' sequence 'Pamyantlon'(cultivation) 'Pena Hepli Mapum'-string player sang and 'Phisarol Jagoi'-Dance of weaving process is took place. These are performed in dance movement by 'Maibi'-spiritual leaders following by other performers. The bodily movement are the impact of the work culture practice from the impact of time immemorial in the houses of Manipuri people. The asthetic movement of hand can be seen in this ritual process of 'Phisarol' the art of weaving cloths is defined in this (Jagoi) dance. The 'Maibi' act of half sitting and smoothly wave of the hand with gracefull dance movement, songs and dialogues the *Maibi* and the member of the procession will depict the whole process of the plantation of cotton plants, sowing of seeds, the plucking of cotton , the preparation of thread, the cloth and finally offering it to the Gods are shown in the dance form which is very important sequence of performance, This form of dance has been performing in 'Lai

Haraoba’ as a ritual performance for the prosperity of the village and the community may there be peace upon the land. So, therefore we need to have a great art form in future that we are fear from extinct.

The dialogue of ‘*Maibi*’ and members of the procession are given below (Kumar Maibi – Kanglei Umanglai Haraoba)

- “Maibi - Ho Lainingthou – Lairembi manaisha! (o you servant of the sovereign God and Divine Queen)
- Mayam (Participant) - Hao! (Yes)
- Maibi - Ho lashing takpa loirabanina, Kaptreng thangdok o, Kapon sao, lashing kappase! (Let’s do the process of ginning apparatus to remove seeds from cotton)
- Mayam - Sare Sare (Yes we have done)
- Maibi - Ho Lainingthou – Lairemma manaisha, lashing hunjillo!(get ready for fluffing)
- Mayam - Hunjille Hunjille!(yes)
- Maibi - Ho Nakhut oina huitri paio!(hold the huitri-a bow tool with left hand)
- Mayam - Paire Paire! (yes)
- Maibi - Ho huitri thingjillo! (twanging the string)
- Mayam - thingjille thingjille! (Yes)
- Maibi - Ho lashing kappo! (fluff the cotton)
- Mayam - Kappe Kappe! (Yes)
- Maibi - Phadhrt – Phadhrt – Phadhrt!.....”(page 92)

From the fields, where the planting begins, to the harvest of cotton , (*Lashing Hekpa*) its plucking, (*Lashing Phoudokba*) drying, (*Manthokpa*) ginning, and cleansing, (*Lashing Takpa*) grinding, the making of *Kapon* with *Kaptreng* (ginning apparatus to remove seeds from cotton), *Lashing Kappa* with *Huitri*, all weave together in a dance of tradition. *Moithap Naiba* (process of making thread) takes shape under the skilled hands, as *langom* weaves with finesse. Upon completing the *langkhai*, the yarn awaits soaked in water and rinse it, followed by the spinning of spools and the arrangement of *Phihou Keirak*. The art of weaving clothes and the commencement of the loom’s song mark the culmination of each task. With the rise of *tem* (equipment) and the shuttle’s flight (*pangandem hunba*), cloth emerges (*phiroi tanba*), to be cut and washed upon completion. Then, in reverence, the *Maibi* offers the garments to the Shrine, invoking blessings of development, longevity, prosperity, happiness, and love. In this bygone era, songs echoed through every village, describing the flowers that bloom on hillsides and descend to valleys, as sung in the *Pena Seishak* and can be seen in Lai Haraoba. Yet, the once-familiar sounds of the flying shuttle and the *kaptreng* are now but echoes. In the early time at the long far distance of the villages we hear a weaving mother sing a cradle song while at the loom to its rhythmic beat to make her baby sleep singing in a sweet voice as she went down with a great design on a loom was a spiritually connecting with the loom and songs it is something present to this day in many cultures but now we all have forgotten. Amidst the hanging *tarang*, poignant melodies once consoled loved ones. Even the exchange of *Sinnai Chei* between boys and girls has faded into oblivion, and the “*Lashing Lei*” holds a special place from birth to death, its seven-hued splendor embracing both body and soul. Described as such by ancestors, and forefathers, it stands as a testament to a time when traditions flourished and the richness of cultural heritage was celebrated in every aspect of life. The lashingphi (quilted

