

## Whose gamcha is it anyway?

THONGKHOLAL  
HAOKIP

**O**n 14 April 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his televised address to the nation regarding the second phase of the lockdown wore a traditional scarf as a facemask. The political circle in Imphal was quick to recognise the scarf as a “Meitei Lengyan” and convey their gratitude to the PM for wearing and popularising their traditional scarf.

The Meitei Lengyan or scarf is known as “leirum phee” or the *leirum* cloth. Chief Minister of Manipur, N Biren Singh, while expressing his appreciation for wearing the traditional scarf, conveyed “how much” Modi “loves and cares for the North-east particularly Manipur”. He identified the scarf as “Manipuri Meitei Lengyan which is traditionally and culturally symbolic” to the Meiteis. Similarly, the Governor of Manipur Najma Heptulla also expressed her gratitude on how much the “Prime Minister cares for the North-east”. Spokesperson of the Opposition Congress Party in Manipur, Ningombam Bupenda Meitei also expressed his pride in the Prime Minister of India wearing the Meitei traditional muffler.

Inspired by the captivating pattern of colours and design, handloom weavers of Barabanki in Uttar Pradesh engaged themselves in mass production of the scarf as a facemask during the pandemic. Demand soared and there were reports that it boosted local employment in the town in these times of crisis.

However, news about mass production of this traditional scarf with a new name, Modi gamcha, was not received well in Manipur. The Directorate of Handloom and Textiles of Manipur wrote to the Union ministry of textiles requesting to stop mass production of the state’s traditional cloth “*leirum phee*” as “Modi gamcha” to protect the interest of Manipuri weavers. The resentment was aggravated by opposition from another community in Manipur for the alleged appropriation of their traditional cloth.

### LEIRUM VERSUS LUIRIM

In early June, the hills of Ukhrul became vocal about the appropriation of their traditional scarf by Manipuris. On social media platforms, activists from Ukhrul asserted the origin and ownership of the scarf to the Tangkhuls by displaying pictures of the *luirim* shawl worn by their grandfathers in colonial reports and ethnographies more than a century back.

Others did a bit of social media posting on the history of the *luirim* to lay claim of ownership. What is known



as “*leirum*” by Manipuris is known as “*luirim*” by Tangkhuls. The history of how this scarf or shawl became a shared cultural artefact for both Manipuris and Tangkhuls goes back centuries in the state’s social history.

To Tangkhuls, the scarf and shawl in such a motif is not only a prized possession of the individual but also an assertion of the identity of the wearer. It signifies the wearer as a ruler or a person of merit. Today the shawl is presented to guests in important events observed by the Tangkhul community of Manipur.

During the pre-colonial era, it is said, the relationship between the hill tribes and valley kingdom was one of conflict, raids, subjection, cooperation and inter-marriage. During such processes, the gifting or exchange of *luirim* was a common customary practice. The Tangkhuls claim that given such a history, the *leirum* or *luirim* became a shared cultural object for both Tangkhuls and Meiteis, but the ownership of the *luirum* belongs to the Tangkhuls.

Indeed, communities in Manipur share much in terms of origin, language and culture. However, such a shared history is hardly highlighted or publicly acknowledged, even though it would bring about greater social bonding and peaceful co-existence.

### COMMON ANCESTRY

Colonial literature is replete with the common ancestry of the three communities of Manipur – Kukis, Meiteis and Tangkhul Nagas, particu-

larly the latter two. In the first colonial *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India* (1835), Robert Boileau Pemberton, then joint commissioner of Manipur, rejected the Meitei claim of “Hindoo descent” and said, “We may safely conclude them to be descendants from a Tartar Colony from China”. About three decades later Colonel McCulloh in his *Account of the Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes* (1859), found “far more ground to conclude them (Meiteis) to be descendants of the surrounding tribes”. Finding the languages spoken in Manipur valley to be still in their pristine state, McCulloh wrote, “Tradition brings the Moirang tribe from the South, the direction of the Kookies, the Koomul from the East, the direction of the Murrings, and the Meithe and Looanf from the North-West, the direction of the Koupoeees”.

Half a century later, EA Gait in his monograph *A History of Assam* (1906) claimed that Pamheiba, who was reputed to have been a Naga chief, became maharajah of Manipur and subsequently a convert to Hinduism, taking the Hindu name of Garib Niwas in 1714. TC Hodson in *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (1911), discussed the traditions of the origin of the Tangkhuls, “In the first group are the traditions which connect them with the valley and drive them thence as emigrants on account of the heat and mosquitoes”. And, “The second group of tradition affords a link with the general tradition which makes the Nagas, Kukis and Manipuris descended from

**Items of clothing in the *leirum* or *luirim* motif have sparked off traditional ownership claims in Manipur**



a common ancestor, who had three sons and who became the progenitors of those tribes”. He further added, “This tradition, which is widely spread, agrees in its many versions in assigning the primacy descent to the Kukis, the next place being given to the Nagas, while the Manipuris are said to be the children of the youngest of these three brothers”.

### OTHER SIMILAR CULTURAL OBJECTS

It is not only the Meiteis and Tangkhuls who share similar traditional clothing and social history in Manipur. Among the Kuki-Chin groups, who believed that they all originated from Khul or Khur, they not only have lingual affinity and mutually intelligible languages, some of them have close resemblance in their traditional clothing also. For instance, the Thadou-Kukis, Koms and Aimols have similar traditional shawls and wrap-around skirts such as *saipikhup*, *khamtang* and *thangnang*. The motif or patterns of design of those clothes are so similar that it is not easily distinguishable by an outsider. This signifies their close socio-cultural tradition and shared past.

In the eastern hills of Manipur, the Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei tribes, who formed an ethnonym Zeliangrong, share a history of common origin and migration routes, as well as some lingual and cultural affinities. Similarly, the Mao and Poumai tribes share a lot of cultural similarities. The Poumais were included in the Mao tribe till their recognition as a

separate tribe identity in 2003.

### THE WAY FORWARD

The communities in Manipur have much in common and share a social, cultural, linguistic and historical past. Much of the common ancestry, lingual affinity, shared culture and history has been sidelined to magnify the present political difference and crisis. On the other hand, the majority community is often engaged in cultural appropriation and domination, thereby sidelining the “others” in the state.

The controversy over the “*leirum phee*” or the *luirim* shawl must not be seen only in light of the alleged appropriation by the majority Manipuri community. It must also be seen through the lens of the close historical and cultural affinity of ethnic groups that inhibit this shared space and the need to acknowledge the cultural past so that marginal groups do not feel alienated and excluded.

The sharing and exchanging of such cultural items should rather bring togetherness and that will only happen with the sincere acknowledgement of past cultural artefacts of “others”, which have become common in the present. Historical and cultural studies should ignite minds to engage in a common future where each other’s history and culture are equally respected and recognised, rather than subverted.

The writer is assistant professor, Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi