

THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN SHAPING SOCIAL IDENTITIES IN MANIPUR

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Abstract-

Manipur, a northeastern state of India, has a rich sporting heritage that significantly influences the social identities of its people. Often referred to as the "powerhouse of sports" in India, Manipur has produced numerous athletes who have excelled at national and international levels. The role of sports in shaping social identities in Manipur is multifaceted, encompassing cultural pride, community cohesion, gender dynamics, and ethnic representation. One of the most profound ways sports shape social identity in Manipur is through the expression of cultural pride and regional identity. Traditional sports like Sagol Kangjei (the precursor to modern polo), Thang-Ta (a martial art form), and Mukna (wrestling) are deeply embedded in Manipuri culture. These indigenous sports not only preserve the state's rich heritage but also foster a sense of pride and continuity among the people. Participation and celebration of these traditional sports reinforce the unique cultural identity of Manipur within the broader Indian context. Manipuri athletes have become symbols of regional excellence and pride on the national and international stage. Sports also play a critical role in community cohesion in Manipur. The state is home to diverse ethnic groups, including Meiteis, Nagas, Kukis, and others, often marked by socio-political tensions. Sports act as a unifying force, creating spaces where individuals from different communities come together, fostering mutual respect and understanding. Local sports events, tournaments, and inter-community competitions serve as platforms for social interaction and solidarity, reducing ethnic divides and promoting peaceful coexistence. However, the role of sports in shaping social identities in Manipur is not without challenges. Issues such as inadequate sports infrastructure, political instability, and limited funding can hinder the development of sports and the realization of its full potential in fostering social cohesion.

Keywords- Sports, tradition, social identity, culture.

Introduction-

Manipur, a state located in the northeastern part of India, has a rich and diverse cultural heritage. Known as the "Switzerland of India," Manipur is celebrated for its scenic beauty, its arts, and its unique blend of traditions and customs. One significant aspect of life in Manipur

is sports, which play a pivotal role in shaping social identities, fostering community cohesion, and influencing the cultural and social fabric of the state. This study explores the role of sports in shaping social identities in Manipur, examining how sports contribute to the construction of personal and collective identities, promote social integration, and provide a sense of pride and belonging for the people of Manipur.

Manipur is a landlocked state, bordered by Nagaland, Assam, Mizoram, and Myanmar. It is home to a variety of ethnic groups, including the Meitei, Naga, Kuki, and various other indigenous communities. The state is culturally diverse, with a distinct language, religious practices, and customs. Historically, Manipur has experienced both internal and external conflicts, largely driven by issues related to ethnicity, identity, and autonomy. In this context, sports have emerged as an important medium for fostering unity, resolving conflicts, and promoting solidarity among the different ethnic groups in the region.

Manipur, despite its small size, has consistently showcased exceptional sporting talent, winning numerous medals—Gold, Silver, and Bronze—at various National Games. This remarkable success is the result of a long and sustained sports movement passed down through generations. Blessed with agility and physical prowess, the people of Manipur have nurtured a rich tradition of indigenous games, many of which have played a pivotal role in preparing athletes for modern sports. Additionally, the state's salubrious climate and the availability of nutritious food have further contributed to shaping the people into outstanding sportspeople. Sports in Manipur are not only a form of recreation or physical activity; they are an essential part of the region's social and cultural life. The state has produced some of India's finest athletes, particularly in the fields of football, boxing, and polo. The traditional sport of Polo, known as "Sagol Kangjei" in Manipur, is one of the oldest known forms of the game and reflects the state's historical connection to sports. Moreover, the people of Manipur are known for their passion and commitment to sports, which has shaped both individual and collective identities. Another very popular indoor game, which is being played in great gusto by both man and woman even now, is the Kang. Regular tournaments (including inter departmental) are held at suitable indoor courts specifically prepared for the game. The state level organizations viz. All Manipur Kang Association and the All Manipur Kang Control Board are looking after promotion and organization of the game in Manipur. Recently, the Kang Federation of Manipur was formed for the unification and overall control of the game in Manipur. Due to its popularity in Manipur, Kang was shown as a demonstration game during the 5th National Games at the newly constructed indoor stadium known as 'Kangshang'.

