

Traditional Knowledge System of the Muslim community in Manipur

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The Muslims of Manipur state is commonly known as *Pangal* or *Meitei-Pangal*. Prefixing of *Meitei* to the word *Pangal* exemplifies the strong relationship between the two communities. The paper provides information on the use of plants and plant parts, which carry ethnobotanical significance in respect of common socio-religious activities of this minority community encompassing from the birth till death. It deals with 17 plant species belonging to 15 genera and 11 families closely associated with 9 categories of the formalities of socio-religious functions, customs, etc. The present investigation aims at the validity of the Traditional Knowledge System practiced and also focused on the activism concerning conservation of plants through the practices of socio-religious functions of *Pangal* community.

Keywords: Muslim, *Pangal*, Socio-religious aspects

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Manipur is a picturesque state in the far-flung Northeastern part of India, bordering Myanmar in the East. It extends between 23° 83N and 25° 68N latitudes and between 93° 03E and 94° 78E longitudes. Fold of mountains, hills on all sides and the Central valley or Manipur valley are some of the physical features of the state. The Manipur valley enclosed by Manipur eastern and western hills is a large innermost basin about 70 km long and 33 km broad having an area of 2067 km². It is one of the Himalayan midlands like the valley of Kashmir and Kathmandu valley. The valley is a high level flood plain with an elevation of about 760 m above the mean sea level¹. The state is home to different ethnic communities such as *Meiteis* and Muslims in the valley and 29 different tribal groups in the hills. *Meiteis* form the largest community in the state.

Muslims, who are the inheritors of ancient Muslim fathers and *Meitei* mothers, share a population of around 8.8%². The Muslims in Manipur are known by *Pangal* or *Meitei-Pangal*. Prefixing of *Meitei* to the word *Pangal* exemplifies the strong relationship exists in between the two communities. However, all communities to identify this ethnic group use the term *Pangal* in more acceptable form and *Pangal* are Islam by faith. Presence of Muslim population in Manipur

valley has been reported since the reign of Naophangba (c.1140-1171 AD) and Irengba (c. 1296-1396 AD) as per *Meitei Puyas* (local annals)-*Sakok Lamlen Ahanba* and *Kanglei Langba Pakhangba*³⁻⁷. As of later settlement, *Musalms* came into the country at an early period about the middle of the 16th century⁸. Perhaps the king of Manipur invited them to Manipur either from Cachar or Assam for making guns. Muslim settlement had taken place during the reign of king Khagemba (1597-1652 AD) in large number, while one of his brothers Sanongba contacted Muslim soldiers of Sylhet (West) to wage war against him. By settling here, they started transplantation of paddy. For a noble cause associated to this and others the Muslims who came to Manipur as war helpers were later on provided local women for their wives, given settlement in proper places and became part and parcel of Manipur society. Different groups residing in the state came in the ancient time from different directions. *Pangals* are an indigenous people like other tribes, for example Kukis, majority of them came in the 18th century⁶. *Pangal* settlements are found in different parts of the Manipur valley and nearly 80 *Pangal* villages have been recorded⁹. They live along the banks of the rivers, rivulets and lakes. Cluster of *Pangal* settlements are mainly found along the banks of rivers such as Imphal, Iril and Thoubal, etc. and also the peripheries of lakes such as the

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Loktak, Ikop, Kharungpat, Waithou, Porompat, Lousipat, etc. where they practice agriculture and rear cattle.

