

Kangla Fort as Living Heritage: Cultural Memory, Pilgrimage Tourism and Community Resilience in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Kangla Fort is an ancient royal palace of Manipur and the cradle of Meitei civilization. . It was the capital of the Meitei kingdom until the British defeated Manipur in 1891. According to Meitei mythology, Lord Pakhangba resides underneath the Fort and ruled the kingdom of Manipur and the universe. This fort is the prominent historical, archaeological and spiritual epicenter of Manipur. Also the fort was the supreme political, military and administrative epicenter of the region. It has survived centuries of royal governance, conflict, traditional lifestyles, cultural evolutions, practices and numerous sacred shrines, symbolizing the region's rich heritage. Rather than just a historical monument, the Fort embodies deep-rooted heritage and resilience of the Meitei community. Its legacy traces its root for more than 2000 years. As recorded in the royal chronicle "Cheitharol Kumbada", the Kangla functioned as the royal seat since King Pkhangba ascended the throne in 33 A.D. Pilgrimages and rituals performed at sacred sites of Kangla Fort by Maibis (priestesses) contributed to the cultural and spiritual life of the community. Ancestral Meitei sacred rituals and rites meant to invoke and appease the Umang Lai (the forest deities) were historically performed here. These pilgrimage gatherings attract devotees that stimulate revenue through tourism-related activities such as accommodation, transportation, food and beverage services and the sale of religious artifacts and local handicrafts. Also, fostering unity through these cultural events, exhibitions and heritage walks, attracting both locals and tourists. Focusing the state unique spiritual and cultural assets, the Manipur Tourism Policy 2022 seeks to expand travel and hospitality and grow the state income. The Kangla Fort encompasses over 360 sacred shrines deeply woven with local folklore and history rendering it a premier destination for spiritual tourism among local and international travelers.

Historically, Kangla Fort powered early Manipur's economy as the main hub for socio-economic and religious activities, trade, agriculture and influencing the overall economic structure in the region. It was the centre for regular cultural events, traditional dance performances, handicraft exhibitions, educational workshops and festivals like Lai Haraoba (Merry-making of the Gods), Cheiraoba (Meitei New Year), traditional arts, crafts and music. Ancient Manipuri dance forms, music and martial arts like Thang-Ta, Sarit Sarak and Mukna continue to thrive even today. In contemporary Manipur this Fort is a major economic asset for the state, as it promotes cultural tourism with massive potential for attracting heritage travelers. Kangla Fort witnessed rise and fall of successive indigenous Meitei rulers, foreign invasions and resistance. Kangla Fort is a living and profound emblem of Meitei community resilience, representing cultural identity, historical continuity and enduring spirit amid periods of intense adversities. Following the defeat in the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, led to the British occupation and the eventual transfer of power to the Indian security forces and its return to the Manipur government in 2004, marked a symbolic reclaiming of cultural-political sovereignty. The fort symbolizes struggle for independence and cultural heritage preservation.

Initiatives have been taken to develop Integrated Management Frameworks for Kangla Fort to secure its historical heritage for future generation. The fort is a tentative UNESCO World Heritage Site and has been the subject of extensive preservation initiatives. The restoration work has been a collaborative effort involving historians, architects and local communities to maintain its architectural authenticity while establishing the fort as a vibrant cultural hub. The restoration brought about freshness into this immortal fort transforming this timeless landmark into a vital link between Manipur's storied past and its modern vision for growth and harmony. It is a living repository of cultural memory and an inseparable part of Meitei identity. The ancient remnants and

sacred monuments of the Kangla Fort profoundly echo Manipur's eventful past and its hopeful outlook on the future.

Keywords: Living heritage, cultural memory, pilgrimage tourism, indigenous identity and community resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Manipur is an ancient state and culturally rich state in northeast India with religious practices and spiritual paths with a deep-rooted native connection of Sanamahism. The state has a rich tapestry of religious traditions, where pilgrimage events play a significant role in the cultural and spiritual life of the people with its diverse population embracing Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and the indigenous Sanamahism. This religious diversity and sacred sites and festivals attract devotees and tourists making it a destination for pilgrimage tourism. Manipur's vibrant landscapes, profound cultural wealth and diverse religious sites, is exceptionally well-suited and promising hub for pilgrimage tourism. By prioritizing targeted sector development and sustainable framework, Manipur can further boost its tourism industry benefitting both the local communities and visitors seeking spiritual and cultural enrichment. Pilgrimages and tourism are inextricably linked. The tourism business attracts a considerable number of local visitors who mostly visit pilgrimage sites. The objective of this paper is to study how Kangla Fort acts as a resilient living entity, pilgrimages, indigenous cultural conservation and cultural memories. Kangla Fort is not merely as an archaeological monument, but a dynamic living heritage landscape. Also highlights on the multifaceted dimensions of the Kangla Fort, economy and community resilience. This study is a qualitative heritage case study based on the documentary sources and field observation. Kangla, the ancient capital of Manipur and the most important seat of political power of the Ningthouja dynasty and its history goes back more than 2,000 years from archaeological evidences, literary sources, oral traditions etc. The fort complex, including the Pakhangba Temple, Kangla Museum, and other structures, offers a glimpse into the rich cultural heritage of Manipur. The valley of Manipur was inhabited by seven clans. They were the Ningthouja (Mangang), the Luwang, the Angom, the Khuman, the Moirang, the Kha-Enganba (Khaba & Enganba) and the Sarang-Leishangthem (Chenglei).



Photo 1: The Kangla Sanathong (The Royal Entrance of the Kangla Fort), (Photograph by the author)

Kangla is considered the most significant sacred and religious centre for the Manipuris. There are many sacred places within the fort, including sacred ponds like Nungjeng Pukhri, which are associated with Lord Pakhangba and used for religious ceremonies. Other significant sites within Kangla include Nunggoibi, dedicated to the Goddess of War, where rituals were performed to celebrate battlefield victories. The fort also contains the

Pakhangba Temple, the Inner and Outer Moats, Kangla Museum, and the former royal residence and offices. Sites dedicated to Lord Wangbaren and Lord Koubru are also present, where pujas are performed for protection against natural calamities and for favorable weather conditions, respectively. For generations, Kangla is sacred and serving as the cornerstone of Meitei civilization, cosmology and religious heritage since ancient times. In the Pleistocene era, the valley of Imphal was filled with water and began draining towards the south into the Loktak Lake. The first point, which emerged dry, was Kangla. In the book "Wakoklol Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok" Kangla is mentioned as the place that is completely dry after the water had been drained out along with the other places in the valley of Manipur. These were probably the important amongst factors in Kangla being chosen as the capital of the Manipuri Kingdom. Consequently, it has been the centre for administration, politics, trade and commerce, culture and religion and the economy of Manipur. It was the capital of the Meitei kingdom from ancient times until the British defeated Manipur in 1891.

There are a number of ancient manuscripts especially "Sakoklamlen" "Chinglon Laihui", "Nunglon" etc. which lay down the rules for the construction, worship, ceremonies relating to Kangla. The Kangla Fort's diverse natural and cultural resources make it a major green oasis in the urban landscape. Beyond its political significance, Kangla Fort serves as a profound spiritual landmark for the Meitei community and people of Manipur across different faiths. The fort is filled with sacred ponds, trees and significant open spaces. Manipur holds a diverse religious landscape and has resulted in an abundance of sacred pilgrimage sites throughout the state. Prominent Hindu pilgrimage sites includes Shree Govindajee Temple, SKCON Temple, Mahabali Temple, Shri Ranji Prabhu Temple, Vishnu Temple, Radha Raman Temple, Nityananda and Narasimha Temple, Ibudhou Thangjing Temple, Kaina Hillock, Hiyangthang Lairembi Temple. Churches like Imphal Central Church, Imphal, Christian Center Church, Tamenglong, Pilgrims Prayer Mountain, Ukhrul and Mosques at Babupara, Imphal. The fort shares a deep bond with the Meitei language (Meiteilon), Meitei arts, crafts, music and cultural events such as Lai Haraoba and Cheiraoba. Moreover, Kangla was also a hub for Manipuri dance and martial arts which continue to thrive even today. The Meitei community is the indigenous people of Manipur, distinguished by their own indigenous religion, native language and script and a rich, deeply-rooted distinct history and culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pilgrimage tourism has grown significantly and popularity due to its substantial socio-economic through employment and foreign exchange while also strengthening cultural and national unity. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2011), reports that annually over 600 million religious trips are taken globally, with up to 330 million people specifically travel to religious or sacred site, which significantly shaping local economies and the broader pilgrimage tourism industry. Manipur's strategic location is beneficial as India's 'Gateway to the East' through Moreh town, the only feasible land route for trade between India and Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries. As India embraces as a global tourism hotspot, its religious sites are driving both spiritual growth and economic development. Under the Ministry of Tourism, Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD), a government Initiative focuses on developing pilgrimage sites and enhancing the religious tourism experience in a sustainable manner. Additionally, the Swadesh Darshan Scheme funds tourism infrastructure and thematic travel circuits focusing heavily on Spiritual Circuit alongside Buddhist and Heritage circuits. According to Yinger (1970), religion as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life. Also, highlighted religion is fundamentally a belief system and social practices. It is a structured framework of beliefs, attitudes, emotions, behavior and all coupled with an understanding of the universe's origin, nature and purpose.

Kangla Fort's history traces back to 33 AD when Nongda Lairen Pakhangba the mythological monarch of Manipur first ascended the thorn. Historians debate the naming of Kangla on several theories with multiple origin stories. The ancient Manipuri text Thirel Layat suggests that the name Kangla originates from the phrase 'Kangsu Kangle Lasu Lare' which means dry and clear.(S. Nilbir:2007:1). Kangla stands as the most important sacred landmark for the Manipuris. As a result this location has been a frequent target for territorial control by the leaders of various clans and lineages since ancient past. According to Meitei's legends, the seven foundational clans of Manipuri are Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Kha-Nganba and Sarang-Leishangthem. These seven clans waged war amongst themselves. Historical accounts assumed the Khaba clan once ruled

Kangla prior to the reign of Nongda Lairen Pkhangba. In 33 A.D. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, widely recognized as the first recorded historical king, ascended to the throne and made Kangla his capital. Of all the historical capitals, Kangla was the most prominent capital due to its strategic positioning and religious importance. The archaeological remains of Kangla offer crucial insights into Manipur's historical art and architecture. Kangla Fort stands as a remarkable example of Meitei architectural mastery.

The most recognizable landmark of the Kangla Fort is the Kangla Sha (two dragon-lion statues) at the entrance symbolizing strength and protection. Cheitharol Kumbada, the official royal chronicle contain numeral documents detailing the instances where various kings of Manipur undertook the construction and enhancement of the Kangla during their rule. Manuscript like Nunglöl Achouba, Chinglon Laihui Sakoklamlen, Kangla Layat and Kangla Houba etc. outline the sacred rules and disciplines for the construction and maintenance of kangla. Further, during the reign of King Naophangba (428-518 AD), a scholar named Ashangbam Laiba authored the Kangla Houba, the ancient manuscript therein meticulously described rules and regulation on how to construct the royal palace Kangla.

Historically, the Ningthouja dynasty ruled Manipur from 1st century A.D., played an important role for the growth and development of the Kangla palace. They constructed forts, royal residence, roads, temples, coronation hall, excavated tanks and moats and other secular buildings. Among the Manipuri kings Naophangba (428-518 A.D.), Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.), Charairongba (1697-1709 A.D.), Garibaniwaz (1709-1748 A.D.), Bhagyachandra (1763-1798 A.D.), Chaurjit (1803-1813 A.D.), Gambhir Singh (1825-1834 A.D.), Narasingh (1844-1850 A.D.), Chandrakirti (1850-1886 A.D.), and Churachand Maharaja (1891-1941 A.D.) played an important role for the growth and development of the palace at Kangla and Langthabal. They constructed forts, royal residence, roads, temples, coronation hall, excavated tanks and moats and other secular buildings.

After series of conflicts King Pakhangba taking control of the Kangla Fort, thereby progressively expanded his territory and solidified the administrative foundation of Manipur. By the middle of 15th century the Ningthouja clan ruled Manipur across length and breadth and controlled the administration from Kangla and it became the most important centre of administration, socio-political, cultural and religious system of Manipur. Rulers of Manipur like Khagemba, Charairongba, Garibaniwaz, Bhagyachandra, Chourjit, Marjit, Gambhir, Nara Singh and Chandrakirti carried out various activities for the improvement of Kangla, the capital of the kingdom. Manipur's religious harmony and the presence of indigenous faiths like Sanamahism add a distinct dimension to its pilgrimage tourism landscape.



Photo 2: Sanamahi Temple (Photograph by the author)

The coming of Hinduism marked a transformative era in the history of Manipur. King Charairongba (1697-1709 A.D.), was the first ruler of Manipur to officially embrace Vaishnavism. The era experienced significant advancement in art, architecture and craftsmanship, driven by political stability, economic growth and the introduction of new religious movement. In addition he erected other magnificent buildings and artistic monuments at Kangla and in other parts of the valley. Many architects and masons from Burma visited Manipur during his reign (L. Iboongohal Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh: 1989:70:71) therein contributed growth in arts and architecture in Manipur. The Manipuri social life which was perfected in the 17th Century was based on kinship structure of clans, lineage and families.

The Manipuri society in the 17th century was well established with its foundation deeply rooted on kinship structure of clans, lineage and families. Manipuri society formation is fundamentally organized around its traditional clan structures.

Historically, the term “Meitei” exclusively identified the Ningthouja clan who became the ruling dynasty of Manipur. Overtime, this term broadened to include all the ethnic groups which were brought under the Ningthouja clans. Meitei society traces its lineage back to seven foundational clans (Salais) namely Ningthouja, Luwang, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba and Sarang-Leishangthem. The concept of “Salai” (political confederation) or “Yek” (blood relation) was the basic foundation of the social life of Manipur. These seven clans emerged in different eras under the rule of Ningthouja dynasty’s reign.

Over time, Kangla evolved from being a place of command and control to a place that builds global relationship rather than merely exerting regional authority. Beyond its function as a political, cultural and administrative hub, Kangla acted as the backbone for ideas issued forth from kings and his advisors as well as traders and preachers etc.

Manipur existed as an autonomous kingdom ruled by Ningthouja dynasty until 1891 AD. Due to political instability, some Ningthouja rulers shifted their capitals to nearby settlements to streamline administration and defend against internal rebellion and foreign threats. In the history of Manipur, existence as an independent kingdom, period from 1890 to 1891 witness two important events. i.e., the palace revolt of 1890 and the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891. In the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891, Manipuri’s lost their independence to the British Empire. Following their seizure of the Kangla Fort on April 27, 1891, the British army demolished the majority of the palace’s internal architecture including Kangla Shas, Utra Kangla, Sanathong (royal gate), residential buildings, departmental buildings and sacred places. After the war, colonial authorities appointed Churachand Singh – great grandson of Maharaja Nara Singh as the new monarch of Manipur.

Following India’s independence on 15 August 1947, Manipur successfully liberated from British colonial rule. The political dynamics from princely state to colonial rule and then to democratic system have led to a significant cultural environment in the Manipur valley. For the first time an elected body formed a responsible government at Imphal by King Budhachandra in 1947. Thereafter the formation of legislative assembly for the Union Territory in 1962 and upgraded it to a full-fledged state in 1972.

DISCUSSION

The Ningthouja dynasty founded by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba at Kangla ascended the throne in 33A.D. and established Kangla his capital. By unifying the Kingdom, he established the core foundation of the social, political and cultural institutions of Manipur. It is from this capital that the Ningthouja clan spread their political and military power. The Kangla is not only the seat of political power but also the most important sacred place and religious centre for the Manipuris, who worships traditional deities. Historians and researchers documented sacred sites at the Kangla such as Kangla Men Surung/ Leikhul, Manglen, Nungaoibi, site for Wangbrel, Nungjeng Pukhri, site for Koubru, site for Rasmandal, Polo Ground, Sanathong (Main Gate).

Manipur, once a princely state in northeastern India, experienced Seven Years Devastation also known as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa in Meiteilon, was a brutal Burmese occupation of the Manipur Kingdom from 1819-1826, and subsequently conquered by the British Empire in 1891. In 1891, following the transfer of administrative authority to the British government of India, the state economy experienced significant changes. In the aftermath of the

Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891, British forces took control of Kangla and destroyed most of the structure found inside the capital and the royal families were not allowed to live at Kangla.

During the reign of Maharaja Churachand, a summer palace was constructed in 1907 at Langthabal and the current Sana Konung (Royal Palace) was constructed in 1908. The archaeological and historical sites at Kangla and Langthabal are protected by the state administration under the provisions of the Manipur Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1976.

Kangla Fort is a living repository of Meitei culture featuring and preserving the ancient temples, sacred sites and architectural marvels that reflect the brilliance of Meitei architectural styles. It is a place where traditional art forms like Manipuri dance, music and martial arts have flourished

Historically, Kangla Fort was the vibrant epicenter for major religious and cultural festivals and various seasonal ceremonies. Religious practices and rituals performed at Kangla by Maibis (priestesses) contributed to the cultural and spiritual life of the community. Traditional festivals and cultural events were held within its walls, reinforcing traditions and community bonds. Back then, the inhabitants of the Kangla era adorned themselves that were both aesthetically pleasing and embedded with great cultural significance. Kings wore the traditional pheijom (wraparound dhoti), while queens and noblewomen wore phanek and innaphi - usually a wrap skirt worn around the waist and a delicate, semi-translucent shawl used to cover the upper body often made of hand-woven silk or cotton. With this outfits jewelries are important for it added an extra touch of glamour. Gold and silver ornaments like bangles, earrings and wrapper khadang-phanek (khwang-phanek) were worn during festivals and official gatherings. The most significant part is each piece of clothing and jewelry reflected a person's role, age, and respect in society. Craftsmanship flourished around Kangla, where artisans made pottery, wove silk textiles and carved sacred figures. These crafts were not just decorative but carried deep cultural meaning. The artistry from this era continues to influence Manipuri culture even today. Kangla Fort offers a unique pilgrimage experience, combining a journey through history with a deep spiritual connection to Meitei culture and beliefs. The Meitei community actively works to preserve its cultural heritage, including its unique language (Meiteilon, written in the Meitei Mayek script) and indigenous religion (Sanamahism), despite external influences and modernization.

Historically, Kangla functioned as a foundational hub for administration, politics, trade and commerce in Manipur. Kangla Fort's economic significance in Manipur is multi-faceted. The fort was the hub for socio-economic and religious life, impacting the daily lives and livelihoods of the people of Manipur. Substantially in today's time, its historical and cultural value, combined with its potential for tourism makes it a focal point for regional economic development. Pilgrimage events attract numerous devotees from near and far generating revenue through tourism-related activities such as accommodation, transportation, food and beverage services and the sale of religious artifacts and local handicrafts. Moreover, job opportunity for locals as tour guides, interpreters, security personnel, maintenance staff, administrative staffs and many more within the fort complex. Meanwhile, Taxi services, e-rickshaws, and bicycles within the fort complex benefit from the increased tourists inflow. To ease the travel process, efforts are being made to streamline travel documentation like the Inner Line Permit (ILP) and e-visa for foreign nationals, further boosting accessibility and visitor numbers. Kangla Fort provides an immense pilgrimage tourism experience, combining a journey through history with a deep spiritual connection to Meitei culture and beliefs. The Sangai Festival of Manipur, a major annual cultural extravaganza, also attracts tourists and generates economic activity. The Institute of Hotel Management, Catering Technology & Applied Nutrition at Imphal is expected to further enhance the pool of skilled manpower to support the growing tourism and hospitality sectors, linked to sites like Kangla.

Kangla Fort Endurance and Community Resilience

The ancient citadel Kangla Fort also endured a period of British colonization. The British conquered the fort in 1891 and turned the ancient royal capital into a military garrison and made notable additions and alterations to the fort's architecture during their occupation to suit their needs. These alterations included the construction of barracks, administrative buildings and additional fortifications. Subsequently, the British colonization of Manipur in the late 19th century had a significant impact on Kangla Fort. The British occupation of Kangla Fort marked a turbulent era for the people of Manipur, as they resisted to protecting their cultural identity and

independence. The fort's deep significance stems from its status as a historical and cultural landmark, inspiring pride and unity among Manipuri people. The fort is a repository of Manipuri history and culture, hosting various cultural programs, exhibitions and educational activities. It plays a vital role in promoting cultural awareness and instilling a sense of pride among the local population.

Despite modernization and external influences, the Meitei community actively strive to protect its distinct cultural identity, particularly their indigenous Meiteilon language using the traditional Meitei Mayek script alongside the continuity of their ancient faith of Sanamahism. Kangla Fort is a living symbol of Meitei community resilience, representing cultural identity, historical continuity and enduring spirit including periods of conflict. Following the Anglo-Manipuri War in 1891, the British occupied and took possession of Kangla. Thereafter, the Assam Rifles took over the administration since independence. After more than a century of military occupation, on November 20, 2004, the then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh transferred the Kangla Fort to the Government of Manipur. This event was a meaningful reclaiming of autonomous governance and community identity.

As a historic landmark the fort symbolizes the Meitei community's struggle for independence and cultural heritage preservation. In 2009, the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act made Kangla a protected site prohibiting any new construction within the fort compound ensuring the preservation of the fort's original appearance and historical design.

Historically recorded, on July 15, 2004, the twelve notable Emas (Mothers in Manipuri) belonging to Meira Paibi (women torchbearers), conducted an unprecedented nude protest outside the Kangla Fort with the banner that read "Indian Army Rape Us", against the rape and custodial killing of Thangjam Manorama by Assam Rifles personnel outside the headquarters of the 17th Assam Rifles at the Kangla Fort. These elderly Emas mobilizes civil resistance movements against security forces through cases involving enforced disappearances, custodial torture, rape, fake encounters. They also fiercely protested and raising their voices against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA), a law that grants the Indian army sweeping powers and legal immunity in conflict-ridden state. Consequently, they challenged the legitimacy of the nation-state, democratic values and civic rights under the Arms Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), and have been widely condemned for misused as weapon to discriminate tribal and indigenous communities. This protest triggered a profound shift how Indians view rape by state actors. The 2004 Naked Protest by the Meira Pabis at Kangla Fort was a powerful and monumental event. The notable Emas (mothers) who took part in the public nude demonstration - Lourembam Nganbi, Thokchom Ramani, Yumlembam Mema, Chungkham Jamini, Keisham Taruni, Laishram Gyaneshwori, Moirangthem Sorojini, Angom Jibanmala, Haobam Tombi, Mutum Ibemhal (deceased), Soibam Momon (deceased), Loitam Ibetombi (deceased). Thokchom Ramani (at the time of the award 83 years old), Ak Janaki Leima, Purnimashi Leima, L Memchoubi Devi, Y Leirik Leima were awarded the "Times of India Social Impact Awards" (TOI Social Impact Awards): Lifetime Contribution". These women are widely respected as the "guardians of civil society" and represent a powerful moral force in the state. Their moral authority and collective action to address a wide range of social issues - from fighting alcoholism and drug abuse to protesting human rights violations and state oppression. Despite those struggles and ill-treatment from the authority the Emas stayed on their ground. After the protest, all twelve Emas were arrested and jailed for three months. The rage of Manipuri women manifesting in various forms of protest, including the world's longest hunger strike that last more than 16 years by Irom Chanu Sharmila, the overall attention to the constant state of exploitation and hardships these communities live under. The protest by these 12 Emas (Mothers) in 2004 and the event of the meeting of Manipur Legislative elected members with Arambai Tengol in 2024 at Kangla Fort were the two powerful symbols of resistance in Manipur. They stem from different eras and hold distinct objectives. Arambai Tengol stand firm on the core responsibilities on the protection of the indigenous Meitei community, territorial integrity of Manipur and revival of pre-Hindu Meitei religion and history. This historic initiative led by Arambai Tengol inspired thousands of youths to join the cause, transforming into a mass movement that could not be ignored.

The grounds of Kangla Fort has witnessed numerous historical events and weathered years of conflict, including periods of conflict, British occupation, and the eventual transfer of power to the Indian security forces. It stands as a reminder of Manipur's past and the challenges faced in maintaining its sovereignty and cultural identity. Manipur Kangla Day is observed every year on November 20. The day marks the historic event of 2004

when the New Delhi returned the sacred Kangla Fort to the people and government of Manipur. On November 20, 2004, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh ceremonially returned the historic site's key to Manipur Chief of Manipur Okram Obobi Singh.



Photo 3: Kangla Sha (two dragon-lion statues) (Photograph by the author)

The Kangla Fort has long served as a central site for protests and movements determined at safeguarding Meitei identity and democratic values. The fort serves as a gathering place for the community, fostering a sense of unity and collective identity. It inspires a shared sense of purpose and encourages collaboration in addressing challenges. The potential for combining pilgrimage tourism with cultural and nature-based tourism also presents opportunities for regional development. The community's profound bond to Kangla Fort empowers resilience in facing various challenges, from past invasions and occupation to modern pressures like pollution and urban development. After years of public protest, the handover of the fort in 2004 to the state government showcased the community's determination to reclaim and preserve their heritage. Further, the restoration efforts, community participation in preserving traditions and the focus on sustainable tourism development are further testaments to their resilience. The ancestral Kangla Fort, through its deep-rooted historical significance and cultural importance, provides a strong foundation for the community to come together, protect their past and build a resilient sustainable future.

Restoration and Development Planning

Since the end of colonial rule, Kangla has been the focus of efforts to restore its historical and cultural significance. The Kangla Fort Board has been actively involved in conservation and development works, aiming to revive its past glory. These efforts include the renovation of temples, construction of the citadel and development of the surrounding areas. Contemporary development strategies integrate Kangla by harmonizing preservation, tranquility and practical use. Kangla's dense forest and herbal garden, recognized as the "Lungs of Imphal," highlight its environmental significance and potential for eco-tourism development. Efforts are focused on restoration and development of Kangla fort as an archaeological park and heritage tourism destination collaborating historians, architects and local communities to its former glory, recreating the architectural features and cultural significance that once defined it. The goal is to preserve the historical structures, creating visitor facilities including a museum, cultural centre and gardens showcasing Manipur's living heritage.

Kangla's potential, highlights its regional significance and the importance of preserving this unique cultural resources. At the same time Kangla Fort is not free from challenges such as pollution, urban pressure and the need for a comprehensive management system to ensure its long-term preservation. The restoration projects have involved meticulous research using historical records and archaeological findings to guide the reconstruction process. The fort's temples, gateways and other architectural marvels have been carefully restored to their

original splendor, allowing visitors to experience the grandeur of Manipur's past. Efforts have been made to revive traditional art forms and promote cultural events within the fort, ensuring that Kangla Fort remains a vibrant centre of Manipuri heritage. Additionally, efforts have been made in collaborating eco-awareness initiatives, showcasing the community's commitment to safeguarding their heritage for future generations.

Developing the sacred Kangla as pilgrimage tourism site aligns with the Manipur Tourism Policy 2022, to make Manipur the northeast top tourist destination by 2030. This includes focusing on sustainable development, promoting diverse tourism products, upgrading infrastructure and connectivity and engaging local communities. The Manipur Tourism Policy 2022 emphasizes sustainable, responsible and inclusive tourism and aims to mitigate negative socio-environmental impacts and maximize developmental and economic impacts. Blending pilgrimage tourism with culture and nature-based tourism creates opportunities for regional development. The Kangla Fort Board's initiatives, specially the Kangla Herbal Garden and the Nura Heikol (Women's Fruit Garden), reflect a commitment to sustainable development and ecotourism and also promoting eco-friendly approaches, waste management, and cultural heritage preservation. Contemporary relevance and preservation of Kangla Fort are anchored by its status as state heritage and a tentative UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Kangla Fort has been developed as an archaeological park, attracting travelers and scholars eager to explore the cultural and historical heritage of Manipur.

