

WANGLEI SUNGBA: A PRESTIGIOUS ANCIENT PROFESSION DISGRACED BY ALCOHOL ABUSE

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‘*Heirang-i ngei da Yu rang-ngakanu!*’ (a common Manipuri idiom)
Translation: Don’t serve rice wine/beer (*yu*) when busy serving fruits.
Explanation: Do not engage in another task before completing the one in hand.

INTRODUCTION

Alcoholic beverages appeared in almost all ancient civilisations as items of ritualistic and cultural importance regardless of the reckless outcomes of their consumption and the aftermath of their abuse in society. Manipur is no exception. Geographically and historically, it is a known fact that groups of diverse ethnic communities from neighbouring South and Southeast Asia settled in Manipur at the beginning of pre-historic times. Kamei et. al (2006) explain,

Though archaeological research in the area is still not fully developed, there are evidences of the Old Stone Age, New

Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age cultures in Manipur. The evidence of the Old Stone Age (Palaeolithic) and New Stone Age (Neolithic) are still scanty but it has been suggested by competent archaeologists that Manipur being located in the geographical and cultural corridor... between South and Southeast Asia holds promises for national as well as global archaeological interests

There may be modest accounts of concrete historical records or archaeological evidence of the use of alcoholic beverages as medicine and in rituals since the early ages in Manipur's civilisation, but a study of ancient texts known as *Puyas* highlights the various uses of this unique liquor in ancient Manipuri society. The alcoholic beverage of Manipur is commonly known as '*yu*' in Meitei dialect, but it is made more prominently in the hilly regions and in very few communities of the valley at present. Apart from the use of alcohol, fermentation as a process is a very popular method of food preservation in Manipur, which is similar to most parts of Southeast Asia. The discovery of fermentation brought in a revolutionary system in the diet and customs of the region where food waste and nutrient deficiency were alleviated effectively. With the introduction of rice cultivation, food became abundant but it also led to amassing. While looking for a way to preserve the extra production, our ancestors turned towards fermentation of the rice as *Wanglei Ayakpa* to gain a nourishing and flavoursome drink. For ancient societies worshipping and revering this process led to the *yu*'s miraculous side and its other merits. *Yu* came to be known as a reward, god's favourite elixir, a warrior's potion for strength, and a sign of affection from loved ones.

Regardless of the importance of *yu* in ancient culture, socio-cultural changes as well as the obnoxious nature of its use in modern society affected the consumption of this locally-made alcohol that led to drastic effects on society as a whole. The distant memory of the honorific use of this rather healthy brew seems now to have been corrupted with the new wave of substance abuse; the people of Manipur now have confusing opinions about *yu*'s production and consumption. Manipur was declared a dry state in 1991 following

the Manipur Liquor Prohibition Act, which lawfully banned the sale and consumption of alcohol in Manipur except among the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Since the law was enforced only in a small section of the capital Imphal, the ban did not prove to be helpful in dealing with alcohol abuse and instead led to a wave of illicit activities surrounding its subsistence throughout the state.

The unstable economic as well as political situation in Manipur at the beginning of the 1950s and its geographical location as a border state with porous accessibility to smuggling goods might be the reason behind the rapid increase in substance abuse in the state. Apart from the social problems that largely affect the youth in society, the history of Hinduism as a new religion also encouraged the stigma around the culture of the old tradition, including *yu*, in the valley. Attaching disgrace to alcohol abuse in general seems reasonable as the negative impact of the substance morphed into a gargantuan crisis, but disgrace and social shame tend to fall more on women in the Meitei community as they are considered lawbreakers and also suppliers of toxic substances while the abusers are seldom given any strict punishment.

Present brewers (Chakpa communities and anyone around the law-enforced area) are subject to vandalism and public shaming to discourage brewing. These women brewers, who are mostly unemployed and financially weak, do the only work they have learned from their families through generations to earn a living. The Chakpa communities have a deep connection with their ancient customs, and the changes brought in Manipur's newer religious values cannot erase old forms, even if modern ways are slowly eroding old customs. Despite all social, geographical, and political facets that contributed to an increase in substance abuse, resistance against the misuse of alcohol, in particular, was directed at the brewers as the sole subject of disgrace. Hodson (1908) said,

The Chronicles contain ample evidence of the change in the diet of the Meithei section of the population which is due to the introduction of Hinduism at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The earlier reigns seem to have been one long feast

with hecatombs of fat cattle and ocean of spirituous drinks, even culminating on more than one instance in fatalities due to excessive appreciation of the good cheer. They then lived like the wild Nagas of the hills, each tribe regarding only its special *tabus*, and each individual abstaining only from the private *tabus*. But the official adoption of Hinduism not only removed the ban against milk but created many prohibitions to which the new converts eagerly submitted. Animal flesh is forbidden and all spirituous liquor or intoxicants are accursed.

Another interesting term used for alcohol in Manipur is 'Hidak', which also means medicine. This nomenclature does not come as mere coincidence but with its history of use as a medicine since ancient times. The different types of alcohol found in Manipur had been used in several concoctions where local herbs, roots, and plants were added to cure specific illnesses. P.K. Singh (2006) had documented a few of these ancient medicines in one of his papers published in *Kangla Lanpung*. Here, several items such as *Tekta* (*Elsholtzia stachyodes*), *phadigom* (*coriandrum sativum L.*), *Tingthou* (*Cynodon dactylon Pers*), *Heibi* (*Meyna laxiflora Robyns*), *Hanurei* (*Mussaenda frondosa L.*), *Kharam Leishok* (*Holmskioldia sanguine Retz.*) etc. were listed as a common ingredient for medicinal tonics made with *machin*, which is the pure concentrated alcohol made by separating the first distilled droplets. Most of these medicines were used for curing common ailments such as cough, diarrhoea, fever etc. and irregular menstrual flow, menstrual cramps, infertility factors, obesity, loss of appetite, low nourishment of foods etc. in women's health. The medicines were prepared in different processes, some consumed orally and others used as ointment. This paper highlights the historical use of *yu* in the Chakpa Lois community and its importance in their traditional rituals. It uses a field report from one of the brewers from Sekmai village through a pictorial journal; ethnographic documentation on liquor law, drugs and narcotics as well as effect of alcohol abuse on *yu*'s cultural and traditional values reflecting. It will also focus more on women brewers who are striving to continue this traditional profession

despite hardships and social stigma in the present society in Manipur. Together with an examination of the overall impact of alcohol abuse in society, the economy, and culture around the production of *yu*, the paper also discusses the plight of women brewers who are facing new challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic.