Different settlers from different directions brought new seeds and plants as they came, still existing terms as *Awa thabi* (*Carica papaya* L.), *Hawai mangal* (*Pisum sativum* L.), *Awa phadigom* (*Eryngium foetidum* L.) and *Awa kege* (*Jatropha curcas* L.) are living testimony to this fact. Here, *Awa* is formerly Burma. *Kusumlei* (*Carthamus tinctorious* Linn.) is the flower that grew first in *Kusum*, land of the *Musalman*s (West of Manipur)¹⁰. *Cheiraoba* the New Year festival of *Meitei* community include this flower among other things as offering to god. This is the flower that once took the fancy of king *Khunjaoba* (1652-1666). Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum* Linn.) smoking was introduced into Manipur in 1610¹¹. Smoking at this stage was with pipe. Very soon the Manipuris discarded the pipe and used the *hookah* to minimise the ill effects of tobacco smoking. The first *hookahs* were imported from the Mughal Empire. They were therefore called *Mughal phoo* or Mughal pot. Soon *hookahs* were made from coconut shell (Figs 1 & 2) in Manipur. The first *hookahs* made here came into use in 1615. Further, it is recorded that the first mention of maize (*Zea mays* Linn.) in the Royal chronicle is in *Langban* (about September) 1683. It was introduced into Manipur from the Mughal Empire. It is called in Manipuri *Chugajag* or the rice of Yogis nowadays known as *Chujag*¹¹. Muslims cultivated poppy (*Papaver somniferum* Linn.) but only to a limited extent as medicinal plant and tranquilizer¹¹. Nowadays, a trace of poppy cultivation is not found in Muslim villages. In Manipuri, *Pisum sativum* Linn. is known as *Hawai mangal*. The word *Mangal* may be a corrupt form of *Mughal*.

The Muslims are universally similar in their common Islamic belief, way of life, and code of ethics. However, their food, dress, language may change from place to place. The *Pangals* have acquired *Manipuri* as their mother tongue and they follow the *Meitei* months and weekdays in fixing the date of marriage and journeys etc. They are the only community who speak *Manipuri* as *Meiteis*¹². The *Muslim* ladies assemble along with the bride at her home to sing folk songs as the following:

“*Chingi khunu lamleibi/Tamgi khunu maingouba/Panhougi louchi louyada/Chekla chaktabiranu/-Terakhada loungakpi/Eina tage tabra/Ningol shamlangna loubagi tabani*”¹³.

(Hilly pigeon who is in wilderness/Valley pigeon who has fair complexion/Don't visit nearby my fathers' plot to eat paddy grains/O girl who looks after the crops under Silk cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba* Linn.)/I intent not to visit/But (your) hair traps me.)

A special function called *Pana kwa puba* or *Panuka puba* is involved in *Pangal* marriage¹². *Panuka puba* is a compound word of the *Pana mana* (betel leaf) and *Kwa* (betel nut). It is said that in the olden days, the groom's party carried *Pana mana* and *Kwa* only in small packets called *Potla* to the residence of the bride for that function. The indigenous games i.e. *Mukna kangjei* (wrestling with a kind of hockey), *Yubi lakpi* (coconut game) and *Sagol kangjei* (polo) were the favorite pastime and recreation for Muslims too. The *Pangals* here followed the *Meitei* style of building houses (old type) facing east (Fig. 3). However, no compartment is reserved in their houses to worship the family deity¹². Houses are made of wood and bamboo fragments. The roofing is done with the straw of *Imperata cylindrica* Linn. (Fig. 3) and *Oryza sativa* Linn. In many occasions, plants are found to be associated with socio-religious functions. These can be seen through the practices of *Na hutpa* (perforation of ear lobe), *Naton hutpa* (perforation of nasal edge), *Sunnat toubu* (circumcision), *Asiba erujabiba* (bathing of corpse), *Luhongba* (marriage), etc. The plants, which are commonly known to the Muslim community, are incorporated in the paper. An attempt has been made to identify new uses of plants similar to reported earlier as well as to collect information on traditional knowledge of plants for Muslim community in Manipur state¹⁴⁻¹⁶.

Methodology

The religious places such as Mosque, *Madrasa* (school), and graveyard were randomly taken for searching possible plantation of some plants, which are involved in the proceedings of religious functions. Field survey was carried out in all the four districts; Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishenpur including randomly taken villages within which panchayats and small towns were involved¹⁷. Interviews were carried out with *Haji's* (one who went for pilgrimage), *Maulavis*, (theologists), specialists of two customs (*Na hutpa* and *Un kakpa*), old men and women, midwives, etc. Religious accounts have been discussed with the learned men. The plant/plant parts were sampled from homestead,

field fences, riverbanks, field, village markets, etc. Plants were identified, and specimens were submitted to the Department of Life Sciences, Manipur University¹⁸.

Results

The plants and plant parts useful with the proceedings of socio-religious in functions, customs and traditions are given below with their uses.

