

# Influence of Hindu and Buddhist Tantric Cult on the Art of Manipuri Manuscript Paintings

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In Manipur, the Paintings of pre-15th Century A.D. are very few in number. But many SUBIKA Paintings drawn after 17th Century A.D. were purely influenced by the Hindu vaishnavite cult. A manuscript called PONPILONG SHEKNING serves as the base source from which we come to know that the people of Manipur had cultural contacts with far off countries such as Persia, Japan, china and Burma. Some Historians and Pandits have mentioned about books and records which were published during the reign of king Khagemba. The Royal chronicle CHEITHAROL KUMBABA also supports this fact.

Most of the paintings in Manipur were drawn on hand-made Paper, palm leaf, Agarbak Tengna, etc. The highest size so far available is 61 cm. by 39 cm.

During the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.), most of the old manuscripts seemed to be fully illustrated and almost every writer or scribe wanted to insert certain illustrations in MS. Though the paintings confirm to be basic ideals of the art, most the paintings are like tribal art. Geometric pattern was commonly used. Some of the artists were not professional. It was done as a fashion according to their own style, which are not related to the context. Some of the artists painted on the cover to fill up the space as a decoration at the border and corner of the books. The art of painting highly expressed in Manuscripts. Books which are fully illustrated number about 500.

The influence of Buddhist art also reached Manipur through Burma. 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' also mentions about Buddhist art in Manipur. The miniature paintings of Buddhist art of different human figures in gold colour was very common in China and Japan. The Tai group of Eastern Countries always depict the Buddhist art in gold colour. Such kind of Buddhist miniature paintings also reached Meitrabak. <sup>1</sup>

In Manipur before the introduction of Hindu Vaishnavite religion the people had the traditional practice of Tantra and Mantra, while worshipping various objects. At last after the reign of Charairongba Maharaj (1697-1709 A.D.) it was mixed up with new form of Hindu mode of worship.

The European philosopher Dr. Jung and his followers have attached great importance to the Indian 'Tantra Mantra'. It will be very useful if we analyse how the art of painting was related to Tantra when worshipping and giving concentration of mind for the devotion to God. Tantra was used in form of Jantra or painting on paper or metal. There are also different Jantras. In practicing Tantra the skill of craftsmen and artists were exhibited. The making of a Mandal while worshipping was necessary. The making of a mandal for worshipping is also different from Hindu art.<sup>2</sup>

A kind of Tantra was also practised by Meiteis while dancing (Thingourol) a kind of sort and spear dance, art performed by the heroes after killing tigers while dancing or performing Thingourol. One has to dance on the Paphal of Pakhangba. It is also a kind Tantric practice used by the Meiteis. Various Tantric symbols alphabets and words in form of Mantras and drawings of Paphal are inserted in Jantras and used as decoration by many people up-till now. They believed that it will protect the wearer from evil spirit and possessing supernatural power. The Mantra and the diagram of Paphal is painted on Bhujpatra and put inside a Jantra. It is used as necklace.

The Tantric Philosophy was based on Knowledge, Yoga, Action and Salvation. Right from the ancient period, the Manipuri way of life and beliefs have been influenced by such belief which gave rise to Tantric cults.<sup>3</sup>

Many scholars have expressed the opinion that, the Tantric Buddhist elements are also found in Manipur which was indirectly helpful in the growth of Tantric cult in Manipur. A group of Tantric Buddhist monks while going to Eastern India via Manipur had left behind, their impact on the religious beliefs of the Manipurians.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it may be safely assumed that the influence of Buddhist Tantric cult which is seen in many manuscript paintings of subigya the influence of Buddhist monks who were going to "China" to preach Buddhism through the hilly tracts of the valley area of Manipur. One of the best examples is a manuscript painting done on Subigya. The costume of a Buddhist monk and the hair style are clearly depicted on painted Pegoda type of architectural design.

