

Transforming Ethnic Conflicts in Manipur Through *Ningol Chakkouba* – a Meitei Familial Tradition *the emerging role towards peacebuilding in Manipur*

An Action Research Conducted from August to December 2013
Change and Peacebuilding Action (CPA)

In partnership with
Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS)

This paper is the final result of an action research project conducted by Change and Peacebuilding Action (CPA), a peacebuilding organisation from Manipur, Northeast India. The researcher Surekha Longjam presented this paper at the Peace Practitioners' Research Conference in Siem Reap, Cambodia, in December 2013.

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Imphal, Manipur, India: 31 December 2013

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GLOSSARY

- AFSPA : Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958
- AMESCO : All Manipur Educational Social and Cultural Organisation
- CSOs : Civil Society Organisations
- MBC : Manipur Baptist Convention
- NIPCO : National Identity Protection Committee
- NSCN (IM) : National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah)
- UCM : United Committee Manipur
- UNC : United Naga Council
- UPF : United Peoples' Front



Transforming Ethnic Conflicts in Manipur through Ningol Chakkouba – a Meitei Familial Tradition

The emerging role towards peacebuilding in Manipur

INTRODUCTION

In Manipur, where conflict has been protracted for more than 60 years without any significant attention of the world, the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have been organising the *Ningol Chakkouba* by transcending familial event for about 20 years. The familial or brother-sister affection and affinity is transformed to communal level to bridge the differences amongst the ethnic groups by various CSOs in Manipur. In this event the participants, women of various ethnic communities, dine together regardless of all socio-religious-cultural differences. The existence of tolerance and acceptance amongst the various groups is being highlighted by the CSOs through the celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* at the societal level. It is generally believed by the CSOs that the celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* at the civil society level can help transform the ethnic conflicts and be a step toward peacebuilding.

Ningol Chakkouba is the age-old traditional festival observed in every Meitei household every year on the second day of the Meitei lunar month *Hiyangei*, which normally falls during October-November. The married daughters and sisters, generally referred as *Ningol* of the family, are formally invited by their parents and brothers at their parental home for a special lunch. *Ningol Chakkouba* is a social institution which demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between brothers and sisters. On the day of *Ningol Chakkouba*, the married sisters and daughters come with sweets and seasonal fruits to their parental home, where they cook lunch along with their brothers. They dine together with joy remembering the old childhood and youth days. After lunch the male members (brothers and father) present gifts to their sisters and daughters, and in return they bless their brothers and father for good fortune, health and prosperity. One interesting fact is that there is no observance of any kind of religious rites or rituals during *Ningol Chakkouba*. It is a secular event of Manipur.

According to Meitei mythology, *Ningol Chakkouba* originated from the time of creation of the universe and the procreation of mankind. It dates back to the era of Atiya Guru Sidaba, who was

the first creation of the Tengbanba Mapu, the creator of the universe. Atiya Guru Sidaba was created and sent to establish a land where man lives and reproduces to continue their lives on earth. The concept of reproduction led to the creation of Leimarel Sidabi, the female partner of Atiya Guru Sidaba, which led to the establishment of life on earth.

The occasion of *Ningol Chakkouba* can rightly be said to have originated from the mythological period. The creation myth *Leithak Leikharon*, which literally means 'of heaven (*leithak*) and the netherworld (*leikha*)', mentions the worshipping of *pi-pa* (female-male), meaning basically the worshipping of the supreme mother and father. The myth further discusses the Supreme God known as *Ching-u Salai Len Sidaba*, also known as *Atiya Guru Sidaba*, as the husband of *Leimarel Sidabi* and their two sons – *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba*. According to the myths, *Atiya Guru* wanted to find out which of his sons recognises him not only as the father but also as *Guru*. So to test their knowledge, on *Hiyangei Nongma panba*, the first day of Meitei lunar month *Hiyangei*, which roughly falls in the month of October-November, he took the form of a dead cow and floated down a big river. *Sanamahi* disliked the sight of the dead cow and didn't pay heed to it while *Pakhangba* realised that it might be the God in disguise and so pulled up the dead cow trying to cover it with the leaf of an indigenous plant called *Sankup Lei*. *Atiya Guru Sidaba* then materialised into his proper form and as an acknowledgement, gave *Pakhangba* this particular name which means 'to know one's father'. In honour of the father, during *Hiyangei Neeni panba*, which usually falls on the second of *Hiyangei*, the son celebrated *Pipa Chakouba* - which later on became *Piba Chakouba* - which means inviting the brothers over for a lunch. Later on during the time of *Pakhangba* and *Laisana*, they visited *Laisana's* brother *Poireiton* every year during the harvesting time to help him out. At the time of departure the brother requested the sister to ask for any gift from him. In response to her brother's request, *Laisana* asked *Poireiton* to host the lunch in honour of the sisters and invite them every year for the convenience of all the sisters to get together in cases where there are more than one sister. *Pakhangba*, the king, gave permission and from then on *Piba Chakouba* became *Ningol Chakkouba*.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