ANCIENT SIGNIFICANCE OF YU

Wanglei is the archaic word for alcoholic drinks, colloquially known as *Yu* in Meitei language. The use of this alcoholic beverage can be found in almost all the old manuscripts of Manipur called *Puyas*. *Puyas* do not have any recorded author or specific year of recording but were believed to be ancient oral tales recorded from around 33 AD to as late as the 11th century, and they serve as mythological tales as well as historical records. Kamei (2006),

The *Meitei Puwari* consists of legends, genealogy and historical accounts of their country. The creation myths or cosmological traditions, origin and genealogies of the clans, religious account, the dynastic accounts of the clan chieftains are given prominent place. Chronicles with or without chronology form the core historical literature.

One such old text is *Nunit Kappa* or the shooting of the sun. This manuscript is considered one of the oldest texts in Manipur. In this text, the use of the alcoholic beverage *wanglei* as part of the staple food of Manipur can be found. The ancient text is a folk tale about a hero who murdered one of the two suns in the sky to create night. This hero, Ekma Haotanglen, before leaving for his mission to shoot the sun, asked his wife to pack his meal with *wanglei*. Another account of the use of *wanglei* as an honorary serving is found in the *Puya Poireitol Khulthok* where the custom of serving *yu/wanglei* to someone superior or elder is seen as a courtesy. This text deals with the arrival of Ebudhou Chingkhong Poireitol, who the Meiteis considered as the

greatest ancestor of all inhabitants of Manipur (in the Meitei version of the tale). Wanglei has also been mentioned in a fable about three brothers (possibly the indigenous tribes before the immigration of Poireitol): *tokpa* (a cat), *chonga* (a bird), and *shabi* (a rodent) who lived in harmony. Tokpa was considered the eldest amongst the three and chonga served him *wanglei* as an honorary service (*Yushin napa*). The process of making *yu*, however, is not explicitly mentioned in these ancient texts, but the prominent role of women as dignified brewers or those who do the work of fermentation in a household or for rituals can be found in several texts.

Chainarol is another antique manuscript that narrates duelling events in the early Manipuri kingdom. The very first account of this duel is between King Yaphurakpa of Chairel and King Haotang Laiba of Kheltey, and the reason behind this is King Haotang Laiba's wife's conduct in serving *wanglei* to King Yaphurakpa. The text narrates an instance where King Yaphurakpa visited King Laiba's territory by mistake while on his hunting trip. As a courtesy King Laiba's wife, Queen Setao Taongam Hoihoipi offered a gourd full of *wanglei* that she had prepared. This act, however, led to suspicions of an illicit love affair between the two, and King Haotang Laiba challenged King Yaphurakpa to a duel to settle his doubts. The two kings ended with a sweet reconciliation instead of beheading one another, but King Laiba's suspicions about his wife serving *yu* and Queen Setao's regal choice of civility towards a guest gives us a lot of insights into *yu*'s role as an item of high customary value.

Most of these manuscripts highlight women's role as key brewers or wine makers while men take it up as an essential reward to nurture their strength and the way of the warriors. There is another ancient text, *Naethingkhong Khulthokpa*, which is also a historical mythology of King Naethingkhong (663-763 AD, CK: Cheitharol Kumbaba) and his adventures in becoming a king. His wife Petanga once saved his life by intoxicating her clan members who wanted to take his head.

Petanga sweetly offered to serve her best *wanglei* that she had prepared especially for her clansmen and in it she mixed a concoction

of strong liquor that drugged them till her husband escaped from her clan.

Before this event, we also find Petanga pleading with her father to spare her husband from the political feuds, and here she mentions how she would become an intoxicated lady without tasting a drop of *wanglei/yu* if she lost her husband: '*wanglei thaktana yupingpi*.' *Yupingpi* is an old term for drunken women.

Women as consumers of *yu* are principally not highlighted in these ancient narratives as most of the stories are about warriors and kings. However, the importance of women's role in ancient society gives us a notion of their accepting *yu* as a part of their staple diet or as a part of religious feasting. Religious use and consumption of *yu* by women can still be seen in today's community in the Hills and among Chakpas. Moreover, women being predominant members of Meiteis' religious performances, the history of *yu* consumption is not negligible regardless of the modern social stigma. *Maibi*, roughly equivalent to a priestess or shaman and much closer to the Burmese *Nats*, Thai *Phiis*, and Buddhist *Yakas* play a leading role in serving the deities in the Meitei community.

'The female *maibi* is more important than her male counterpart (There is another type of *maibi* who function as midwives, but these have no ritual role and are never addressed as 'ima' [mother]). She plays a more prominent role in the rituals and it is only the female *maibi* who becomes possessed by the *lai* and can deliver the oracle. Traditionally any male *maiba* who did experience spirit possession had to dress in the women's clothing of the *maibi* (there are parallels in many cultures to male mediums cross-dressing.), would be spoken of as a 'male *maibi*', and if he did give an oracle would be addressed as *ima maibi* (mother *maibi*). The practice of cross-dressing is now becoming eroded, and at the present time male *maibas* have begun to adopt some of the *maibi*'s ritual roles while retaining their own dress (we recently observed a *Lai Haraoba* at which the *maiba* assumed the role, which traditionally belongs only to the *maibi*, of drawing the *lais* from the waters.). This would seem to indicate a move towards male

control of religious functions which traditionally belonged to women.' (S.N.A. Parratt 2002; J. Parratt 2002).