Traditional Sports and Cultural Identity –

Traditional sports in Manipur are deeply connected to the state's cultural heritage and serve as a way for people to preserve their customs and traditions. One of the most iconic traditional sports is Polo, which originated in Manipur and later spread to other parts of the world. Polo, or Sagol Kangjei, holds cultural significance, as it is believed to have been practiced by the royal families of the region and was used as a symbol of status and power. Polo games were not only played for entertainment but were also integral to the political and social dynamics of the Manipuri kingdom. A special characteristic of these indigenous games is that it was played not merely for the love of the game but also as part of military combat training patronized by the kings of Manipur through the ages. Most of the polo players of Manipur were trained in the use of 'arambai' (an arrow like deadly shaft conveniently used both in attack and retreat). No wonder, it was mainly the polo players, who formed the bulk of the Manipur Cavalry that devastated northern Burma (Myanmar) during the campaigns of Garbiniwaz, King of Manipur (1709-48).

Apart from Polo, other traditional sports such as Thang-Ta (martial arts), Yubi-Lakpi (a traditional form of rugby), and Kang (a game similar to field hockey) have been practiced for centuries. These traditional sports are deeply embedded in Manipuri society and reflect the region's values, including courage, discipline, and honor. Participation in these sports helps individuals connect with their cultural roots and reinforces a collective Manipuri identity. For example, Thang-Ta, which involves the application of swords and spears, is more than just a martial art; it is a means of passing down values of bravery, respect, and self-discipline from one generation to the next. Thang-Ta is often performed during religious and cultural festivals, further linking sports with cultural identity. Manipur has a local version of hockey called *Mukna Kangjei* which means wrestling and hockey. It is a combination of modern-day hockey and rugby. The players pick up the ball and having got the ball they run towards the goal of the opponent. They play hockey too, dribbling with ball but their hockey stick design is different from what is seen in contemporary hockey.

The sport disciplines in which our people have laurelled the state and the nation with their outstanding performances in the national and the international sport events including the Olympic games with the Khel Ratana and the Ajurna Awards are weightlifting, boxing, hockey, Judo, Wushu, Archery and football. It is, therefore, imperative that these games have been well suited to the people and the environment of the region. It would be interesting to examine some of the sport disciplines which are well suited to our area and people in the perspective of the historical dimension of traditional games, socio-cultural, socio-political and other social practices. There are a number of indigenous games for baby, children, youths, male and female. The indigenous games of the people have been directly or indirectly associated with ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the state. Many of the games are more or less related to the indigenous martial arts.

In many traditional festivals sports is associated with it, Umang Lai Haraoba an annual festival which is observed in almost every villages in the valley districts. There is a sports event of Mukna (traditional wrestling), athletics, football, and foot hockey where every youngster takes part. In the villages of Manipur, the society is divided into neighborhoods/locality called *Leikai*. A *leikai* is a cohesive social organization within neighborhoods and every leikai will have a sports club which integrated into societal culture and sports. By preserving these traditional sports, the people of Manipur assert their unique identity in the face of external influences and modernity.

Modern Sports and Social Integration -

In addition to traditional sports, modern sports such as football, boxing, and athletics have become increasingly popular in Manipur. The rise of these sports has had a significant impact on the social identity of the indigenous people of Manipur, as they provide a platform for individuals from diverse backgrounds to come together and showcase their talents. Football, in particular, has become a unifying force in the region, with the state producing many talented players who have gone on to represent national teams. Football was the first among the modern games introduced by the British in Manipur at the fag end of the nineteenth century. It was at Paltan ground formerly known as Manung Kangjeibung near Kangla fort that the British Indian sepoys started playing this game for the first time in Manipur. Rev. William Pettigrew, the then teacher of the Johnstone School introduced the game to his students in 1899. At the turn of the century a football team of the Johnstone School was formed followed by a second one known as Maharaja team under the patronage of His Highness, Sir Churachand Singh K.C.S.I., C.B.E. the Maharaja of Manipur.

Football matches, especially those involving local clubs or the state team, are attended by large crowds and are a source of collective pride for the Manipuri people. These events transcend ethnic and social divisions, bringing together people from different communities to celebrate their shared love for the sport. Football, therefore, serves as a powerful tool for social integration, fostering a sense of belonging and community among the people of Manipur. The passion for football in Manipur also strengthens regional identity, as the state is known for producing some of India's top footballers, such as Renedy Singh, Jackson Singh Thounaojam and Bala Devi, who have become national icons.

Boxing is another sport in which Manipur has excelled. The state has produced a remarkable number of national and international-level boxers, including Olympic medalists such as Mary Kom, who has become a global ambassador for the sport. Mary Kom's achievements have brought immense pride to the people of Manipur, and her success has helped elevate the state's status on the global sporting map. Her journey from a small village in Manipur to becoming a world champion has not only shaped her personal identity but also reinforced the collective identity of the Manipuri people as a resilient and determined community.

Boxing, like football, has the potential to bridge social divides, as athletes from various backgrounds come together in the pursuit of excellence. For young people in Manipur, boxing represents a pathway to success and social mobility. It provides an opportunity for individuals to rise above their circumstances and gain recognition on a national and international level, thereby contributing to the shaping of their social identities.

Sports as a Source of Empowerment and Pride-

Sports have a profound impact on the empowerment of individuals and communities in Manipur. For women, in particular, sports have provided an avenue to challenge traditional gender roles and assert their presence in a society that has historically been patriarchal. Female athletes such as Mary Kom, Mirabai Chanu, Kunjarani, Rani Devi, and Chanu Sushila have become role models for young girls in the state, inspiring them to pursue sports and break free from societal constraints. Mary Kom's success story is a testament to the transformative power of sports. She has not only brought attention to women's boxing but has also challenged the gender norms prevalent in Manipur and India as a whole. Her achievements have inspired countless young girls in Manipur to take up boxing and other sports, thereby changing perceptions about women's roles in society. As a result, sports have become a tool for gender empowerment, allowing women to challenge stereotypes and build their own identities based on strength, skill, and resilience.

Moreover, sports have played an important role in building a sense of pride and unity among the people of Manipur. The achievements of Manipuri athletes on the national and international stage have given the state a sense of recognition and respect. Whether it is in football, boxing, or athletics, Manipuri athletes have demonstrated that they can compete at the highest levels and emerge victorious. This has created a strong sense of collective identity, as the people of Manipur take pride in the success of their athletes and view their victories as a reflection of the state's potential and talent.

In a region marked by political unrest and ethnic tensions, sports have become an outlet for the expression of pride and unity. Sporting events offer a temporary escape from the challenges of daily life and provide an opportunity for the people of Manipur to come together and celebrate their shared identity, irrespective of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

Sports and Social Change in Manipur-

The role of sports in shaping social identities in Manipur is not limited to personal or collective pride; it also plays a significant role in driving social change. The success of athletes from Manipur has sparked a growing interest in sports and physical fitness among the youth, leading to the development of sports infrastructure and training facilities in the state. The government and various organisations have recognised the importance of sports in promoting social development and have invested in the development of sports academies, training centres, and community sports programmes.

One notable example of social change brought about by sports in Manipur is the establishment of the Sports Authority of India (SAI) Training Centre in Imphal. The centre has become a hub for aspiring athletes, providing them with the resources and training they need to excel in their chosen sports. The SAI centre in association with the local sports organisations, has helped foster a culture of sportsmanship and professionalism in the region. This has, in turn, led to an increase in the number of young people pursuing careers in sports, thereby contributing to the state's social and economic development.

Sports also play a role in addressing social issues such as youth unemployment and substance abuse. By providing young people the opportunities to engage in sports and build a career, the state could mitigate some of the challenges associated with social disintegration and alienation. Sports offer an alternative path to success and fulfilment, encouraging discipline, teamwork, and resilience.

Conclusion -

Sports in Manipur are more than just games or competitions; they are a powerful force in shaping social identities. Through traditional and modern sports, the people of Manipur assert their cultural heritage, bridge social divides, and create a sense of unity and pride. Sports have provided a platform for individuals to express their personal and collective identities, empowering them to overcome social and economic barriers. From the historical significance of Polo to the global recognition of athletes like Mary Kom and Mirabai Chanu, sports have become an integral part of Manipur's social and cultural life. As the state continues to evolve, sports will undoubtedly remain a central pillar in the construction of social identities, fostering unity, pride, and social change in the process.

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