India's present northeastern State of Manipur, part of the North-Western Region of Southeast Asia (*Nowersesia*)¹, was an independent kingdom with a recorded history of more than 2000 years. Different ethnic groups have been living together interdependently. Manipur had a

¹ *Nowersesia* is a concept introduced by Bobichand Meitei Rajkumar for locating the region which was first published on 26 June 2012 <http://www.ifp.co.in/nws-7222-idea-of-india-s-northeast-envisaging-a-common-future/> and 10 July 2012 <http://www.ifp.co.in/nws-7533-commonalities-and-complexities-of-india-s-northeast-or-norwesesia/> in *Imphal Free Press* (www.ifp.co.in).

written constitution before India became a republic. With the adoption of the Manipur Constitution Act 1947, Manipur became a constitutional monarchy after the British left in 1947. Elections, based on universal adult enfranchisement, were held in 1948 for the first time in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Manipur had a State Assembly, whose members were the peoples' elected representatives. A Council of Ministers managed state affairs until the "coerced merger" into Dominion India on 15 October 1949, after King Maharaja Boddhachandra was coerced to sign the "Merger Agreement" on 21 September 1949. However, the king did not have absolute power since he was just a constitutional head and the "Merger Agreement" was not ratified by the State Assembly². The majority of the people still consider the "Merger Agreement" to be null and void.

Therefore, the "Merger Agreement" is the crux of the Manipur-India conflict, which has been protracted for many years after the "coerced merger" of Manipur with Dominion India on 15 October 1949. Closely linked to this is the ethnic conflict in multi-ethnic Manipur. During 1992 to 1998 violent ethnic conflicts between the Kuki groups and the Naga groups and between the Kuki groups and the Paite groups claimed many lives, mostly innocent women and children. The short-lived Meitei-Pangan (Manipuri Muslim) riot of 3 May 1993 also claimed several lives. Now, the tension between the pan-Naga and other ethnic groups who want to maintain the centuries-old integrity of Manipur, particularly the Meitei, could reach a flashpoint at any point (Bobichand, 2007). Manipur embraces about 40 ethnic groups including the *Mayang* (a name given non-Manipuri who migrated into Manipur mainly from mainland India). They are namely: 1) Aimol, 2) Anal, 3) Angami Naga, 4) Chiru, 5) Chothe, 6) Gangte, 7) Hmar, 8) Inpui, 9) Kabui, 10) Kacha Naga, 11) Kharam, 12) Koirao, 13) Koirang (Koren), 14) Kom, 15) Lamgang, 16) Liangmai, 17) Lushai/Any Mizo tribes, 18) Mao, 19) Maram, 20) Maring, 21) Mate, 22) Meitei, 23) Monsang, 24) Moyon, 25) Paite, 26) Poumai, 27) Purum, 28) Ralte, 29) Rongmei, 30) Suhte, 31) Simte, 32) Tarao, 33) Tangkhul, 34) Thadou, 35) Thangal 36) Vaiphei, 37) Zemei, 38) Zou, and 39) Pangan (Manipuri Muslim). The Meiteis and the Pangans (Muslim men who were allowed to marry Meitei women) are valley dwellers and they are not allowed to settle in the hills. The other ethnic groups are broadly categorised into two groups – the Naga 'tribes'³ and Chin-Kuki-Mizo 'tribes', who were originally hill dwellers but can settle both in the hills or the valleys according to their preference.

The assertion of distinctive "tribal" identities and even claims of exclusive ethnic territories are normal human aspirations. After all, ideas and events sweeping across the world percolate to the

² Here the State Assembly means the "State Assembly" of the pre-merger independent Manipur under the Manipur Constitution, 1947 not the State Assembly of the present Indian State of Manipur.

³ Here 'tribes' and 'tribal' mean the other ethnic groups of Manipur whose religion is not Hindu and listed as Scheduled Tribe under the Constitution of India.

people in Manipur eventually. They become causes for violent ethnic conflict only when ethnic armed groups try to enforce them. One such violent conflict occurred between the Naga and Kuki “tribes” of Manipur during 1992-98.

The conflict came out in the open when the Isak-Muivah faction of National Socialists’ Council of Nagaland (NSCN (IM)), a pan-Naga armed outfit fighting for Naga independence, demanded land tax from Kukis on the pretext that they were immigrants from Burma living in “Naga territory”. When the Kukis did not oblige, quit notices⁴ were served by the United Naga Council (UNC) by diktats from the NSCN (IM) to Kuki villages settled near or in the midst of Naga villages in Manipur. When the Kukis refused to obey the diktats, the NSCN (IM) used armed gangs called the Nagalim Guards to burn down Kuki villages and mercilessly kill Kuki villagers, including helpless women and children. This was similar to the ethnic cleansing process widely practiced in the Former Yugoslavia during the same period (Bobichand, 2007).

