

Decolonising Education through Thang-Ta: Reconstructing Precolonial Pedagogy in Manipur

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Abstract

The study of martial arts, viewed through the prism of pedagogy, offers significant insights into the moral, social, and intellectual foundations of a society. Pre-modern communities did not merely practise martial systems of combat; they embedded them in education, administration, and identity. The martial traditions of Northeast India, especially Manipur, remain under-researched in South and Southeast Asian studies. This paper examines Thang-Ta, the native martial tradition of Manipur, as a coherent pedagogical system integrated into the traditional education of early Meitei society. Drawing on historical sources, the study argues that Thang-Ta constituted a holistic pedagogical formation combining physical discipline, moral formation, socio-political conditioning, and cultural continuity. It situates Thang-Ta within an epistemological paradigm that contests Eurocentric, text-centred theories of education by privileging experiential, ritual-centred, and community-based learning. The paper concludes that Thang-Ta is not only a martial practice but a living pedagogical system central to identity formation, moral growth, and social integration in Manipuri society.

Keywords: Thang-Ta, Indigenous Education, Embodied Knowledge, Moral Pedagogy, Manipur

Introduction

The historiography of education has often privileged formal institutions and textual traditions, leaving oral and embodied practices at the margins. Manipur offers a striking case through *Thang-Ta*, the indigenous martial art of the Meitei people. More than a system of combat, *Thang-Ta* functioned as a vehicle of moral education, identity formation, and social cohesion. Its practice combined rigorous physical discipline with ritual and communal learning, embedding values of patience, respect, and unity. This paper argues that *Thang-Ta* constitutes a coherent pedagogical formation, one that challenges text-centred educational models by privileging experiential and community-based knowledge. Thang-Ta, the indigenous martial tradition of the Meitei people of Manipur, forms part of the broader system known as Huyen Langlon (Lallong). The term Huyen denotes “war,” while Langlon signifies “knowledge” or “art,” collectively framing warfare as an organized body of knowledge rather than a purely physical activity. In contemporary usage, this system is widely recognized as Thang-Ta, derived from *thang* (sword) and *ta* (spear), symbolizing its principal martial instruments. However, to define Thang-Ta merely as “the art of the sword and spear” is to overlook its broader pedagogical, ethical, and socio-cultural significance. The term combines *thang* (sword) and *ta* (spear), indicating its foundation in armed combat. The practice also incorporates unarmed techniques, ritual performance, and symbolic expression. Its history is inseparable from the politics of colonial suppression: following the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, the British colonial administration banned Thang-Ta as part of a broader effort to dismantle Meitei martial and civic culture. The practice was driven underground and survived through private transmission among committed practitioners. Its subsequent revival in the post-independence

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period repositioned Thang-Ta as both a performative tradition and a mode of instruction. Understanding this colonial rupture is essential to interpreting the contemporary contexts in which Thang-Ta pedagogy is practised and transmitted.

In this study, Thang-Ta is understood not merely as a martial art but as a pedagogical formation that integrates physical discipline, ritual practice, moral formation, and civic responsibility. This interpretation aligns with broader understandings of indigenous pedagogy, which emphasise learning processes embedded in local cultural practices, oral traditions, and community life. Rather than privileging formal institutions or written texts, such systems rely on participation, observation, and embodied engagement as primary modes of knowledge transmission (Battiste 2002). Education, in this sense, is not separate from everyday life but woven into social, ritual, and productive activities

Despite its cultural and historical importance, *Thang-Ta* remains overlooked in academic discourse. Existing literature has largely focused on its performative and artefactual aspects, neglecting its role as a pedagogical system. There is a clear lacuna in the scholarly treatment of Thang-Ta as a mode of moral and social education, particularly in the literature on South Asian physical culture and indigenous pedagogy. This study seeks to address that gap by examining *Thang-Ta* as an indigenous pedagogy embedded in the traditional education system of precolonial Manipur.