(a) Circumcision (Sunnat touba or Khatnah or Un Kakpa)

Ziziphus mauritiana Lam. (Rhamnaceae);

Local name: *Boroi*;

Parts used: Curly spine; The words *Sunnat* or *Khatnah* are of Arabic terminology, which means a way of life and circumcision, respectively¹⁹. Circumcising of all boys is practiced. On the second and third day of the operation, a swelling region containing watery pus could be observed. A short spine of *Z. mauritiana* is used in puncturing the swollen skin to take out the watery pus. The process is known as *Boroi-tingkhang-kappa* and done by *Napit*. Then, the organ is warmed over a cupful of warm charcoal containing gums of *Canarium strictum* Roxb. for healing and drying. The latex or juice taken from inflorescence of *Musa paradisiaca* Linn. was used to rub on the operated skin for healing.

(b) Bathing of corpse (*Asiba erujabiba*)

Pogostemon purpurascens Dalz. (Labiatae);

Local name: *Shangbrei*;

Parts used: leaves; Bathing of Corpse is a religious rite. For this, *P. purpurascens* leaves boiled with clean water, which gives a pleasant fragrance are used in the cleaning of a dead body before burial. Leaves of *Ziziphus mauritiana* Lam. are also used when *P. purpurascens* withers. By and large, *P. purpurascens* plant or *Z. mauritiana* branch is commonly placed over the grave immediately after ceiling of the grave. For this reason, the two plants are conserved in *Pangal* villages.

(c) Daily prayer of righteous men (*Tasbih chatpa*)

Coix lacryma jobi Linn. (Poaceae);

Local name: *Tasbih Pambi/Chaning*;

Parts used: seeds; Hundred seeds of *C. lacryma jobi* arranged on a thread are used for counting number of prayers by hand as one goes on saying prayers (Fig. 4). This expresses the literal meaning of *Tasbih chatpa*, means *Tasbih* the ejaculation¹⁹, a

meritorious ejaculation. The beaded thread arranged from *C. lacryma jobi* seeds more often, than not replaced by artificial ones' available in village market.

(d) Prayer function for a dead person (*Lik chatpa* or *Wazifah*)

Melia azedarach Linn. (Meliaceae);

Local name: *Sheizrak*;

Parts used: seeds; *Pisum sativum* Linn. (Leguminosae); Local name: *Hawai mangal* Parts used: seeds; The meaning of the word *Wazifah* is Pension or stipend¹⁹. *Lik chatpa* is synonymous with *Tasbih chatpa*. Fruits of *Ziziphus mauritiana* Lam. are boiled with water; then the outer fleshy mass of it is rubbed off so that the hard seed is conveniently used for a religious function called *Lik chatpa*. For this purpose, 10,000 seeds taken from *Z. mauritiana* (Fig. 5) or *M. azedarach* or *C. lacryma jobi* (Fig. 6) are kept in ready. A group of people sitting together, each seed is used for counting the number of prayers. This group while counting all the seeds, the same is repeated so as to complete 70,000 of prayers. Seeds taken from *M. azedarach* are not durable as insects often infect them. Minimal uses of seeds taken from *P. sativum* are also found in some villages.

(e) Perforation of ear lobe and also nasal edge (*Na hutpa* and *Nashika hutpa*)

Acacia farnesiana Willd. Syn. *Vachelia farnesiana* (Linn.) Wright (Mimosaceae);

Local name: *Chigonglei*;

Parts used: Prickly spine; This function is absolutely for baby girls. A prickly spine taken from *A. farnesiana* is used for piercing of ear lobe and right nasal edge. A woman of the village, considered a specialist in the area, is engaged for carrying out the whole process in an informal function exclusively of women and children. Mostly the midwives are engaged for such customs. In this process, a spine is pierced in a proper position of an ear lobe or nasal edge and is left at the specific hole for three days. Later, black threads replace the spine.

(f) Marriage meal (*Luhongbagi chak khangba*), offering meal for a dead person (*Mangam touba*)

Musa paradisiaca Linn. (Musaceae);

Local name: *Laphu*;

Parts used: leaves; *Scirpus mucronatus* Roxb. (Cyperaceae); Local name: *Kouna*; Parts used:

stem; A big meal is usually offered to friends, relatives, poor and needy persons for this function. Leaves taken from *M. paradisiaca* are made as plates for keeping foodstuffs (Fig. 7). Foodstuffs are kept on the abaxial surface of the leaf, whereas *Meiteis* usually keep the foodstuff on adaxial surface of it. A kind of mat is made from *S. mucronatus* and *Pangals* sitting on the mat do various functions i.e. *namaj* (prayer), marriage meal, and offering meal for a dead person, etc., (Fig. 7).

(g) Ceiling of grave (*Kabarda wa siba*)

Bambusa nutans Wall. (Poaceae);

Local name: *Wootang*;

Parts used: stem or culm; *Bambusa tulda* Roxb. (Poaceae); Local name: *Saneibi*; Parts used: stem or culm; *Dendrocalamus giganteus* Munro. (Poaceae); Local name: *Marubob/Meeribob*; Parts used: stem or culm; *Bambusa kingiana* Gamble. (Poaceae); Local name: *Watangkhoi*; Parts used: stem or culm; Burial function of a dead person takes place with a note of prayer activities. After laying the dead into the grave, properly cut bamboo stems in lengths, according to the size of the grave, are plated on the recess. To prevent from soil percolating into the grave, leaves of *Musa paradisiaca* Linn. are kept over the bamboo plates and then everything is covered with soil. Choosing of bamboo species for grave ceiling differs from place to place.

(h) Offering of pan (*Kwa lanba*)

Piper betle Linn. Var. *Siriboa*. (Piperaceae);

Local name: *Kwa mana*;

Parts used: leaf; *Areca catechu* Linn. (Arecaceae); Local name: *Kwa*; Parts used: seed (hard nut); *Cocos nucifera* Linn. (Arecaceae); Local name: *Yubi*; Parts used: fruit; Offering of *Kwa* or *Kwa potla* to all the guests of any meal of above is a social tradition. *Kwa potla* is prepared by plant parts of *Betle* leaf (*P. betle* Var. *Siriboa*) smearing lime over abaxial surface of it and with a piece of seed of *A. catechu*¹⁶. Total ingredients are wrapped in a rectangular shape of leaf taken from *Musa paradisiaca* Linn. Over it, a slice of thread derived from stems of *Bambusa nutans* Wall. is used as fastener. There is a custom called *Kwa lanba*, in which father-in-law offers groom *Pan* or *Kwa*. Similar form of *Kwa lanba*, but without *Kwa* is seen at the arrival of groom to bride's house. In this

custom, the nearest kins of bride present a variety of eatable items to the friends of groom and groom himself such as *C. nucifera* fruit and cups of cow milk.

(i) Others

Phoenix dactylifera Linn. (Arecaceae);

Local name: *Khurma/Khajur*;

Parts used: fruits; *Salvadora persica* Linn. (Salvadoraceae); Local name: *Yathinchei/Miswak*; Parts used: Twigs; A short stick of *S. persica* (chewing stick) is available in the village market (Fig. 8). One edge of this stick is smashed as to make it soft and conveniently used as toothbrush²⁰⁻²². Using of such stick bitter in taste as toothbrush is viewed as an embodiment of religious significance and keeping teeth strong as well. Cleaning of teeth with *Miswak* as part of ablution five times in a day is practiced. Tender branches of bamboos are also found in use as toothbrush before each prayer. Breaking of *Ramzan* (Muslim holy month) fasting is done with the fruits of *P. dactylifera*. Dry fruits are served to the invitees of Muslim marriages. There has been a tradition of planting *P. dactylifera* with care in *Pangal* villages (Fig. 10). On the day of *Idd* festival, women take at least one fruit of *Cocos nucifera* Linn. along with other eatable items to their parents home.