In response to the Naga aggression, the usually clannish and divisive Kuki tribes organised and formed armed groups of their own to protect their settlements and started to assert their identity. A trickle-down effect also came into play among other “tribes” not affected by the Naga-Kuki conflict. They became more conscious of their distinctive ethnic identities and began to form, by hook or by crook, their own armed outfits. The NSCN (IM) retaliated by arming and influencing other “tribes”, such as the Paite-Zoumi, who do not belong to the Kuki fold. It led to another violent ethnic clash between the Kukis and the Paite-Zoumi in 1997-98 resulting in scores of deaths.

During this time, other intermediary ethnic groups distanced themselves from both the “Naga” groups and “Kuki-Chin-Mizo” groups and remained independent, like the Komren.

In these clashes, the Meitei CSOs played a moderating role for both sides of the ethnic conflict, even though current “tribal” leaders, once again looking through the “tribal” prism, hardly acknowledge the Meitei contribution to bringing the murderous climate back to semblance of normalcy. However, being the majority ethnic group and being also the descendants from a melting pot of many ethnic strands through the centuries, the Meiteis are not, nor can they afford to be, sectarian in their approach and outlook. As a people, they are acutely conscious of the historical responsibility of preserving and protecting not only Manipur’s territorial integrity but also the idea of Manipur as a place where all ethnic groups can coexist actively (Khaminwa, 2003). So, in 1993, when 103 lives were lost in a single day in the Meitei-Pangan ethnic clash, fuelled by outrageous rumours

⁴ This is similar to an eviction notice. In the context of Manipur, eviction notice can be issued by the Government only. Quit Notices was popularly used in this context.

probably spread by agent's provocateurs, both Meitei and Pangan communities quickly atoned for their mistakes and brought their relationship to normal.

As the NSCN (IM) leadership still claims a swathe of Manipur as exclusive Naga territory and seeks to be amalgamated with other so-called ancestral Naga territories in India and Burma to form an independent "Nagalim", the threat to Manipur's centuries-old territorial integrity is palpable. They are pursuing this claim in peace talks with Government of India representatives, whom the Meiteis suspect are appeasing the Nagas because there is no transparency in the talk between the Government of India and the NSCN (IM). Therefore, the latent and open conflict between the Nagas and the Meiteis may come violent any time if the Government of India is not sensitive enough to the feelings of the Meiteis.

Since the National Socialists' Council of Nagaland (NSCN) split in 1988, Thuingaleng Muivah and the NSCN (IM), in league with invisible vested interest groups, have made concerted and constant efforts to construct "Nagalim", a land greater than present India's north-eastern State of Nagaland (Bobichand, 2013). Nagalim would encompass most of the geographical land mass of the present north-eastern region of India and the western region of Myanmar, threatening to dismember the region, namely India's Northeast or Nowersesia (North-Western Region of Southeast Asia).

However, in response to the campaign of NSCN (IM), the peoples of India's northeast and neighbouring states of Nagaland, particularly Manipur, stand firmly against Thuingaleng Muivah's exclusivist agenda. There was the peoples' uprising against this exclusivist agenda of forming Greater Nagaland by dismembering the centuries-old Manipur and against the Government of India's policy of appeasing the NSCN (IM). Eighteen people were killed by the Indian Security Forces in June 2001 to suppress people who were uprising to protect the integrity of Manipur. Many suffered physical injuries and trauma from the bullets of the Indian security forces. Only when many of India's political institutions and symbols were burnt down uprising did the Government of India tone down their open policy of appeasing the NSCN (IM). Though news of the peace talks have been widely covered in both print and electronic media nationally and locally, the talks are carried out without transparency.

The ethnic conflict is closely linked to the protracted conflict between India and armed opposition groups of Manipur for about fifty years. The ethnic conflict thus involved is more destructive in nature and is more widespread than the armed conflict. In ethnic clashes that took place between the Naga and Kuki in 1990s, many people from both the groups were killed or displaced. The women have suffered the most; both physically and psychologically they have been

the victims of such conflicts. The unrest still found amongst the different ethnic groups is related to issues including, but not limited to, separate homelands, recognitions and majority-minority...

Manipur is home to a myriad of communities and ethnic groups, namely *Meitei* (generally considered as Hindu Meitei), *Pangan* (Manipuri Muslims), tribes (Naga and Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups) and *Mayang* (non-Manipuri who migrated into Manipur mainly from mainland India); each with their own cultural practices encompassing customs, costumes, rituals and food habits.