The objectives of the research are fourfold: first, to examine the historical and cultural context of *Thang-Ta* in precolonial Manipur; second, to analyse its pedagogical dimensions; third, to understand its role in fostering morality, discipline, and community; and fourth, to locate *Thang-Ta* within indigenous epistemological frameworks. These aims are pursued with the conviction that *Thang-Ta* is not only a martial art but a living educational system that shaped identity and social integration.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research design informed by interpretive anthropology and indigenous epistemology. This framework recognises knowledge as culturally situated and historically embedded, often transmitted through ritual practice, oral memory, embodied traditions, and community-based systems of learning rather than exclusively through formal textual documentation (Geertz 1973; Smith 1999). Such an approach is particularly appropriate for examining Thang-Ta as an indigenous pedagogical system grounded in ethical discipline, embodied knowledge, and socio-cultural continuity.

The study primarily relies on documentary and textual sources, including extant scholarly literature, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical records, archival materials, and ancient manuscripts of Manipur relating to warfare traditions, indigenous education, ritual practice, and martial knowledge systems. Particular attention is given to traditional Meitei manuscripts (Puya), historical chronicles, and available literary accounts that illuminate the philosophical, ethical, and educational foundations of Thang-Ta within Manipuri society. These materials are supplemented by books, academic dissertations, institutional reports, and other secondary sources relevant to indigenous martial traditions and educational values.

Data collection involved a systematic review and interpretative examination of historical and contemporary sources to identify recurring themes concerning pedagogy, moral instruction, discipline, ritual symbolism, and knowledge transmission within Thang-Ta traditions. Narrative, historical, and cultural accounts were

treated as valid epistemic sources, consistent with indigenous frameworks of knowledge production that value lived memory, symbolic practice, and intergenerational transmission (Cajete 1994; Battiste 2002).

Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and conceptual categories across educational philosophy, ethical formation, and indigenous pedagogical practice (Braun and Clarke 2006). Themes emerged inductively through repeated engagement with the literature and historical texts and were further interpreted through relevant theoretical perspectives, including embodiment (Csordas 1990), habitus (Bourdieu 1977), and experiential learning (Dewey 1938). Particular emphasis was placed on contextual interpretation to understand how *Thang-Ta* functioned historically as a medium for moral cultivation, physical discipline, and cultural continuity.

The study further adhered to principles of ethical scholarship in the representation of indigenous knowledge systems, ensuring cultural sensitivity, accurate interpretation, and responsible engagement with historical and traditional sources (Smith 1999). Reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the research process to minimise interpretive bias, particularly in relation to the researcher's familiarity with Manipuri cultural traditions and linguistic context, thereby strengthening contextual understanding while preserving scholarly objectivity.

Conceptual Framework

Central to this framework is the concept of embodied knowledge, in which learning is acquired and transmitted through the body. In *Thang-Ta*, repeated movement, disciplined training, and ritual practice inscribe values such as respect, patience, and self-control into bodily habit. This reflects the understanding that the body is not merely a medium of expression but an active site of cultural inscription and pedagogical formation (Csordas 1990).

Closely related is the principle of experiential learning, which holds that knowledge emerges from direct participation in practice (Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984). In the context of *Thang-Ta*, this extends beyond technical training to include labour, ritual, and communal responsibility. The Manipuri case, however, situates such learning within a broader ethical and communal framework that differs from Western experiential learning theory in two important respects. First, experience in *Thang-Ta* is not individual and reflective but communal and participatory: knowledge is not internalised in isolation but emerges through collective practice. Second, experiential learning in this context is inseparable from civic duty and spiritual order, such that moral formation and practical competence are developed simultaneously rather than sequentially.

Literature Review

Academic scholarship on martial arts has grown increasingly attentive to its ethical and philosophical dimensions. Morganelli (2018) argues that martial practice entails a "protector ethic," positioning practitioners as moral agents rather than combatants. This corresponds with the emphasis on discipline and ethics in *Thang-Ta*, where martial skill is never conceived independently of moral formation.