With almost all the ancient rituals being conducted with *wanglei* as a part of the offerings, we can conclude that women did consume this alcoholic beverage as they led the prayers. A rare and celebrated text from the *Puya* collection contributed an ode to a famous female deity of the Meitei community, goddess Panthoibi. This text, *Panthoibi Khongul* presents verses venerating her audacious, free-willed spirit, praising her for being able to elope with her lover despite being married to the king of the Khaba clan. In this text, Panthoibi can be found arranging *wanglei* as a part of her feast, which gives us an idea of how women were not excluded from the *yu* diet in ancient society. Moreover, the wide use of *yu* as a medicine for most menstrual and related illnesses in women since ancient times also indicates the significance of alcohol as an essential part of medicine rather than an intoxicating drink. In addition to menstrual illnesses, it is also used essentially for post-partum wellness drinks with many other healthy herbs added to produce a nutritious potion.

Women folk in Sekmai and Pheiyeng also uses *yu* as a cosmetic toner. They apply it to their face and body for cleansing, to treat break outs and other skin irritations. It is quite common even today for these communities.

This finding brings us to the understanding of alcohol an ancient diet wherein there was no discrimination regarding its consumption based on gender or profession. The widespread alcohol abuse present in the current social context was also not prevalent.

YU AND THE HERITAGE COMMUNITIES

The concept of social disgrace and shame for a brewer's profession does not exist in the Hill tribes and the Chakpa community in Manipur. It is only seen among the religiously reformed sections of the

Meitei community. Imphal being the capital of Manipur is also sees the greatest alcohol abuse/has the highest instance of alcohol abuse. Youth and other male members of society are often found abusing the drink leading to social disturbances like domestic violence, thievery, and other indignities. The bitterness of these outcomes brings in the necessity of the role of Meira Paibi and other CSOs to enhance the slow-impact law and stop alcohol abuse. In doing so, many a community were ostracized, social and cultural notion regarding liquor began to change into that of a taboo, shame or disrespectful. these changes in cultural notion directly impact more towards the women folks who take part in brewing as a profession rather than the men folk who were the primary abusers. There are drives and media coverage for several of these activities where the liquor law is applied. However, as the law has been withdrawn from the Hills, it is up to the few Chakpas communities and the other residents of Imphal, especially the Meiteis who are exposed to raids against *yu*. To understand *yu*'s present association and role there is a need to study the Chakpa communities. They are very few groups of villages that uphold the ancient ways of Manipur.

Basanta (2008) says that the Chakpas

...are an integral part of the Meitei community, and they are one of the oldest communities of Manipur. The Chakpas are found mentioned in the manuscript "Kangbalon"- a royal chronicle containing a chronology of Kings ruled before the Christian era. According to this literature the Chakpas first settled during the reign of King Moriya Phambalcha.... The Chakpa villages are Sekmai, Koutruk, Pheiyeng, Leimaram, Andro, Kwatha and Khurukhul, etc.

Villages Andro, Sekmai, and Pheiyeng are considered major heritage sites for tourists and other researchers who are studying Manipur's history and culture. They have successfully preserved old ethics and values and serve as living examples of Manipur's forgotten past. The wide use of *yu* in these communities is not shamed and the communities remain free of abuse. There are instances of over

drinking not amounting to chronic abuse or social disturbances, as the community does have its own strict social jurisdiction bound by old customs and penalties called the *Loisang* which is a form of administrative body headed by a *khullakpa* or chief.

Almost all the ceremonies and rituals in Chakpa villages include *yu* as an essential offering. From birth ceremonies to death ceremonies, *yu* is involved. In fact, the birth ceremony is called *yu-pan thaba* roughly interpreted as an ‘offering of *yu*’. This name has been corrupted into *ipanthaba* in the Meitei community today, where the use of *yu* is no longer acceptable. Villages like Sekmai and Angro, however, perform the *yu-pan thaba* in their own unadulterated way.

On the day of *yu-pan thaba*, which is held either on the fifth or sixth day, the offering is made in the verandah. It is a simple ritual which is centred around the offering of *phoudang phou*—a basket full of paddy. The paddy is kept in a basket known as *likhai*. A garland of dried fish of *ngakha* or *phabou* is placed above the paddy. Along with it a pair of coins and a pair of *Meitei thum* (local salt prepared in the form of a plate) are placed on the basket. The offering includes *waiyu* (rice beer) which is placed near the basket. Nowadays, *waiyu* is replaced by *kalei* (strong liquor), as preparing *waiyu* is time consuming and laborious. *Phoudang phou* is prepared by the concerned family and is done without the direction of the maibi.

The offering is accompanied by a short prayer by both the maibi and family members, particularly women of the family. After this short prayer a feast exclusively arranged and organised by women of the family and the neighbourhood is held. However, the bathing of the child and the mother precede the feast. The child is carefully bathed by the maibi. The bathing of the mother, however, depends on her health.

Next to Maibi Chaklon Katpa (can be roughly translated as the feast for the female shaman), *Yu-pan Thaba* is another all-women affair. But, on this occasion, men are excluded from the invitation. The invitation essentially includes the maibi (priestess and medical

practitioner), *maioknabi* (assistant to *maibi*), and *khom-enbi* (the breast feeder). These three women are involved in the delivery of the child, where the *maibi* plays the main part in labour work and is assisted by the *maioknabi*. The *khom-enbi* feeds the baby from her breast and not by the mother of the baby on delivery day. The tradition of including a *khom-enbi* is solely because of the belief that the mother's milk in the early days of the birth is unfit for consumption. So, for many hundreds of years, the people of this place have not been using the best part of mother's milk, which is fully nutritious and a source for the child's immunity.

Considering the crucial role played by these three women in the delivery of the baby where a minor negligence may lead to a fatality, their invitation to the feast is nothing less than gratitude to them for their invaluable service to the family. All the invited women from the neighbourhood attend the ceremony with a chicken in their hands. The host family also shares a number of chicken for the feast along with necessary items for cooking.

Women contribute by cooking and dine together in the feast. Before sitting for the feast, they share a round of their local liquor. Excessive rounds may even make someone lose her balance (Basanta 2008).

Marriage rituals also include a considerable amount of *yu* for all segments and types. There are three types of marriage rituals in the Meitei community; the Chakpas also accept them. However, the inclusion of alcoholic beverages is not acceptable in the other Meitei communities. The three types of accepted marriage rituals are *Hainaba*, *Keina katpa*, and *Chelhong*. For all the three ceremonies, *yu* is considered an offering of courtesy for both the matrimonial parties. 'And here arises the significance of "yu" in the cultural life of the "Andros". There is hardly any ritual in "Andro" where "Yu" is not included. Here, "Yu" is not only for the deities, this is also meant for those present on the occasion. However, the distribution of the "Yu" is the task of the boys of the girl's "Leikai" (locality)' (Basanta 2008).

THE BREWERS AND SELLERS

Ene Tombi (name changed) is one of the many brewers in village Sekmai. Her husband is a sharecropper in one of the fields and a part time angler. They are a family of five with three daughters (one daughter is married) and one grandmother. Ene Tombi has been brewing for as long as she can remember, and her whole family has been brewers for generations. No one in her family has a job with a steady income, but both her daughters are in school and pursuing other dreams of becoming a classical dancer and a craft artisan. Before I met Ene Tombi, my visit for research in Sekmai was not welcomed and sparked some false alarm; most brewing ladies hid behind closed doors or questioned me about my presence. Ene Tombi was, however, exceptionally calm and she allowed me inside her humble cottage, where her mother-in-law and husband welcomed me warmly. The pungent smell of fermented rice could be picked up right at the village entrance, but now I could smell more than just fermented rice: pigs in backyard and their food, *ookchak* stored in barrels, and the smell of fresh brew somewhere.



Sekmai River, a hotspot for annual new-year picnics and other revelry in Manipur.



The process of brewing is not a part-time affair. Ene Tombi has to spend over ten hours inside her brewing chamber every day to produce around 50 litres of the drink. She starts early in the morning at 3am, when they start cooking a specific rice called *chamang cheng* (unpolished rice). Even though Ene Tombi's husband has less of an idea about the brewing process, he helps her throughout the cooking of rice. They do it together as a team and manage the large cauldron of rice over the wood stove.

Ene Tombi has to stir the pot constantly or else the rice can burn or overcook, which according to her spoils the *yu*. To ruin the first step is almost like suicide. It would lead to a loss that would put her into serious debt, which could take her a long time to recover from. This worry is, however, only for amateurs. Ene Tombi is proficient in her distilling skills and such a mistake is ancient history. Recalling her first brewing experience, she says she burnt a pot of rice once in her teenage years and was reprimanded by her grandmother.



After cooking the rice, she had to check the *Khari* (the thick milky drippings from the washed rice stored for fermentation) dropping from the nearby sack of cooked rice that she had kept for three days for fermentation. She went in and tasted the murky drops dripping from the sack. The sack was stuffed with cooked rice mixed with

hamei, which is like yeast but made out of a native creeper called *yangli*. Hamei (the local yeast powder made out of *yangli* and rice) is the main ingredient in producing *yu* and also the key factor for making *yu* unique as compared to other alcoholic drinks. The quality of hamei determines the taste of the drink and tasting the khari drops gives an indication of the taste. Ene Tombi seemed satisfied with the taste of her khari. She nodded an approval. While the previously fermented rice is ready for distillation, the cooked rice is poured into a perforated basket to cool down and when cooled, Ene carries the basket of cooked rice over her head and rushes to the mighty Sekmai river along with her daughter who offers to help. There he delicately washes the rice.



On the way to Sekmai river to wash the rice.

Returning from the river, Ene Tombi mixes the washed rice with hamei powder and stuffs it inside a sack and keeps it on a bamboo shelf where the khari begins to drip slowly. These drops are collected for four days and that is when the process of distilling actually begins. Ene Tombi is making the common *kalei yu*, which is a distilled sparkling

liquor that is different from the ancient process of making the other types of *yu*, like *leiyu* and *waiyu* or fermented rice wines.

Revisiting her brewing experiences, Ene Tombi narrated how she had to brew in darkness and out in the wilderness away from the settlement to avoid vandalism by several anti-drugs and narcotics units or random police. She had to create a hidden hut in the middle of the fields with high grass and brew at night, clean the vessels in the dark, and hide them behind thick bushes in the wild. When asked if she felt guilty about the alcohol's impact, she smiled and responded that abusing a substance is not only about *yu* but bad for all such items. She considers brewing a profession and nothing else. She has to brew and make a living. As a member of the Chakpa/Loi community, she carries an essence of cultural commitment to continue brewing and help her family survive.

'I don't even drink *yu*. I don't do such a reckless thing, but as a woman and as a person who has an obligation to feed her family, I am practising my profession,' said Ene Tombi. None of the women admitted to drinking even though we could spot a few brewers and other women looking slightly intoxicated. However, Ene Tombi seemed true to her words and expressed her strong opinion on drinking as bad for woman.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Ene Tombi and the rest of the brewers (all women and some even single mothers and grandmothers) faced a new wave of challenges. Since the selling of liquor is done unlawfully, the pandemic hit them badly. With an immediate lockdown, Ene Tombi said she was getting close to starvation. She also said that all brewers have to pay Rs 50 as fine to the Excise Department, but these officials came and asked for Rs 100 since there was a pandemic. This sudden increase in tax combined with the ruining of the business proved devastating and most brewers fell into deep poverty.

The villagers in Sekmai depend on the production of *yu* as their livelihood. Young children in any household pound *yangli* to make *hamei* so that they can earn some pocket money.



Ene Tombi also mentioned that being a brewer helps in convincing her community when it came to mortgages. Brewing means earning and it is enough to encourage people to loan money for emergencies. If not, community members are hesitant to give monetary help even during a misfortune.

Ene Tombi is a brewer, but the law forbids her from selling her product her product. She cannot fix the price of her product either, as this is up to another section of the business. After spending a whole day inside her brewing chamber, at around 3pm, Ene Tombi comes out with around 50 litres of sparkling *yu*, worth Rs 1,000. From this, we need to subtract the cost of raw materials (wood for the stove, rice, and *hamei*), after which the average gain for her hard work finally comes to 30 per cent of her daily capital.

‘If I am allowed to sell, then I will be able to control the amount of production or the price and quality of our *yu*, but this is not possible as we are all doing it illegally. We could have sold it for ceremonies or festivals in other villages too. Now, there is no regulation for quality or maintaining the processes of our ancient drink. We are just brewing

it for survival now. The only solid gain is ookchak and hot water,' she says with a laugh.

The constant brewing of *yu* for the whole day provides warm water for the whole family, and they get to take happy hot showers in the early morning chill every day. And the ookchak means fodder for the pigs. The rice, after distillation, is stored in a large barrel as fodder for the piglets. These piglets are Ene Tombi's ultimate possession. She looks at them with hope. When they mature, she will be able to get Rs 20,000 to 30,000 per pig.

'Even if I don't want to pray for myself, I have to pray for my piglets so that they don't die on me or get a disease. It would be a disaster if they die or fall ill. Anyway, my piglets seem very healthy and blessed for now,' Ene Tombi says, looking at her five piglets rolling around the pigsty. The five piglets are the only saviour for a woman like Ene Tombi.



Ene Tombi's pigsty.

If Ene Tombi can't sell her *yu*, then who does? The answer to this question leads to the middle section of the business: the *yu* dealers. These dealers are also women who work as collectors and distributors. Ene Chaobi (name changed) is a *yu* dealer whose task is collecting the *yu* from the brewers, filling it in plastic bottles, and managing the illegal trade. For women like Ene Tombi, Ene Chaobi is the only source of

survival. There is no one else to buy a brewer's *yu*. She has to regulate the price according to demand and taxes, and that is why Ene Tombi can't fix the price for her *yu*. This bridge is the point where futile laws and corrupt anti-narcotics officials and groups slip in to make their own share of profits.

Ene Chaobi has to face her own share of problems as a dealer, and even risk her life to continue her business. She works with a team, and one mistake could ruin her life. But, on the other side of the coin, she reaps the most benefits from the existence of *yu*. Most *yu* dealers are capable negotiators. She has to make sure that she pays for all sections of illicit persecutors who would otherwise push her to pay legal penalties. When asked if she could reveal a few of these corrupt bodies, she said it could be anybody and that she had to pay because there was no way for her to differentiate between them. Once she even paid a stranger who chased her claiming to be a VDF from Thoubal district.

When a dealer manages to handle all these hurdles and has the right support (through illicit payments) from all sections (government and insurgent/unidentified groups) is when she starts making money. Ene Chaobi is one of these exceptional women.

There are also many who once practised in the place occupied by Ene Chaobi but were struck by misfortune and hit rock bottom. Ene Pishak (name changed) is another woman from Sekmai who is one of those unfortunate *yu* dealers. She recently returned from an unidentified hospital, bedridden and alone (or so she claimed). She is 43 years old, and her husband died two and a half years after their marriage (she was just 20 at that time). Ene Pishak said he was a heavy drinker but died mysteriously after complaining about seeing a spirit by the side of Sekmai river. Her personal stories of woe easily overwhelm the obligation of research work but, with patience, she revealed how a *yu* dealer's business could be one of the most lucrative jobs in the present Manipuri society.

She started involving herself in the business as an assistant to one of her neighbours, a couple who were successful *yu* dealers. They took Ene Pishak for several negotiation sessions with various officials, police,

and other captains of the various groups claiming to be insurgents who needed to be paid illegal taxes and who helped in smuggling the liquor to various part of the state. In time, she even became friends with many of the higher-up officials, both in the government as well as insurgent groups. She refused to mention any names but spoke of a few 'Town Commanders' and 'Regional Commanders' of several groups around the districts of Ukhrul and Senapati as if they were close acquaintances. They were supposedly her enemies but were also much-needed partners for her business. Being a young woman at that time and with a flourishing business, this gave her new hope of a fulfilled married life with a caring husband. She was attracted to a member of an unidentified group who had been helping her in her business. They worked together for almost five years, and this brought them close enough to decide to get married. However, in the end, he betrayed her. He took a large amount of money from her business and vanished, never to be found again.

Ene Pishak had very little information about her fiancé. There was no possibility for her to trace him. With the pile of debt thrust on her by her disappeared lover, Ene Pishak had to fall back in disgrace, alone, stigmatised, and cornered into selling her own organ to walk out of the misery. She wouldn't reveal her address, her name, or her current profession. She is still appears young and energetic but doesn't stop shedding tears every time she is questioned about her business.

ANTI-NARCOTICS AND THE LAW

The problem of alcohol abuse in Manipur can be evaluated through the major disturbances that have happened historically in the state. The instability in Manipur started with resentment and arguments against forcefully imposing statehood in a proud ancient kingdom that the British left as a sovereign nation at the time of India's freedom. When India won its independence, Manipur was also an independent nation

with an elected chief minister and a ruling monarch. This brief taste of freedom was, however, hampered by the larger nation. This served as a reason for a revolt and the fear of losing one's identity led to bitterness and resistance. Manipur is not a state new to the exploitation of its cultural and ethnic identity. It is a sensitive community with dilemmas about ethnic identity that have evolved through its history. The ancient legacy and the smudged past glories contributed an element of frustration for every new generation where existence and beliefs were questioned and debated. With a fragile sense of unity and distrust, this led to the rise of armed rebellions and they multiplied as various 'insurgent groups' across the state. With an increase in resistance, the Indian government imposed a law called the Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958, also infamously known as AFSPA in several regions of the Northeast and labelled the area a disturbed region.

This law became infamous for the power that it gave to those implementing it. This superficial response by the government to a complex problem led to an even worse outcome for those living in the region. The act was mercilessly abused by the men in power and led to the exploitation of the lives of many young individuals for nearly four decades. The youth, mistreated, confused, deprived, and pressured by political concerns on top of their own social and cultural complexities, turned to 'substance abuse' at a quick pace. Manipur's geographical location also acted as a catalyst in this. The Golden Triangle of the drug world (Thailand and Myanmar being the main route) for drug trafficking led to the widespread availability of narcotics and drugs in Manipur's towns. The early 1980s and 1990s were the worst for Manipur and included alcohol abuse as well.

Yu was already taboo for the religiously-reformed sections of society. The structural abuse made it worse, and people started questioning its existence. Narcotic drug dealings had been an open secret for most in power and wealth, as they are the only ones who could bend the law in their favour. They could not be easily targetted by common citizens, associations, or groups. But as a society netted by the structure of community disciplining and Meira Paibi being

the leading women's organisation, the women who are also often the victims of violence due by alcohol abuse came out to form various organisations to deal with the problem.

One such organisation is Coalition Against Drug and Alcohol (CADA), a non-profit civil organisation founded in 2006, registered under the Society Registration Act, Manipur with its head office at Konung Mamang, Poreiromba Khongnang Road, Imphal East. The coalition works on both drug and alcohol demand and supply reduction in the state in particular and throughout the country in general. The coalition is closely working with NGOs working in the field of drugs and government departments like Social Welfare, Excise, and Narcotics and the Police' (CADA Quarterly, Vol no. 1 Issue No. 2).

Priyokumar Hijam, CADA's 57-year-old president and one of its founding members narrated his personal experience as the son of an alcoholic. His father was a highway truck driver who transported wood logs between states. Back in 1975, his father met with a terrible accident and lost his life due to drunk driving. He recalled the terrible accident where the logs behind the truck smashed his father's body into the front window, making it impossible to collect his body for a proper cremation. This memory disturbed him and is the main reason why he helped establish CADA and also helps the women who were routinely tortured by their drunken husbands. Men like Priyokumar and other members of organisations like CADA believe in three methods of facing the problem of drug abuse. Like the 'three legged *Yotsabi* (cookery tripod)', they use:

- a) the Awareness Method
- b) the Rehab Method
- c) the Drive (vandalism) Method

CADA stated that it had organised awareness programmes for atleast 50,000 students so far in an attempt to educate the youth on

The awareness is also provided for 20,000 women, individually and in groups. They also made sure to give counselling to abusers and helped them enroll for rehab. Apart from these two methods, they also undertake drives around the area where the alcohol law has been enforced to abolish the availability of liquor.

CADA's ultimate aim is the complete abolition of drugs and alcohol in the state. Along with occasional awareness programmes and addiction treatment, it believes that destroying the root of the problem that is the brewers and the vendors is an important tool to fight the abuse.

Drives are targeted mostly at alcohol vendors as other drug items cannot be easily traced for abolition. Here, CADA members comb through street vendors, collect all intoxicating substances (*yu* and the ingredients used in making it) and burn them in front of the media and police. They do it very often and throughout the valley.

They believe that discouraging brewers and sellers will cut down the availability of alcohol, and thus reduce abuse. They believed in creating more awareness as one way of tackling the issue. However, members also strongly believe that the raids and harsh punishment for brewers are also important to teach a lesson to these law breakers. When asked if they had had an impact with their efforts, they admitted that it was a far cry and Manipur was still a state racked by alcohol abuse. CADA wants the law to be more stringent when it comes to dealing with alcohol abusers and help organisations like CADA in facing the evils in society.

While organisations like CADA and others take up social problems in their own hands, the law still seems lethargic and ineffective. With the law seemingly banning liquor throughout the four prohibited districts, there is no scope of age restrictions in drinking, no punishment for drunk driving, and no concrete method to deal with substance abusers except for monetary fines. All this leads to abusing the brewers as the only source of the problem, especially by those who

use the law and other names of the civil organisations to collect illicit taxes or horde the substances for their own gains.

Y. Jayentakumar Singh is a sub-inspector working in the Singjamei Police Station. He has been involved in various drives conducted by government departments. He believes that 'abuse' of alcohol or any other substances is also a result of the overall economic and political scenario in the state and lack of awareness and manners. As a policeman, he considers it his duty to seize the brewers, as they are the ones who are brewing illegally and are thus abusers. If caught, they are chargesheeted, FIRs are registered against them, and they are referred to the Excise Department to pay a fine. Y. Jayentakumar Singh said that lifting the alcohol act will be economical and a more manageable way for the production of alcohol, but it is due to the large sections of an unaware and misbehaving population that Manipur has had to embrace the prohibition act to avoid the menace of drugs and other substance abuse at present. He is, however, hopeful that in the future people will learn about the horrible effects of substance abuse and consider quality *yu* as a part of our cultural cuisine, to be consumed with respect and not abused.