In the course of history, the acceptance and avoidance of foods amongst these communities has been the issue of discourse. In their cultural assertion and group solidarity, they form a hegemonic cultural formation within and across religious-cultural groups that proscribes or stigmatises the consumption of certain types of food. The intolerance to proscription and stigmatisation of diverse food habits leads to tensions in pluralistic cultures. Ethnocentric notions of food habits between the different communities add to the socio-cultural hierarchal structure of the society demarcating the groups. The dominant group appears to emphasise cultural superiority over the others and tries to subdue the inter or intra-culture through the ideas of who eats what, who can eat together, who should consume which part of the animal's body, the sequence in which people eat depending on gender, generation and socio-cultural status. The perception of superiority and inferiority also give rise to conflicting ideologies, increasing the gulf between the groups. Negative peace exists within and across the socio-cultural groups. By "negative peace" we mean the absence of direct violence but there is still an underlying psychological unrest within inter and intra communities.

Significantly, as a step towards transforming the ethnic conflicts and peacebuilding in Manipur, the CSOs have been organising the *Ningol Chakkouba* by transcending familial event. The affection and affinity is transformed to communal level to bridge the differences amongst the ethnic groups by various CSOs in Manipur. In this event the participants - women of various ethnic communities - dine together regardless of the socio-religious-cultural differences. The existence of tolerance and acceptance between the various groups was highlighted by various CSOs during the celebration of *Ningol Chakouba*. Thus, the CSOs believe that the celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* at the civil society level could help transform the ethnic conflicts in Manipur and be a step toward peacebuilding.

Therefore, the research has been carried out with the following research questions:

1. What are the cultural connotations of *Ningol Chakkouba* and different meanings for the people of Manipur?

2. How do the CSOs and the participants understand the *Ningol Chakkouba* as a social event and as a means of peacebuilding?
3. How far will the celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* at civil society level continue and how effective will it be in peacebuilding efforts?
4. How different ethnic communities wish to extend this traditional approach for a more cooperative ethnic relationship and peacebuilding between divided ethnic communities?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out by adopting the structural-functionalist approach (John Fisher, 2010). The orientation of this approach enables us to better understand the prevailing structure of the social relationship and the internalisation of the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival. The research has been carried out following the constructive approach of studying the problem as it seeks to describe, analyse and understand the culture and behaviour of the different communities with regard to food and the emerging role of *Ningol Chakkouba* toward peacebuilding in Manipur. We have applied a qualitative technique wherein the researcher participated as an observer. This is also to minimise the biases as it is more of subjective nature.

Purposive sampling has been adopted for selecting participants for the focus groups, taking into account the inclusion of the concerned communities. The sample has been drawn from the two districts of Imphal, Imphal East District and Imphal West District, each populated by different ethnic groups of Manipur. The participant selection for the three focus groups was based on age criteria-teenaged (13 - 19 yrs), young adults (20 - 45 yrs) and adults aged (45 yrs and above). Each focus group included 10 members comprised of people of different ethnic groups, religion, gender, educational level, occupation and socio-economic status.

The focus group discussion (FGD) method was applied for the collection of the primary information regarding participation in the *Ningol Chakkouba* and the food, as either a binding force or as a hindrance in bridging the gaps created by the diversity in food habits.

The following questions were asked whenever and wherever relevant in the Focus Group Discussions:

- 1) Is the *Ningol Chakkouba* celebration of this year the first for the group?
- 2) How many of the participants have participated in the previous celebrations?
- 3) Who have ever gone to Meitei family for *Ningol Chakkouba* till date?

- 4) If yes then who have invited them, when and where was it?
- 5) What brought them to that celebration?
- 6) What is their understanding of the celebration?
- 7) How they perceived such an even organised by Civil Society Organisations as a participant and an observer?
- 8) What are their understandings of communal harmony or co-habitation of varied communities in a plural society like Manipur?
- 9) What is conflict?
- 10) What is peace?
- 11) What is your/our role in conflict transformation and peace restoration in the society?
- 12) What are their expectations from such celebration and inter-communal coming together?
- 13) Is today's celebration going to be just one day after the event ends?
- 14) What are they going to share about today's experience with their family and friends?
- 15) Being a woman, a mother, a sister, a wife and a daughter how will you project yourself as a peace builder?

For the secondary data, information has been collected taking references from literatures including newspapers, journals, magazines, newspapers, documents, and archives etc.

Due to time constraints, the research dealt only with the present trend of *Ningol Chakkouba* at societal level as a movement towards peacebuilding in Manipur.

The hurdles or prejudices in the minds of the communities which may emerge when studying the cultural sensitivity amongst different ethnic groups and individuals could be overcome by identifying community leaders and meeting with them. They might be convinced that the research conducted would be for the betterment of the community as a whole and eventually they might be willing to assist with conducting a focus group; we being the observer.