Ibomcha (2012) examines the decline of traditional Meitei institutions under the pressure of modern schooling, noting their former role in identity formation and moral awareness. Singh's *Loiyumba Sinyen*, as discussed in Manikchand (2012), provides insight into the sociopolitical framework within which martial practices were embedded in governance. The *Chainarol* similarly reflects ethical principles of combat, including honour,

bravery, and ritualised confrontation (Hemchandra 2016). Parratt's (2005) edition of the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* provides an indispensable chronicle of Meitei royal history. It offers important context for understanding the socio-political conditions in which *Thang-Ta* flourished as a civic institution.

Beyond martial arts, scholars of indigenous education emphasise the importance of oral traditions, ritual, and embodied practice. Cajete (1994) argues that indigenous education is ecological and holistic, integrating body, mind, and spirit. Smith (1999) foregrounds the decolonising potential of indigenous methodologies, challenging Eurocentric dominance in knowledge production. Smith's insistence that indigenous research must be grounded in community accountability and cultural continuity resonates strongly with the Manipuri case, where *Thang-Ta* served simultaneously as martial discipline and moral pedagogy. Battiste (2002) further demonstrates that indigenous knowledge systems are not supplementary to formal education but constitute distinct epistemological traditions with their own logics of transmission.

Scholarship on somatic pedagogy and embodied practice also offers relevant conceptual resources. Farrer's (2009) work on *Silat* in Malaysia and Singapore demonstrates how martial arts function as sites of community formation, spiritual practice, and embodied moral instruction, paralleling the pedagogical dimensions of *Thang-Ta* in notable ways. Comparative perspectives of this kind help situate the Manipuri case within global debates on physical culture and indigenous education.

Nevertheless, none of these studies examines *Thang-Ta* as a theoretically coherent pedagogical system. A systematic review of relevant regional journals, Manipuri-language scholarship, and postgraduate dissertations confirms that this specific focus remains absent from the literature. By bringing together indigenous epistemology and embodied knowledge theory, this study seeks to expand the existing body of research and situate *Thang-Ta* within global debates on education, decolonisation, and identity formation.

Embodied Pedagogy and Ritual Discipline

Thang-Ta was not simply a martial technique but a pedagogical formation in which the body became the primary site of knowledge. Training begins with foundational exercises such as *Sajel Kanglon* (physical exercise), which cultivates rhythm, attentiveness, and bodily awareness (Indu 2016; Rishikesh 2022). Traditional sports such as Mukna (wrestling), Yubi-lakpi (coconut rugby), Mukna-Kangjei (wrestling-hockey), horse riding, boat racing, and jumping events enriched physical culture. Boys were rigorously trained for strength, while select royal women like Queen Linthoinganbi also learned *Thang-Ta*, horse riding, archery, and Arambai (dart warfare), demonstrating gendered yet flexible martial education. Such practices forged a warrior ethos, ensuring community survival and sovereignty. These practices were not only technical but moral, embedding patience, discipline, and respect through repetition. In this sense, *Thang-Ta* exemplifies Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, in which social values are inscribed in bodily routines and reproduced through practice (Bourdieu 1977). Unlike classroom instruction, the Manipuri system relied on embodied cognition, situating knowledge in movement and ritual rather than in text (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Csordas 1990).

Ritual was inseparable from pedagogy. The Gurukul model and personalized mentorship were deeply embedded in Manipuri society. The initiation of a child into martial training required a sacred ritual (Ojah Boriba), conducted under astrologically auspicious signs. Students trained under masters, beginning with basic movements and *Sajel* breathing exercises before advancing to weaponry, tactics, and ethics (Indu 2016). Ritual gestures such as *Khurumba* (bow) extend beyond formalised expressions of respect and function as

deeply embedded pedagogical acts. Practitioners interviewed for this study consistently emphasised that *Khurumba* signifies not merely deference to the teacher but a form of total surrender of the self, understood as a precondition for learning.