In 2015, the then-ruling Congress government headed by Okram Ibobi briefly proposed the lifting of the Manipur Liquor Prohibition Act, 1991. However, this was strongly condemned by all the civil organisations in Manipur fearing that it would lead to utter decay in the state because of substance abuse. The government's idea behind lifting the alcohol law was economic gains and curbing the activities in the illegal trade that were booming under its radar. This was condemned by prominent women like Thokchom Ramani, who is the president of the Nupi Samaj, the All Manipur Women's Social Reformation and Development Samaj. The law thus failed to be lifted and remains to this day.

Dr R.K. Nimai is a retired IAS officer who worked as an advisor to the Governor of Manipur. He strongly believes that the prohibition law is not effective and that it is only providing space for corruption.

The notion of public shaming and vandalism by organisations is also just scraping the surface and is not an effective tool in curbing substance abuse. The issue of domestic violence against women is not entirely the result of alcohol but a reflection of a patriarchal society and the dependent state of women in Manipuri society. With due education and financial independence, violence against women with or without alcohol abuse can be faced. He believes in the legalisation of liquor, as people will always find a way to stay connected with drink; it would be better for the government to manage its production. In fact, making it legal will make it easier to bring in systematic control and also protect the vulnerable sections of women brewers around the state who are the most exploited in this space. If other countries can do it and if people are aware and educated, there will be no problem with the production of Manipur's unique rice wine under strict regulations.

YU AND ITS ABUSERS

While ancient culture and tradition celebrate *yu* as an elixir for strength and happiness, the modern face of its existence is becoming far from what it was in the past. *Yu*, being an unlawful item is never under scrutiny for quality or quantity. A CADA member pointed out that no brewers in Manipur have became rich through this profession, but they still do it out of cultural ties and emotional sentiments, blindly believing in some random profit, which does not amount to much compared to the effort that they put in. They are also suspicious that some brewers are even forced into brewing as bonded labour. There is no evidence of this, but it is worth pondering over, as *yu* dealers and smugglers are the main body who is profiting the most from the profession. Also, for a few brewers, maintaining quality is the last thing on their minds when they have to sell their product in secret and their aim is making profits. Many tragedies have happened in the past due to the unchecked quality of *yu* and its oblivious consumers who drink it.

Yu sometimes becomes methanol if it is contaminated and not brewed properly, and this can cause death. There have been several such instances in Manipur.

However, even with this problem, drinkers flock to local vendors and become addicts. While we discussed the socio-political scenario as a possible reason for the high number of addicts, there is also personal behaviour that leads to the problem.

Tomba (name changed), 59, is a police officer who works in the wireless department. He has been a known alcohol addict for the past 40 years but is currently clean. It was his daughter who gave us details of his affair with *yu* and his ongoing battle with addiction. She does not want her father to be ever reminded of the intoxicating substance that nearly broke her family. Tomba was introduced to *yu* as a teenager when he joined the local wood cutters to earn a living since his family was poor and he had to earn for his education. The hard work was what made him move to *yu*. With dedication and perseverance, Tomba made himself a police officer, serving the government, and creating a respectable place for himself in society, but it didn't take long for his old friend *yu* to come back in a much finer form, in work parties and other gatherings with his colleagues. This reintroduction was not the same as how he consumed it during his teenage years to numb the ache from hard work; now it was meant to deal with mental pressures and pleasures. Tomba's daughter revealed that her father is a quiet man and does not speak much. She believed that this quietness must also be a reason for her father falling neck deep in *yu*. When his professional and personal life took a toll on Tomba, he started drinking. For nearly 40 years, Tomba was in and out of several rehab camps. The first two stays in rehab were done forcefully by his relatives, but he left the rehab centre, witnessing physical abuse and torture in the camp instead of actually dealing with his addiction. After this experience, Tomba tried to cure the addiction himself but without success. His daughter still speaks admirably of him because he loves his family and feels guilty about the trouble and hardship he brought to his wife and daughter.

His drinking worsened to a point where he could no longer recognise his wife.

‘Is she really your mother? Do I really know this woman?’ This was what Tomba once asked his daughter when he saw his wife, sober but demented by years-long alcohol abuse.

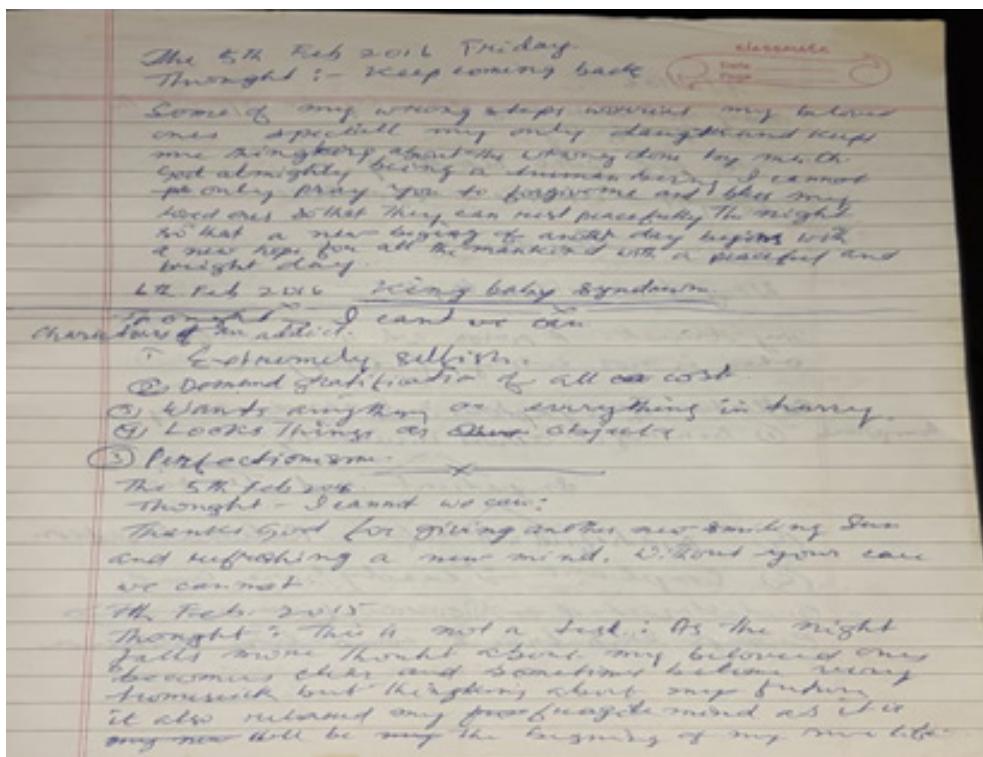
When sober, Tomba is a doting father to his daughter. They share books and a love for other activities like gardening and roaming through the paddy fields. These memories of him gave strength to his wife and daughter to deal with his addiction, even though Tomba sometimes resorted to violence when he was intoxicated.