The relevant stakeholders were asked how they would like to be referred to in the research, to see if their community needs would be addressed by the research. In the process it could also be established if the language, target and aims of the research are in the interest of the community and relevant stakeholders. The suggestions and valuable inputs received as responses from the stakeholders are also incorporated in our studies.

RESEARCH FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

The *Ningol Chakkouba* festival is based on the brother–sister relationship. The sustenance of this relationship is mainly because of the exchange of love and blessing associated with the festival. Every year without fail, the parents and the brothers dedicate a day for their married daughters and sisters. The festival marks the functioning of the social units and institutions, and also highlights aspects of role expectation and social exchange. This can be validated after interviewing the leaders of All Manipur Educational Social and Cultural Organisation (AMESCO)⁵.

AMESCO started organising the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival in 1993. Their main objective was from the very beginning to bring together the different communities living in Manipur. They thought that the differences between the communities became visible from 1992 in varied ways and decided to organise this particular festival as a means to bridge the gap. Besides the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival, AMESCO and other organisations also organises *Mera Houchongba, Id, Gan-Ngai, Christmas*, etc., to bring together the different ethnic groups living in Manipur

AMESCO firmly believes that, historically, we all have originated from the same ancestors; so it is important for us to keep alive the spirit of love and solidarity amongst us. *Ningol Chakkouba* as a festival has nothing to do with religion; it's a celebration of human bonding and relationship, specially the brother-sister relationship. Besides the Meitei's *Ningol Chakkouba*, other communities also have their own festivals which mark this relationship. When AMESCO invites the participants of different communities, they try to emphasise that it is AMESCO inviting them over for the festival and not Meitei inviting other communities. They are also concerned about the present trend of competition between festival attendees to demonstrate who can afford the most expensive gifts particularly in bringing along seasonal fruits and edibles known as 'athenpot' by Ningols particularly married sisters or daughters to their home and also in the gifts offered to the *Ningols* by the host, fathers and brothers. In the case AMESCO as a host taking the role of fathers and brothers, they prefer and also emphasise on bringing along items which are locally produced and available but affordable seasonal foods like fruits and vegetables. Moreover, AMESCO reminds festival attendees that there is no rule that one has to bring along something for the host. The organisation started organising the festival beyond family as they learnt that many members, sympathisers; social minded people started inviting sisters from different communities to their home in the along with their family members for *Ningol Chakkouba*.

⁵ AMESCO was formed on 4th of December 1992.

AMESCO indicated that this indeed helps in developing the relationship on a more personalised and friendly level and strengthening the bonding. This particular celebration is not just the conduct of *Ningol Chakkouba*; it is something more at a higher level. They feel that it is 'cultural integration'.

According to the National Identity Protection Committee (NIPCO), the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival is an age-old tradition that conveys the message of love and remembrance of the childhood memories for brothers and sisters, and daughters and parents. The theme of the festival is to strengthen the bonds amongst the different ethnic communities of Manipur. The sisters and daughters of the different ethnic communities were invited to the festival, and they brought vegetables and fruits from their gardens as their token of love. This shows how they take the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival as an important occasion to exchange love and blessing between brothers and sister, and fathers and daughters. The leaders of NIPCO reiterate that the celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* at societal level is meant to bring together the different ethnic groups of Manipur to interact and share their life experiences. It is an attempt to reduce the gap created by the misconception of the social structure created long ago and the present political structures and systems.

The only concern that NIPCO expressed was the celebration should be made on the actual day, the second day of Meitei lunar month *Hiyangei*. They argued that using the convenient day for such occasion, rather than the traditional day, will distort the historical significance of the festival. They are of the opinion that familial celebration can be fixed in accordance with the families concerned in case the family cannot invite their sisters and daughters on the actual day of *Ningol Chakkouba* due to unavoidable circumstances. But at a higher communal level, it should be celebrated on the historically appointed original day of *Ningol Chakkouba* unanimously. They strongly emphasise this because from the early times, only the major community, the Meiteis, have been practicing such ceremonies but now the celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* has reached a new level as it is transformed beyond familial tradition to communal in strengthening the bond of love and spirit of togetherness. When sisters from the hill communities come for the festival, they feel they should bring locally available items, such as athenpot or khudolpot, as gifts for their brothers who have invited them to participate in this grand occasion. The United Peoples' Front (UPF) also firmly believes that the festival will definitely help in building love and solidarity among the different communities. Like other organisations that have organised *Ningol Chakkouba* festivals, UPF highlighted the importance of celebrating the *Ningol Chakkouba* at a social level on. At a personal family level it is another matter of convenience but at a social level even though they appreciate the

conduct but the very act of holding it on any day act as a spoilt sport to the spirit of the beautiful festival.