Discussion

Herbalism is the study of those plants which are of use to man. Corpus of knowledge gained through the ages from trial and error of using plants in different socio-religious aspects could be seen in the experience of Muslim (*Pangal*) community²³. Planting and conservation of *Ziziphus mauritiana* Lam. around religious places (Fig. 9) and conservation of *Pogostemon purpurascens* Dalz. in graveyard from the early period of *Pangal* settlement in the state is enough indication of judicious and wise selection of plants. It is mentioned in a *Hadith* (tradition of prophet Muhammad) that the prophet once put a palm twig in a grave. Perhaps this is the reason why the *Pangals*, since they are inclined to follow the prophet of Islam, place *P. purpurascens* or branch of *Z. mauritiana* in the graves (Fig. 11). The very fact that palm trees are rare in Manipur explains the *Pangals'* tradition of placing these plants in the graves. We see a local adjustment like using other plants instead of palm trees. *Pangal* tradition of placing plants in the graves helps conserve these



Fig. 1 Hookah made from coconut shell



Fig. 2 Coconut shell Hookah



Fig. 3 Roofing with *Imperata cylindrica*



Fig. 4 Tasbeeh made from *C. lacryma-jobi* Linn.



Fig. 5 *Ziziphus mauritiana* Lam. Seeds



Fig. 6 *Coix lacryma-jobi* Linn. Seeds



Fig. 7 *M. paradisiaca* Linn. leaf and mat made from *S. mucronatus* Roxb.



Fig. 8 *Salvadora persica* Linn. (Chewing stick) sold in the market



Fig. 10 *Ziziphus mauritiana* Linn. near mosque



Fig. 9 *Phoenix dactylifera* Linn. in a muslim village



Fig. 11 *Ziziphus mauritiana* branch in muslim grave

plants. Thus a close connection between *Pangal* cultural behavior and ecological balance is seen.

A curly short spine of *Ziziphus mauritiana* Lam. is sharp and painless when used in the case of cultural practice of circumcision. But a spine of *Acacia farnesiana* Willd. is used in the piercing of ear lobe and nasal edge of baby girls. *Meiteis* of Manipur use a long spine taken from *Z. mauritiana* in performing ear lobe²⁴. Using of spines in such customs can be compared to that of many tribal practice of using the spines of the *Vilva* (*Aegle marmelos* (L.) Correa) tree for tattooing their bodies²⁵. Water boiled with berry leaves is recommended for bathing a corpse²⁶. It conforms to the selection of *Ziziphus mauritiana* Lam. plant. Selection of *Pogostemon purpurascens* Dalz. is done with the belief that the fragrance of this plant suppresses the bad smell of a dead body. And using of fragrance is considered a *Sunnah* (following prophets' life). After putting the dead body in the shroud, its head should be perfumed. Wet camphor of *Cinnamomum camphora* (Linn.) Nees & Eberm. is rubbed on the forehead, nose, knees and feet²⁶. Dress of a dead is smoked with the gum extract of *Canarium strictum* Roxb.²⁷. In ancient time Romans were very fond of fragrant plants. The Emperor Nero, with typical extravagance ordered saffron water sprinkled along the road before him when he made his triumphal entries into Rome²⁸.

Bark decoction of *Ziziphus mauritiana* Lam. cures loose motion and menstrual disorder²⁹⁻³⁰. The degree of popularity by the extent of use of some seeds threaded or utilized in convenient methods can be put in the increasing order as such: *Pisum sativum* < *Melia azedarach* < *Coix lacryma jobi* < *Ziziphus mauritiana*. *P. sativum* was found to be a common vegetable for many a home garden. *Coix* sps. seeds are used for necklace in Manipur and the same is a staple food of the tribals in Madhya Pradesh and Manipur^{16,24,31,32}. Fruits of *Melia azedarach* Linn. (Persian lilac) are worn as necklace to avert contagious diseases. Probably it was introduced into the southern parts of India by Mahometans (Muhammadans). To Mahometans, *Melia azadirachta* Linn. (Indian Lilac) was known as *Azaddarakht-i-hindi*, from its resemblance to the *M. azedarach* (Persian Lilac)²². *Pangals* found the leaf of *Musa paradisiaca* Linn. convenient in many cultural gatherings and feasts, two whole banana plants are erected on either side of the main entrance in big functions²⁵. The making of *mandaps* for social gathering is a common feature,

which involves many a species of bamboo species. It has similarity in other regions³³. Given the importance of food and health value, the people of Manipur use pseudo-stem, inflorescence of *M. paradisiaca* in the preparation of local dishes; it is eaten raw to overcome poor milk lactation³⁴. Not only bamboo species, there are other plant species and their parts are used partly or wholly or in processed forms in the socio-religious functions of the Manipuri Muslim community. So there is an unbreakable relation with the plants and the community.

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