A few years back, Tomba was hospitalised due to deterioration of his health and was almost on his deathbed. This near-death experience opened a new perspective for Tomba to look for a cure before it was too late. After he was discharged, he willingly got himself admitted to one of the rehabilitation centres called Divine Light and spent a successful year without withdrawing back. This rehabilitation centre was to Tomba’s liking. They do not use physical ill-treatment as a method but rely on methods like spiritual cleansing, yoga, recreational activities, and interventions. Tomba made friends with other addicts and also got to learn from them. As treatment for relapsing, Tomba was also given narcotic pills, but he would not consume them and saved them for his friends who needed them more than him. This small act of compassion worked as a reminder of why he was there in the first place. The rehab centre also gave books, pen, and notes for Tomba, which he loved the most and used to trace his downfall and learnings from his mistakes. His daughter treasures these notes that he made in the rehab centre.

In 2019, Tomba’s mother died, which brought in a new wave of regret and an understanding of his family’s grievances, which was majorly caused by his addiction. Resolved to cure the addiction forever, Tomba is currently determined to never be near or relate to *yu* in any way for the rest of his life.

Tomba’s daughter believes that addiction has to do a lot with a person’s character and social surroundings. She saw many of her

father's friends drinking with him, but none of them ruined their lives like her father did. She was understanding of how addicted people sometimes feel helpless about who they have become and want people to be helpful instead of exposing them to outright social shame and repulsion. As a college graduate, she is helping her father get back on his feet. He is also beginning to share his thoughts and worries, which is a great initiative to curb his addiction and dependence on narcotic substances to unburden himself. The social stigma is undoubtedly shared by family as well. But Tomba's daughter did not blame her father who was a victim of circumstances and noted his willingness to correct his mistakes. She is also well aware of people who do uncivil and evil deeds by abusing alcohol and agrees that harsh punishment and condemnation would also do good, but most addicts are usually helpless individuals waiting for a hand to pull them out of addiction.



A page from Tomba's notes during his rehab.

CONCLUSION

Manipur as a state is still a long way from prosperity and its literacy rate is still 76 per cent. Historical pride of the state's people is an invisible force that has mingled with a confused world of reformed religions and social structures. Its Hill areas are largely ignored, with class disparities rapidly increasing, and there is exploitation of the larger working class by the corrupted elits.

The beaten brewers of Manipur do not form the only disgraced section but are one of many. In fact, it is not new for any study of ancient civilisations to find alcoholic beverages as a high-end social diet while regulated only by strict social decorum and behavioural scrutiny mostly done lawfully.

In Manipur, the active participation of community members in social problems gives way to unchecked malice done without a deeper understanding of the consequences and follows a shallow viewpoint of satisfying the notion of serving society. Vandalism is quite common and very regular while drunken abusers always walk the streets untreated and unpunished. The social shame and repulsion for women brewers is considered acceptable as a way of discouraging the face of abuse, but we need to be reminded of the systematic exploitation of the item intertwined into various problems and causes. The larger part of the problem lies outside organisations' hands and instead can be found in politically and morally corrupt attitudes that need the whole community's re-education and commitment to following a moral code and behaviour.

The brewers need to be protected as any other profession, and every outcome should not be directed as abuse against them. . We may consider legalisation of *yu* a necessary step for the alcohol problem, but the law can be lucrative for only a few while potentially worsening the conditions of traditional brewers. We also need to understand the prospect of modern capitalists who break down the chain of indigenous ways. Legalising alcohol is vulnerable to exploitation if the government does not take serious and sincere action in acknowledging

the plight of traditional brewers. Private firms might step in to create a larger capital for themselves, which will result in scarcity of rice and other resources.

It is a reasonable recommendation that our government and policy makers focus on protecting the quality and quantity of *yu* for traditional brewers, checking and controlling the menace of addiction, instructing traditional brewers to follow systematic sustainable methods, and making sure that their profession is more profitable by removing illegal taxes and other unlawful levies.

While we are instantly terrified of making *yu* legal, it is also not wrong to sweep every corner and rummage through what we often ignore. Righteousness will not screen the truth of our problem. It is only reasonable to not leave behind any section of a community regardless of gender or profession but to try and include its struggles as a part of our understanding. To completely eliminate alcoholic drinks would be best from the perspective of our society but this perspective does not take the ground reality into account. Thus, the need is to deal with the larger problem and not focus on easier targets—here, the helpless brewers—resulting in ugly consequences.

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