Upon entering the Sindamsang (training space) or the residence of the *Sintakpural* (guru), trainees are required to demonstrate the highest degree of respect. This is expressed by entering barefoot and bowing before the *Sintakpural* and elders. The training ground must be meticulously maintained; it is to be kept clean and well-groomed, with water sprinkled both before and after each session as a ritual of purification. Certain restrictions govern access to the training space. Women who are pregnant or undergoing their menstrual cycle are traditionally not permitted to enter the training floor. Prior to commencing practice, trainees must offer reverence to Pakhangba, regarded as the originator of Thang-Ta, and also bow to their training partner while performing a formal salutation with their weapon. Strict codes of bodily discipline are observed: trainees must never touch their own or their partner's weapon with their feet. Any act of crossing between two practitioners engaged in training is considered a breach of protocol, requiring the immediate cessation of practice for that day. Students are expected to stand while receiving instructions, refrain from intoxicants, and bow respectfully to the teacher before departing. Disciples of Thang-Ta are further bound by a rigorous ethical code. They must abstain from intoxicating and harmful substances, avoid cruel or immoral behavior, and show respect toward parents, teachers, elders, women, and children. They are expected to pursue mastery with sincerity and devotion, venerate Lord Pakhangba, and pledge themselves to the defense of their land, while avoiding laziness and absenteeism. Additionally, disciples must adhere to strict moral and social norms: they should refrain from lying, honor their word, and avoid marital relations with women who are already married or belong to the same clan. Traditional prescriptions also include avoiding dining with women during menstruation, not walking beneath drying lines or creeper plants, refraining from touching women's fishing nets, and abstaining from consuming certain creeper vegetables. By observing these codes, practitioners are believed to cultivate the discipline necessary to defend their land, promote self-reliance through the use of indigenous food and dress, and lead a dignified life. Regular practice of Chingkheiröl and breathing techniques is emphasized as essential to this disciplined way of life. (Kokngang, 2007)

This interpretation resonates with currents in Indian philosophical thought, particularly Vedantic ideas that conceive the self (*atman*) as fundamentally continuous with the universal principle (*Brahman*). It is important to note, however, that this reading represents an emic framing offered by practitioners themselves, not merely an interpretive claim imposed from without. The act of surrender in this framework is not hierarchical submission but an ethical recognition of shared ontological unity.

In pedagogical terms, *Khurumba* operates as both a disciplinary and a moral practice, reorienting the practitioner's disposition. It cultivates humility, attentiveness, and relational awareness, positioning learning as an ethical encounter rather than a purely technical exercise. Discipline in *Thang-Ta* is thus not externally imposed but emerges through an internalised philosophy of respect grounded in metaphysical understanding.

Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power offers a productive lens for understanding how *Thang-Ta* shaped bodies and subjectivities. Through surveillance, repetition, and correction, the training ground functioned as a space of normalisation. However, the Foucauldian parallel has important limits. In *Thang-Ta*, discipline was not exercised through institutional coercion but through ritual consent and cosmological belief. Practitioners submitted to rigorous training not because of external compulsion but because the training

ground was understood as a sacred space. Sacrifices to deities such as *Pakhangba* or *Huyei Laleima*, the singing of hymns, and the maintenance of ritual purity transformed discipline into a communal and spiritual practice. The power at work here was productive and relational rather than punitive and hierarchical.

This integration of ritual and discipline ensured that martial ability was inseparable from moral character. *Thang-Ta* pedagogy cultivated not only fighters but ethical agents, aligning with indigenous educational ecologies that emphasise the unity of body, mind, and spirit (Cajete 1994; Smith 1999). The absence of textual manuals reinforced oral transmission and apprenticeship: knowledge was acquired through observation, imitation, and correction under the guidance of the *Oja*. This process also fostered kinship among practitioners and embedded learning within community structures.