The UPF have been organising the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival for many years and partnered with NIPCO to organise this year's *Ningol Chakkouba* festival. The aim was to organise it at a more easily accessible part of the state. However, due to the agricultural season as well as other factors it could not materialise, so the event was held at the Keishampat Lairembi complex in Imphal. In spite of all the problems the event was organised successfully.

Regarding the response of the participants, the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival was well received and welcomed by the participants, as evidenced by the boon 'bor' (the blessing) they have showed to the organisers. On the question of 'dakhina trend', the competition in giving gifts, the organisers recommended that the organisations need to do some introspection within and between the organisations to check and control it so that the unhealthy trend becomes diminished. \

In comparison, the celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* organised by United Committee Manipur (UCM) started with a tasks and lectures. The interaction at the very beginning started with a discussion on the mythical origin of *Ningol Chakkouba* and informed the participants that it was during the reign of Church and Maharaj that *Ningol Chakkouba* evolved into these new tradition of inviting the married sisters and daughters over to their parental home by the brothers and parents for lunch along with showering them with gifts.

According to UCM, their main objective of organising *Ningol Chakkouba* to go beyond familial tradition is to build up and maintain the love and solidarity amongst the different ethnic communities. When we spoke with UCM, they said it is also to strengthen the weakness amongst them so as to reduce the differences and misconceptions whatsoever between the different ethnic communities, on the line that we cannot stay alone, we have to unify. In their search for an instrument to promote their objectives *Ningol Chakkouba* fits in as a special occasion wherein all the communities can participate without any differences based on race and religion.

The UCM expressed its happiness in strengthening this practice with the other communities also organising such occasions, mentioning the Meitei Pangan, Kom, Chiru, etc., who have started such practices.

The organisation has also been witnessing a favourable response from the participants. The tribal sisters from the hills are so excited with the idea of joining in the festival that they bring 'khudolpot' (gifts) along with them. Among their usual participants are also the village chiefs and village authority members who usually accompany the sister-invitees of their respective villages.

They opined that this is because of the distance factor and convenience, and because of space and time. The usual food items they offer in the ceremony are fish items, since this is the most commonly accepted food item to all the different ethnic groups of Manipur. They also give a strong emphasis and take caution on the 'gift giving' part at the end of the ceremony. They make sure that tribal brothers hand over the gifts to the Meitei and Pangan sisters and the Meitei brothers present to the tribal sisters and Pangan sisters. In cases where there are Pangan brothers present they also gift the sisters from the other communities.

In organising such festivals, UCM makes sure that they include a formal function in the pre- and post-lunch sessions. It is at this time that selected participants are invited over the stage to give speeches which are most of the time very emotional and beautiful. The leaders of UCM welcome the new practice of organising *Ningol Chakkouba* by different organisations and hope that this tradition will indeed help us in building peace and solidarity amongst different ethnic groups of Manipur. They also firmly believe that women have a very important role in peace building. As a concluding message to the researchers they strongly warned us to be very objective in our research and also to be very careful with the words that we use in undertaking such an important task.

Interestingly, this year, 2013, the *Ningol Chakkouba* event organised by Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC) gave special emphasis to the sisters who have inter-community marriages. Their basic idea was that the Meitei, 'tam' (valley) as they referred, to has been celebrating *Ningol Chakkouba* for a long time, inviting the married sisters and daughters over a special lunch and showering them with gifts. However, those sisters who are married to other communities, such as a tribal girl married to a Meitei or a Meitei girl to a tribal or a Meitei Pangan often are not a part of the celebration. So MBC wanted to give a message to these sisters that they are also remembered and there are others concerned about them and that they are not left out of the celebration.

The main food items they had served were fish, chicken and pork. Their funding came from donations and also from the parent organisation. All together the women as well as their children and relatives who came along with them and the organisers totalled around three hundred thousand.

The celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* also exists in other tribal communities, though with a different name, '*Ningol Ningsing*'. The occasion is held at any time of the year but preferably and usually during November and December.

MBC also believes that the practice of sitting together and interacting with one another as done in the *Ningol Chakkouba* ceremony will definitely help to increase understanding between different groups. To those who criticise their efforts, the MBC leaders want to be clear that they do

not have any hidden political agenda, rather it is a very simple effort in trying to build up and develop a very beautiful culture and tradition. Their underlying message is 'we care'.