cotton material) is produced in Manipur and used as a covering in winter. Colours are obtained from natural sources and the juice of wild indigo is used as a black or dark blue dye. A bark from the plains is used for a red shade, and green, yellow, and orange are obtained from the barks of jungle trees. In the verdant hills of Manipur, the cotton plant stands in humble purity, its blossoms clothed in pristine white. Yet, in the hearts of our people, it blooms as the “seven-colour flower,” a marvel of transformation awaiting the artist’s touch. *Leirol*, the lyrical anthology of our land, resonates through the valleys and peaks, a cherished treasure of our Manipuri society. To unravel the tapestry of our culture, one must immerse oneself in the world of these flowers, where every petal holds a story of tradition, spirituality, and artistic expression. *Leirol* becomes the torchbearer of our heritage, illuminating the path as we navigate through the annals of time. Within the delicate petals of the *Lashing Lei* lies a repository of ancestral wisdom, offering insights into the fabric of our society’s past. Its roots intertwined with the fertile soil of Manipur, it bestows upon humanity a priceless gift, accompanied by the beauty and essence shaping the very souls of our maidens and permeating every facet of our existence. The rhythmic cadence of our oral literature songs, with their metaphors and similes, weaves a rich tapestry of language and cultural wealth, guiding us towards an enlightened future. As custodians of this precious legacy, it falls upon us to safeguard and protect it at all costs. For within the petals of the *Lashing Lei* lies the essence of our identity, the heartbeat of our culture, and the promise of a future where our traditions continue to flourish and thrive.

CONCLUSION:

The flower *Lashing Lei*, an emblem of unity binding the hill tribes and valley peoples of our land, serves as a poignant reminder of the divine gifts bestowed upon humanity. The dance and songs of Manipuri culture can see the revealing essence and allure of this cotton flower and many other different types of indigenous flower. Each and every flower carry a sweet, aesthetic, romance, loving, caring story of human life and nature. Through poetic inquiry, songs, bodily movement of dances (folk dance) etc. The culturally practices, ritual process of performance of artistic skill in Manipur can be seen the impact of naturally born quality of flowers. From many art form like *Lai Haraoba*, *Pena seishak* we can find the intrinsic value and role of ‘*Lashing Lei*’ (cotton flower) in human life to shape up a history in a creative world. From the melodious strains of *Tampha Lairembi*, sung whilst tending to the cotton fields of *Maring Pakhang Tomba*, we glean the profound significance of nature’s offerings, wherein the cotton plant, revered as an indomitable force inseparable from human existence, emerges. The delicate art of weaving, intricately entwined with our state’s economic fabric, finds its genesis in the discovery of the cotton plant by *Tampha Lairembi*. The hymns that herald her discovery stand as a testament to her ingenuity and reverence for the natural world. However, amidst the march of time, the dulcet verses of *Leirol*, such as the poignant *Khongjom Parva* and the soul-stirring *Pena* songs, languish on the precipice of oblivion. An insidious tide of foreign influence sweeps over our cultural landscape, drowning out the dulcet melodies of our mother tongue. The once cherished arts of the *Pena*, with their haunting strains, are now but a distant echo, their practitioners relegated to the annals of memory. Yet, amid the encroaching shadows, glimmers of hope persist. In the hallowed grounds of the *Lai Haraoba*, faint echoes of *Pena Eshei* still resound, a testament to the enduring spirit of our heritage. But alas, the once ubiquitous presence of *Pena Seishak* in the homes of Manipur has faded into obscurity, a lamentable loss to our cultural tapestry. Thus, it behooves all who hold dear the treasures of our heritage to safeguard and protect the exquisite and unique flower as the *Lashing Lei*, the traditional art form of *Lai Haraoba* from the encroaching specter of extinction.

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