The paintings of Paphal snake god, Pakhangba's diagram, and drawing of a particular symbol of palandabi was the product of Tantrism, which was used by Manipurians. The drawing of these symbols on the front wall of the dwelling house represented the tantra symbol. The purpose of doing so was to control the evil spirits.<sup>5</sup>

The tantric philosophy was based on knowledge of yoga, action and salvation. The Manipuri way of life and beliefs have been profoundly influenced by such beliefs which gave rise to Tantric cults. Various forms of dragon illustration (i.e. Pakhangba Paphals) found in the old manuscripts are connected with the Tantric cult.<sup>6</sup> Many art objects which were influenced by Tantric Buddhist elements are also found in Manipur. There is no doubt that Tantrism also greatly affected the art of painting and sculpture of Manipur. It is said that it was preached from eastern countries. Some Buddhist Monks passed through Manipur on their way to Yunam. It continued upto 16th century A.D.<sup>7</sup>

During Pre-Garibniwaz period (1709-1748 A.D.) or pre - hindu period the practice of Tantricism occultism, Mantras and Laiwas were very commonly used by the people which had a great impact on many arts. People used Mantras and Jantras. With inscribed symbolic diagrams, or paintings of the deities. For examples "Nara Singh Tantra", "Devi Tantra". etc were used by the King and warriors. These were very popular during Maharaj Chourjit Singh (1806 - 13 A.D.).

Though Garibaniwaz Maharaj was a devotee of Vaishnavism, Tantric cult was also practice during his period. It is said that many Princes performed magical rites and the Tantric prayers. There is a story that, Syamsai Khurailakpa the oldest son of Garibniwaz Maharaja celebrated Tantric sacrifice related to magical rites for many days in the river bank.<sup>8</sup>

Black art and Tantric practices during ancient days were also depicted in the manuscript paintings. One of the best example is the figure of a peacock sitting on the snake which was believed as possessing supernatural power of human beings. Another example of the existance of such Tantric art which can be compared to this painting is the gold peacock and a bell metal snake lying on a bell metal plate, covering by another bell metal utensil (Chaisen). It was excavated while digging a trench at Kangla the old palace in the year 1969. It is now preserved in the state Museum. The local pandits and the priests and priestesses, interpreted the meaning of such practices as a symbol of Tantricism. It was buried by

Somebody with an intention of doing harm to the then king. The painting of Dragon sculpture of human figures and many other objects were also used by ancient people for practicing Tantric and black art for doing harm to somebody. It is also related to witch craft. They believed that the figure peacock sitting on snake was a symbol possessing supernatural power of bestowing harm to someone. Various kinds of art which is related to tantric was also produced. Such kind of art and paintings are related to astronomy and astrological influences. Subigya paintings or Manuscripts are the product of Tantricism. It may be called Tantric art. The worship of Nabagraha forwarding off the evil influences of planets, for example saturn, (Rahu ketu) etc. for attaining success and prosperity in life. The Trinath, Panchali, one of the Tantric books, may be mentioned as a testimony of different kinds of Tantric practices.

Tantricism and Shaktism are closely related to snake cult. Tantric art was practiced by many groups of people not only among the meiteis but in many parts of hill area, Burma, Tripura (Takhel), Kachhar and Bengal.

During the reign of Maharaj Bhagyachandra (1173-1798) Gour Dharma was embraced by the people. However new change in the field of art and culture was brought about in Manipur after Garibniwaz. At that time a lot of good paintings which are related to Gourdharma might be produced. Due to lack of evidence we cannot construct a proper history of that time. After the death of Bhaigyachandra enmity between the Rajkumars and local chiefs for the Throne was very common. The imposition of severe punishment for practising Black art and no devotion to God are clearly recovered in contemporary sources.

In the end, it can be said that though there are evidences of paintings mainly manuscript paintings which are of very ancient origin, it can best be concluded that most of the manuscript paintings have been drawn after 17th century. And the influence of the Hindu and Budhist Tantric cult on the Manipuri manuscript paintings is considerable.

#### Notes & References

1. M. Kirti, "Ancient religion of Meitei" (unpublished) P. 5; and also see *Manipur Samaj Haogatlakpa Amadi Chaokhat lakpa*, p. 101.

2. Ibid, p. 101.
3. Ibid. p. 101.
4. R. M. Nath, *Background of Assamese Culture*, p. 96.
5. M. Kirti, Op cit.
6. Mutua Bahadur, *Manuscript Paintings of Manipur*, p. 33.
7. Hu Shih, *China and Eastern World*, p. 16; Dhabla Singh, *Outline of History of Manipur*, p. 24.; P. C. Bagchi, *India and China*, p. 8.
8. M. Kirti, Op. Cit, p. 101.