In the practice of *Thang-Ta*, the foremost principle is that this martial art must be learned and cultivated for the protection of the nation and the welfare of the people, rather than for personal or individual gain. Its techniques and knowledge must never be misused or applied for unjust or harmful purposes. A practitioner is expected to uphold a high standard of moral conduct. This includes showing deep respect toward women and refraining from coveting or engaging with another person's spouse. The ethos of *Thang-Ta* emphasizes self-sacrifice—placing the interests of others, the nation, and, traditionally, the king above one's own. Service to the collective welfare is regarded as a primary duty. Ethical restraint is central to this discipline. A practitioner must avoid all forms of wrongful conduct, recognizing that honor and reputation precede all else. As expressed in traditional wisdom, shame is regarded as the “elder brother,” and death as the “younger brother,” signifying that the loss of honor is more grievous than death itself. Furthermore, disciples are instructed to cultivate inner discipline by overcoming the fundamental vices that hinder human character. These include ego, jealousy, lust, anger, temptation, and greed—often conceptualized as the six inner enemies of human beings. Mastery in *Thang-Ta*, therefore, is not merely physical but deeply ethical and spiritual, requiring continuous self-regulation and moral vigilance. (Rishikesh, 2022)

Such accounts confirm that the absence of written manuals was not a deficiency but a deliberate feature of a system that privileged relational and embodied transmission over textual codification. *Thang-Ta* thus demonstrates how embodied practice and ritual discipline together formed a coherent pedagogical formation, producing individuals who were physically skilled, morally grounded, and socially integrated.

Socio-Political Structures and Knowledge Transmission

To understand the educational significance of *Thang-Ta*, it is necessary to situate it within the socio-political structures of precolonial Manipur. The *Lallup* system, which required compulsory labour and military service to the state, ensured that martial training was embedded in civic life. Each individual was obliged to perform both duties, thereby receiving instruction in martial and civic responsibilities simultaneously (Indramani 2015). This dual function produced citizens who were physically capable, politically aware, and socially responsible.

In sociological terms, the *Lallup* system exemplifies Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction, transmitting values and identity through embodied practice (Bourdieu 1977). Unlike modern education, which often separates intellectual formation from civic virtue, the Manipuri system integrated both, creating a framework in which duty and discipline were inseparable. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records instances in which martial

prowess and civic loyalty were publicly recognised and rewarded, suggesting that pedagogical achievement in *Thang-Ta* carried socio-political consequences (Parratt, 2005).

The first school of a Manipuri child was the family and community hearth (*fungga*). Parents, grandparents, and elders transmitted values, vocational skills, and cultural knowledge through storytelling (*fungawari*), lullabies, and domestic training. Mothers and grandmothers instilled morals through folk songs such as “May Heaven Firmly Bless You”, embedding identity and ethics from infancy. Girls were taught weaving, embroidery, and domestic arts, while boys practiced climbing, hunting, and wrestling under paternal supervision.

This familial pedagogy ensured generational continuity of skills and values. Storytelling (*Funga Wari*) carried moral lessons that nurtured responsibility, while goddesses like Emoinu, patron of the hearth, symbolized domestic education. Such home-based training was regarded as sacred and central to Meitei upbringing.

Knowledge transmission in precolonial Manipur extended beyond formal structures into family and community contexts. Storytelling, apprenticeship, and participatory learning sustained vibrant exchanges of knowledge across generations. Oral narratives functioned as living records of history and moral instruction, shaping collective memory and ethical awareness (Kokngang 2007).

Education was experiential: students practiced farming, woodcutting, and hut building alongside martial exercises, cultivating self-reliance and communal responsibility. Teachers also imparted philosophy, creation myths, codes of conduct, and the exploits of ancestors, shaping learners into warriors, leaders, and administrators. The process combined manual labour, discipline, spiritual reverence, and moral instruction.

The text *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba* narrates the holistic training of *Naothingkhong* under the guidance of *Luwang Ningthou Punshiba*. Under his teacher’s guidance, he studied history, statecraft, rituals, warfare, and cultural arts. This account exemplifies how traditional pedagogy aimed to produce well-rounded individuals equipped with knowledge, skills, and moral virtues to face life’s challenges.

Institutions such as *Pakhangphan* and *Leishaphan* formalised this moral education, providing structured spaces for the teaching of discipline and practical skills (Basanti 2018; Ibomcha 2012). *Pakhangphan* functioned as a communal assembly space where young men received both martial instruction and civic education. At the same time, *Leishaphan* served an equivalent role for women, transmitting cultural knowledge, ritual practice, and domestic arts. These institutions reinforced the integration of *Thang-Ta* into broader educational contexts and underscored its role in holistic development.