To make sure that all the participants interact with each other and the message of celebrating the *Ningol Chakkouba* in a unique way is received, lectures and talks on living together lovingly and peacefully are given during the festival. Formal programmes and services are also conducted in the church in the pre-lunch hour. To break the ice among the different participants, smaller groups are formed and separate sitting arrangements were also made. Participants also have the opportunity to introduce themselves. The 'Khudolpot' or 'Athenpot', that is the gifts of mainly seasonal fruits brought by the participants, like apples, oranges, bananas, and coconuts, are distributed among the gathering as they all sit down for lunch together and also distributed to those staying in the nearby localities and to the downtrodden.

The MBC selects the participants and spreads the news of invitation through the Community Development Workers, the Church, and media like, Aza , The Sangai Express, The Imphal Free Press, Hueiyen Lanpao, and Naharolgi Thoudang newspapers and local news TV channel. The Community Development Workers are introduced to us (orally) as a body who give financial aid as well as initiatives in various self-help programmes to those tribal women married to non-tribal.

The local authorities also enlightened us about other important festivals among the hill communities of Manipur with similar themes to the *Ningol Chakkouba* from early days. They is 'Ekam', a sort of a festival from the earlier days where a prominent and rich figure of the community offers a grand feast to everyone in the community and to the neighbouring villages, and both male and female equally participated in the event. The guests also used to bring along gifts of fruits and vegetables for the noble man. Nowadays, they have the 'Chanou Tamba', which is organised at a community level, where offerings of the first fruits, vegetables and rice are given in thanksgiving to god as a post-harvest festival. All the items brought by participants are kept together and later on distributed to the attendees as well as to the other nearby villages.

Interestingly, this year 2013, even the Indian Army, who enjoys impunity under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) of 1958, has started exploring the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival as part of their civic action programme.

The Sanai Express, English daily published in Imphal, carried a news report of the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival hosted by Inspector General of Assam Rifles (South), IGAR(S) in its 10th November 2013 edition. According to the report they had collected from a release of the PRO IGAR(S), the event was organised by 30 Assam Rifles (AR) of 9 Sector AR under the aegis of HQ IGAR(S), wherein women from various walks of life and communities of the state were invited. It is reported that

Major General Rajeev Chopra, IGAR(S) extended a traditional welcome to the *Ningols* who in reciprocation offered fruits and other foods (Athenpot). This was followed by lighting of the lamp and speeches by prominent women dignitaries and the Major General himself. The programme also marked the recognition of various women for their outstanding contribution towards the society. In his message the Major General appealed to the women to continue their important role of maintaining peace, development and harmony in the society and emphasised that in the current milieu, as the State is undergoing drastic transformations, the women can make a big difference. The report also noted that the women expressed gratitude toward the noble gesture of Assam Rifles and said that it shall further strengthen the bond between the security forces and the local populace and will definitely contribute towards bringing peace to the state.

On the *Ningol Chakkouba* day, 5th November 2013, the last round of FGD was conducted by the team. The discussion was initiated by a brief introduction of the research and the team members for a smooth proceeding. The group composed of seven members including Meitei Pangan, Tankful, two Animal, Meitei, Kabui and Chiru. The questions for FGD mentioned in the Methodology/Research Design section developed to facilitate the FGD were asked, though the researchers made the discussion flexible...

For all the participants it was their first time experience of the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival. They had previously heard about the festival. The participants shared a general view that peace is a state of existence where people who belong to different religion and ethnic groups are coming together and interacting harmoniously. They were conscious of the inter-communal tension for a separate identity creation. They stated that forgiveness is a means towards peacebuilding in the state. Many of them expressed that they were at first reluctant to come when they were invited for the *Ningol Chakkouba* festival. After it was explained to them why they were asked to be a part of the celebration, they willingly came with their other friends. Doubt and hesitation to come was common, it is unclear what the reason for the hesitation was. A few shared that since their uncles' work with the organisers, it was easy for them to understand the matter more clearly. *Ningol Chakkouba* in itself is the festival in which the brothers devote a day from their busy and tight schedule just to feast with their married sisters. They think that they are lucky to be a part of the celebration. They have heard of the *Ningol Chakkouba* but being a part of it feels emotionally linked with the brothers who invited them. They wish the celebration continues to take place every year and they would love to come again and again to meet everyone. They expressed that in spite of the long distance they covered to reach the venue, their hearts were filled with excitement and affections. They were happy not because of the gifts or the lunch, rather because they were being treated as special and important by the brothers (organisers) like their sisters. They further said that

they have no words to express of how they felt that day and the days to come but it is a good and happy one. Further, they brought up the role of woman as a mother towards peacebuilding. They were of the opinion that it is the women that teach their children about the world in their early years. As mothers, they can sow the seeds of tolerance and perseverance towards other groups. In a state like Manipur where different ethnic groups live together, it is the mothers that should explain every aspect of life positively. All together they welcome such exchange of traditions among the people of Manipur. They were willing to explore and celebrate other festivals that bring them together, not just during *Ningol Chakkouba*. They were content with the approach of the CSOs toward peacebuilding and strengthening the inter-ethnic relationship. They hope for more similar occasions to come in the near future.

