



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Thang-Ta For Self-Defense And Physical Fitness Amongst The Youths Of Manipur

Thokchom Chitralekha Devi¹, Mamta Lukram² and A.K. Choudhary³

¹Department of Sociology, Bir Tikendrajit University, Canchipur 795003, Imphal-West, Manipur, India.

²Department of Sociology, Naorem Birahari College Khundrakpam, Imphal-East 795114, Manipur India.

³Department of Management and Interdisciplinary Studies, Bir Tikendrajit University, Canchipur 795003, Imphal-West, Manipur, India.

Abstract

Manipur is understood as an erstwhile independent kingdom which had been constantly waging war against different groups- intra-group, inter-group and outsiders. Thang-Ta played major role in defending the nation, its external and internal enemies.

Nevertheless, with the passage of time and globalization, lifestyles, economy and polity changes fast. Modern gyms are frequently associated with urban lifestyle, social status, global fitness trends, influencer culture, consumer identity, associated with commercial infrastructure, machines, supplements, branded clothing, memberships and urban consumerism. Traditional martial arts like Thang-Ta evolved for survival, warfare, endurance, mobility, coordination and practical combat efficiency.

Direct studies comparing Thang-Ta with “gym culture” or contemporary fitness practices are not yet available. The current study will focus on the significance of both ‘thang-Ta’ and Gym Culture, not to undermine any one of them.

Key Words: *Thang-ta, Gym Culture, tradition, martial arts, physical fitness*

Thang-Ta and its significance in physical fitness

The history of Manipur has shown traces of constant war waging against different groups- intra-group, inter-group and outside the group. However, the state never relied on modern weaponry and advanced technology when it stood as an independent kingdom against their enemies in territorial war or even against the Britishers. It was the traditional war-tactics that contributed greatly in its war history. Physical fitness and martial arts have been the key techniques relied upon for defending the kingdom from invaders. In fact, we can say that the traditional martial art of Thang-Ta has solely defended the then nation, Manipur Kingdom from its external and internal enemies.

With the passage of time, society progressed towards various developments including Modernization, Globalization and urbanization which has greatly impacted the traditional lifeways of our society. Things which once was treasured as rare has become common and easier to access. Human population grew, settlement expanded, new inventions emerged and the days where everyone have to toil hard in fields for two square meals a day without proper income are gone. Production sector has been divided into primary, secondary and tertiary sectors, where tertiary or the service sector has gained momentum in the urbanized life and people no longer have time and space to keep on depending the traditional mode of life.

Political systems became more complex along with invention of more sophisticated weapons and deadly war weapons. Physical fitness no longer remained as the sole thing defending the country, and traditions slowly started losing its hold in the maintenance of state affairs. People started confining themselves in small cabins working for hours with electronic gadgets like mobile phones, laptops, etc. They no longer even have time to have food properly, they have become workaholics. Under such circumstances a traditional martial arts game like 'Thang-Ta,' was deemed to be forgotten due to shift in preference of the people i.e. citizens.

At this time, as a step to promote and preserve the age-old traditional practice, people started to take up initiatives for its conservation. Nevertheless, under the influence of globalization, youth's mindset and preference shifted towards gym culture, to match with the demand and fashion of the modern trend.

The art of Thang-Ta has significant relevance in modern physical fitness and contemporary gym culture when seen through the lens of functional movements, athletic conditioning and holistic body development. Unlike conventional gym training which isolates muscles through repetitive resistance exercises, the art of Thang-Ta develops the body through integrated movements the training of Thang-Ta emphasizes on coordination of body and mind, mobility, agility, balance, reaction speed, endurance and neuromuscular control simultaneously.

There are several aspects which align closely with current fitness methodologies. The circular footwork, rotation mechanics, deep stances and fluid transitions enhance hip mobility, spinal flexibility, shoulder stability and overall joint articulation these qualities resemble objectives found in mobility focused training systems and athletic performance programs. Continuous weapon drills and dynamic movement sequences produce high cardiovascular demand similar to high intensity interval training (HIIT) improving stamina, respiratory efficiency and recovery capacity.

There are several benefits of practicing Thang-Ta to physical health, A detailed study of Ta-Khousaba, a spear-based component of Thang-Ta states that the systematic sequences build lower limb strength, coordination and cardiovascular endurance and are promising for physical and sports science. Also, another survey of Manipuri students practicing Thang-Ta highlights physical and mental fitness as key motivation alongside social, psychological benefits and its value as performing art and sport. As a modern sport, Thang-Ta now uses structured training and competition frameworks, similar to organised sport conditioning.