Challenges and Future Directions

Kangla Fort was not accessible to the public for decades following its occupation. Decades of warfare and military occupation led to neglect and damages of the fort. Following the official handover of Kangla Fort to the state government, continuous restoration work has been carried out. Despite its popularity, Kangla encounters significant challenges concerning its conservation and development. Ongoing restoration activities require careful management to ensure minimal disruption to the site's historical and archaeological integrity. The potential for conflict between development and the preservation of cultural heritage of this ancient fort is a concern that needs to be addressed through careful planning and community engagement. Kangla Fort still continues to face significant vulnerabilities of pollution, escalating urban development and the impact of climate change. Preservation requires strategic preparation, adequate financial backing and community involvement. Ancient Kangla Fort is not just a structure - it is a living legacy that must be protected.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Archaeological evidence and historical records indicate that ancient Manipur used to have a well-settled and affluent population, as island of prosperity having rich heritage and traditions with its indigenous script (the Meitei Mayek) and civilization of more than 2000 years of glorious past. Kangla Fort's significance as a pilgrimage destination offers a unique opportunity for economic development and community empowerment in Manipur. Despite periods of foreign invasion and occupation, including British colonization and the presence of the Assam Rifles, the fort's return to the state government in 2004 was a significant victory symbolizing the reclaiming of Manipuri sovereignty and cultural heritage. The fort's endurance through these challenges highlights the resilience and determination of the Meitei community to safeguard their unique identity and autonomy. Kangla Fort serves as an emblem of collective community resilience, representing their courage to adapt and persevere while upholding their unique cultural identity in the face of historical and contemporary challenges.

Future strategies for Kangla Fort prioritizing integrated management and moving forward:

- Make The Kangla Charter the core foundation for all future projects integrating heritage management with urban planning.
- Utilize the Manipur State Monuments Act to safeguard a wider array of historical sites, but balance rigidity with accessibility.
- Restoring historical landmarks like Field Marshal W.S. Slim Cottage and garden demands thorough historical research and a primary focus on existing structural issues first.

- Maintain an evolving record on cultural assets through detailed research ultimately elevating public awareness of Kangla Fort's significance.
- Upskill the local workforce with targeted tourism industry skills through education and training to support the growth in the hospitality sector

Beyond history and its role as a political capital, Kangla is considered the nerve centre of Meitei cosmology, embodying ancient myths, philosophy, culture and architecture, undoubtedly feel the spirit of Manipur's vibrant history come to life. Many cultural traits, such as respect for nature, oral storytelling and craftsmanship are shared across the region. Kangla Fort is not just a historical landmark of the past but a living testament of the resilience and vibrant cultural tapestry of Manipur. The ancient Kangla Fort offers a unique blend of pilgrimage experience that weaves the region's past together with the Meitei culture and beliefs. Restoring and officially recognizing this site and preserving its legacy will continue to educate and motivate future generations. Kangla, thus embodies a living museum of art, events, ideas and institutions of ancient Manipur.

Kangla Fort enduring spirit signifies more than a historical site. It is the living center of Manipur intertwining sacred traditions with political history. Maintaining the legacy require blending its deep royal history with modern progress with cultural preservations, sustainable tourism and pilgrimage economics to drive regional growth. This preserves the ancient capital's vibrant identity and strengthens community resilience by keeping people deeply connected to their roots. Kangal Fort stands as an enduring emblem and a beacon of cultural richness and economic growth for generations to come. Kangla Fort stands as a powerful testament to Manipur's resilience, fostering unity, and serves as a guiding light of Manipur's future proving its soul remains unbreakable.

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