Experiential learning was central to this system. Training in *Thang-Ta* was not confined to martial exercises but extended to labour-intensive collective activities such as cultivation and construction. These activities cultivated humility, cooperation, and responsibility, embedding moral values in everyday work. As noted in the conceptual framework, the Manipuri case goes beyond Dewey’s (1938) model of experiential learning in that labour was not merely practical but explicitly moral, binding education to civic duty and communal ethics. Experience was not a method deployed within a curriculum; it was the curriculum itself.

Oral testimony from practitioners reflects the centrality of communal experience to pedagogical formation.

As one senior Thang-Ta guru explains:

In our training, learning never occurs in isolation. Every movement is practiced collectively, and through this shared labour, students cultivate discipline, patience, and mutual respect. Technical skill alone is insufficient; it is through collective practice that moral character is formed. (Personal communication, 2024)

This testimony illustrates that the pedagogy of Thang-Ta extends beyond the transmission of physical techniques to encompass ethical and social development. The emphasis on shared labour and collective engagement reflects a communitarian model of learning, wherein values such as discipline, humility, and responsibility are internalized through embodied and participatory practice rather than through abstract instruction alone.

Such accounts affirm that the knowledge transmitted through *Thang-Ta* was simultaneously practical, ethical, and civic. The sociopolitical structures of precolonial Manipur thus reveal *Thang-Ta* as a deeply embedded pedagogy sustained through compulsory service, oral tradition, and collective labour, producing communities in which education, morality, and identity were structurally inseparable.

Gender and Comparative Perspectives

The pedagogical system of *Thang-Ta* reflected gendered divisions of labour without being entirely exclusionary. Men were expected to undergo military training as part of their civic and military duties. Women were primarily engaged in domestic work and cultural transmission through institutions such as *Leishaphan*. Historical accounts nonetheless reveal that women participated in martial education, particularly within royal and elite circles. Queen Linthoinganbi is remembered in oral tradition for her access to spaces of martial activity generally reserved for men (Basanti 2018). Corroborating references in royal chronicles suggest that elite women were not entirely excluded from the martial domain, though the conditions of their participation remain difficult to reconstruct with precision.

This dual reality of selective empowerment and structural limitation is analytically significant. Women's involvement in martial practice challenged prevailing norms by granting them agency in martial and civic life. At the same time, the broader system reinforced structural boundaries, confining most women to domestic and ritual roles. From a pedagogical perspective, this tension reflects the complexity of indigenous education systems. Women contributed to cultural continuity through oral narratives, ritual practices, and selective martial training, ensuring that values of discipline and morality were transmitted across generations. Their participation demonstrates that *Thang-Ta* was a negotiated practice, embodying both inclusion and exclusion in the transfer of knowledge.

Placing *Thang-Ta* within a comparative frame further illuminates its distinctiveness. In Japan, *Bushido* emphasised loyalty, honour, and moral discipline, embedding martial practice within codes of governance and ethics (Nitobe 1900). However, *Bushido* largely excluded women from formal training, though women of the samurai class sometimes practised *naginata*. Thai *Krabi-Krabong* combined weapon training with ritual, linking combat to spiritual protection and communal identity. In Southeast Asia, *Silat* integrated dance, ritual, and combat, serving as both performance and pedagogy, with women's participation varying significantly by regional tradition (Farrer 2009).

Thang-Ta shares these traditions' concern with morality, ritual, and community, yet it differs in one notable respect: its integration with the *Lallup* system of compulsory civic service. The dual role of soldier and citizen is structurally embedded in *Thang-Ta* in a way that has no direct equivalent in *Bushido* or *Silat*. This integration situates *Thang-Ta* as simultaneously a martial code and a civic pedagogy, making it a distinctive case within global traditions of martial education.