THE OUTLOOK

The parents and brothers are expected to invite their married daughters and sisters once in a year for feasting in their parental home. This role expectation is socially ascribed and aims to strengthen the bond of the two parties. The exchange of gifts is also significant, though not a major aspect of the festival. The sisters are expected to carry fruits, sweets and other edibles when they come for the *Ningol Chakkouba*. It was believed that these gifts brought by the *Ningols* are being offered to the soul of their ancestors, and are later distributed among the siblings including the *Ningols*. The tradition of bringing gifts of food for brothers and father; and presenting gifts to married sisters and daughters continues even though the religious rituals do not.. This could be the reason how *Ningol Chakkouba* got its secular status in Manipur. The brothers and parents as a part of the celebration present gifts to their *Ningols* and in exchange they receive blessings for well-being and good health. They are being blessed to be more prosperous in the followings years so that there should be no lapse in the observance. This show how important *Ningol Chakkouba* is, especially for the *Ningols* of Meitei society.

Another traditional festival of the Meitei is *Cheiraoba*, which is also meant to celebrate the new year of the Meitei lunar calendar and at the same time carries the message of daughters-parents and brothers-sisters bonding. Those *Ningols* that were invited for the feast on *Ningol Chakkouba* or the newly married *Ningols* bring gifts for their parents and brothers on this day. If one is not related by blood but was invited for the *Ningol Chakkouba* then in the following *Cheiraoba* in reciprocation she is expected to present gifts to the male members of the family who invited her to

convey her gratitude and willingness to continue their relationship in future. Thus establishes a close relationship of respect and love in reciprocation.

The festivals like *Ningol Chakkouba* play an important role in bringing together the hearts of different groups of people. It may take different forms with the passage of time but will enhance the theme of fraternity. The following pattern reflects how *Ningol Chakkouba* shows the light of a peaceful society.

Stage of Observation	Theme	Outlook
Myth	Insurance of better harvest to the brother for the betterment of the kingdom	Prosperity leading towards peace
Family	Rejoice the sister-brother relationship	Sustenance of love and togetherness
Community	Inter-communal bonding	Establishment of enduring relationship based on love with a sense of belongingness to a single entity Manipur for a progressive peaceful co-existence.

CONCLUSION

The objective of conducting this small action research is to examine the impact and scope of the emerging role of *Ningol Chakkouba* in achieving more conscious inter-ethnic relationships in Manipur, finding a constructive way to build peace between divided communities.

Overall the research team had a wonderful experience interacting with the participants. Many values that were attached to the festival were known. The researchers who are Meitei *Ningols* understand that the *Ningol Chakkouba* is a festival that every Meitei woman looks forward to, but for the non-Meitei it is the experience of a lifetime to witness this event. They no more doubt about their social and cultural marginalisation by the dominant group, the Meitei. It was the time and space with the existing system and structures that created the friction between the different groups that once co-existed harmoniously. The main difficulty that slows down the FGD was the language of communication. The participants were not able to bring out their views clearly due to the shortage of the words they know. This might be a problem that leads to the gap in inter-communal interaction with the ethnic groups who live in the remote and hill areas. Nevertheless the language of mutual trust and understanding of each culture enable the researchers communicate with them.

The peace-conflict continuum will exist but the extent and the intensity will reduce with the passage of time and more open-mindedness, which will increase with more interactions amongst the different ethnic groups of Manipur. The inter-communal marriage is one of the factors that bind different groups together besides inter-mingling. The ending note is to have more of the interaction and exchange of thoughts by sharing their lived experiences about the past and present for a better future. Penetrating the mind might influence the thought process but entering the heart will clear their doubts and fear.

Ningol Chakkouba is a social institution with the characteristic of reciprocal relationship between brothers and sisters, and fathers and daughters. In the new emerging character of *Ningol Chakkouba*, the reciprocal relationship is not only between the brothers and sisters of different ethnic groups but also between the ethnic groups of Manipur.

Even the Indian Army who enjoys impunity under AFSPA has started exploring the *Ningol Chakkouba* institute as part of their civic action programme.

However, care and caution should be taken in the celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* beyond the familial tradition to maintain CSOs' objective of strengthening reciprocal relationship and building a peaceful coexistence between the ethnic groups of Manipur.

Great potential and hope are visible in the celebration of *Ningol Chakkouba* as a community event for more conscious inter-ethnic relationships and peacebuilding between divided ethnic communities, if the emerging character of *Ningol Chakkouba* continues consistently with more involvements of CSOs and expanding their circles. The emerging role no doubt plays a key role in transforming the ethnic conflict and peacebuilding in Manipur.

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