Comparative analysis also highlights the gendered dimensions of martial pedagogy more broadly. The selective inclusion of elite women in *Thang-Ta* reflects a pattern also found in *Silat* traditions, where female practitioners have at various times performed and taught within community contexts. These parallels underscore the need to approach indigenous education as a dynamic rather than static formation, shaped by social structures yet capable of adaptation and negotiation.

Discussion: Decolonising Education and Global Relevance

The study of *Thang-Ta* contributes significantly to contemporary debates on decolonising education by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies that have historically remained marginalised within dominant academic discourse. Conventional educational theories have largely privileged textual traditions, rationalist pedagogies, and institutionalised modes of learning, often overlooking embodied, oral, ritualised, and community-based forms of knowledge transmission. Historical and documentary evidence relating to *Thang-Ta*, drawn from extant scholarship, traditional Meitei manuscripts, historical chronicles, and cultural records of Manipur, demonstrates that education within indigenous contexts may be transmitted through disciplined bodily practice, ritual performance, and ethical socialisation. In this regard, *Thang-Ta* challenges hierarchical assumptions that privilege formal textual knowledge and instead reveals embodied learning as central to moral, social, and civic formation.

A critical consideration in interpreting *Thang-Ta* as a pedagogical system concerns the possibility of retrospectively imposing analytical coherence upon practices that historically evolved in fluid, context-specific, and adaptive forms. From this perspective, *Thang-Ta* may be viewed not solely as a formally codified educational institution but as a constellation of interconnected practices embedded within martial discipline, ritual life, governance, and social organisation. Ancient manuscripts of Manipur, historical narratives, and indigenous cultural accounts suggest that knowledge transmission often occurred through lived participation rather than explicitly articulated pedagogical frameworks. Such an understanding cautions against the uncritical application of contemporary educational categories to premodern indigenous traditions.

At the same time, historical and literary sources indicate recurring patterns of instruction, ethical cultivation, and disciplined practice that support the interpretation of *Thang-Ta* as a meaningful pedagogical formation. Evidence found in indigenous texts, historical records, and contemporary academic studies consistently points to structured modes of learning involving ritual observance, disciplined bodily training, moral instruction, and social responsibility. Rather than imposing external conceptual frameworks, the present study seeks to reconstruct the implicit pedagogical logic embedded within indigenous practices, acknowledging both continuity and contextual variability across historical periods.

Theoretical perspectives concerning embodied cognition, habitus, and disciplinary power provide valuable interpretative frameworks for analysing *Thang-Ta* (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1977). The Manipuri case demonstrates, however, that such concepts assume distinctive meanings when situated

within indigenous epistemological contexts. Historical evidence suggests that discipline within Thang-Ta was embedded in ritual obligations and ethical commitments rather than institutional surveillance alone. Habitus emerged through repeated embodied practice in culturally meaningful spaces, while experiential learning was connected to social responsibility, martial preparedness, and communal order. Consequently, indigenous pedagogies should not be understood merely as illustrations of established theoretical concepts; rather, they possess the potential to extend, challenge, and enrich prevailing educational frameworks.

The global relevance of Thang-Ta becomes particularly visible when considered comparatively alongside other martial pedagogies such as Bushido, Krabi-Krabong, and Silat. Comparative scholarship reveals shared concerns with ethical discipline, ritual practice, communal values, and moral self-cultivation, while simultaneously highlighting Thang-Ta's distinctive integration of civic responsibility within the historical framework of the Lallup system. Such comparisons underscore the importance of recognising diversity within educational traditions and resisting homogenising representations of either "Western" or "indigenous" pedagogical systems as internally uniform categories (Dei 2002).

Decolonising education ultimately requires recognising indigenous traditions not as static relics of the past but as dynamic and evolving systems of knowledge. Historical manuscripts, scholarly studies, and indigenous documentary evidence relating to Thang-Ta collectively demonstrate that education can be meaningfully rooted in embodied practice, oral transmission, ritual engagement, and communal ethics. By offering an alternative to dominant text-centred educational models grounded in concrete historical and cultural realities, Thang-Ta contributes to broader global discussions concerning the reimagining of education through pluralistic, culturally responsive, and epistemologically diverse frameworks.

Practical Implications

The pedagogical framework of *Thang-Ta* offers important lessons for contemporary education in Manipur, India, and beyond. Its emphasis on discipline, ritual, and community demonstrates that learning can be rooted in values as much as in skills. Integrating elements of *Thang-Ta* into modern curricula could strengthen moral awareness and civic responsibility, particularly in educational contexts that have become narrowly examination-centred. Physical training combined with storytelling and ritual practice might foster resilience, respect, and collective identity among students, echoing indigenous approaches to holistic development (Cajete 1994; Smith 1999).

Experiential learning was central to *Thang-Ta*, with collective labour integral to its pedagogy. Cultivation, construction, and communal service were not merely practical tasks but moral exercises that cultivated humility, cooperation, and responsibility. Modern curricula could adapt this principle by linking classroom knowledge with community service, environmental stewardship, and physical activity, thereby extending education beyond rote learning and examination preparation.

Thang-Ta also demonstrates how indigenous knowledge can engage productively with global educational frameworks. Recognising embodied and ritual practices as valid forms of learning contributes to the decolonisation of education, affirming cultural continuity while engaging with contemporary debates on pedagogy. Policy frameworks such as UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003) and India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) already emphasise the integration of traditional knowledge systems into formal education. *Thang-Ta* provides a concrete example

of how such integration can be achieved, offering a model that values ethics, community, and embodied practice. Any such incorporation must, however, remain attentive to context, ensuring that practices are not abstracted from their cultural foundations or deployed in ways that strip them of their ethical and relational dimensions.

Conclusion

This study has argued that *Thang-Ta* is best understood not as a discrete martial tradition but as a pedagogical formation embedded in embodied practice, ritual discipline, and socio-political organisation. By examining its modes of transmission, institutional context, and ethical orientation, the analysis demonstrates that learning in precolonial Manipur was inseparable from civic duty, cultural continuity, and moral regulation. Rather than relying on formalised textual systems, *Thang-Ta* operated through practice, repetition, and relational structures, thereby challenging narrow definitions of education as institutional or text-based.

At a theoretical level, the study contributes to ongoing debates on education and knowledge systems by demonstrating that categories such as “formal” and “informal,” or “physical” and “intellectual,” are insufficient for understanding pedagogies grounded in embodied and communal practice. *Thang-Ta* illustrates how knowledge can be simultaneously practical, ethical, and political, with learning occurring through participation rather than abstraction. It offers a productive lens through which dominant educational frameworks may be reconsidered, particularly those that privilege textuality and institutionalisation.

The analysis has also emphasised that *Thang-Ta* is not a homogeneous or idealised system. Its pedagogical structure reflects historical conditions, including gendered access, hierarchical relations, and shifting institutional contexts following colonial suppression. Recognising these internal dynamics is essential for avoiding reductive or romanticised interpretations of indigenous knowledge systems. *Thang-Ta* should be understood as a historically situated and adaptive practice, shaped by negotiation between continuity and change, and capable of informing educational thought precisely because of this complexity.

The contemporary relevance of *Thang-Ta* lies in its potential to inform current discussions on culturally grounded education. As educational policy in India increasingly acknowledges the value of indigenous knowledge systems, *Thang-Ta* offers a concrete example of how ethical formation, physical discipline, and community engagement may be integrated within pedagogical design. Such integration requires that practices are not abstracted from their cultural foundations.

Future research may build on this study by incorporating more extensive ethnographic data, broader comparative regional analysis, and longitudinal perspectives on institutional transformation under modern conditions. Greater engagement with Manipuri-language sources and unpublished oral histories would further enrich the evidential base.

In sum, *Thang-Ta* complicates conventional understandings of education by demonstrating that learning can be embodied, relational, and structurally embedded within social life. Its significance lies not only in its historical role in Meitei society but in its capacity to expand how education itself is conceptualised, offering a model in which moral formation, communal responsibility, and practical discipline are not supplementary but constitutive of the educational process.

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