In a systematic review and meta-analysis of Tai Chi, researchers found moderate improvements in muscle strength, endurance, balance and spine flexibility in adults whose age is more or same as 16 years. Training was usually done for 3-12 months with 1-7 sessions/week, 40-90 minutes of activity per session. This research showed that martial art movement systems alone can improve key fitness components typically targeted in gym.

Tai Chi uses continuous, semi-squat, weight-shifting movements with concentric and eccentric muscle work in the legs, which increases lower-limb strength and neuromuscular control. Slow kicks and single-leg stances, plus rotational trunk movements, train postural balance and spinal flexibility; improved thoracolumbar flexibility contributes to better balance. Coordinated breathing and focus are rooted in its martial origin this adds motor control, proprioception and reactive balance which aligning with modern conditioning principles.

And just like Tai Chi, Thang-Ta also involves various movements and breathing which help develop both body and mind. Unlike Tai Chi which is mainly focused on recreational form (since most practice the movement-based style for health benefits and only advanced practitioners using weapons) Thang-Ta focuses on both armed and unarmed styles of combat. Though its main purpose since ancient time was that of Defending the kingdom of Kangleipak, it also has a lot of deliberate and precise movements and actions that directly help strengthen body, balance and mind.

Impact of Globalization: Gym culture and ‘Thang-ta,’ a poor man’s game

The statement that Thang-Ta is a game for the poor compared to modern gym culture is less of an insult and more of a reflection of the historical class dynamics, accessibility and differing ideas of physical culture in the society.

According to professional examinations the phrase points towards a few socio-economic contrasts like Accessibility and economic structure, Functional physical culture vs commercial fitness culture, cultural prestige and urban modernity and finally The irony of Modern Fitness trends.

Traditional martial systems like Thang-Ta historically developed within communities that never really required expensive infrastructure. Training could be done in open grounds, village courtyards, community spaces or any other simple akhara-like environments. The only requirements were body movements, discipline, weapon practice, oral instructions and community transmission of the art.

In many parts of India especially the Northeast, martial traditions remained physically accessible even when modern fitness facilities are economically out of reach. Because of these things, some people casually frame Thang-Ta as “for the poor”: not because the art lacks sophistication, but because it historically remained community-owned rather than commercially packaged.

In contrast modern Gym culture is strongly tied to commercial infrastructure, machines, supplements, branded clothing, memberships and urban consumerism. While gym culture prioritizes muscular hypertrophy, visual physique, body sculpting and aesthetic presentation, Traditional martial arts like thang-ta evolved for survival, warfare, endurance, mobility, coordination and practical combat efficiency. And therefore, the physical training philosophy is fundamentally different. A Thang-Ta practitioner may develop explosive movements, balance, mobility, cardiovascular endurance, spatial awareness and reflex conditioning all without the necessity to pursue body building aesthetic commonly associated with gym culture. This creates a social perception gap: Gym physiques are immediately visible and socially marketable whereas martial efficiency is performance-based and often less outwardly “displayed.” In sociological terms, this mirrors the distinction between aesthetic fitness and functional fitness.

Modern gyms are frequently associated with urban lifestyle, social status, global fitness trends, influencer culture, consumer identity. Traditional arts, especially indigenous ones, were historically viewed as old fashioned or rural after colonial moderation and globalization. scholar note that many Indian traditions underwent decline or transformation due to changing socio-economic system in the 20th century. Similarly, Thang- Ta survived partly through cultural preservation and performance tradition after restrictions after British rule. Because of this history, modern gym culture often gained greater commercial prestige, while indigenous martial systems remained associated with local communities and lower cost participation.

Despite the many stereotypes, Thang-Ta today is increasingly recognized as a competitive sport, a physical education system and a cultural heritage practice. It also has been incorporated into school syllabus, University studies, university competitions and national sporting structures like Khelo India Initiatives.

These evolutions reflect a border reassessment of indigenous physical knowledge systems in modern India. In short Thang-Ta represents low-cost, community based, fully oriented physical culture system while modern gym culture represents a commercialized, infrastructure-dependent model of fitness shaped by contemporary consumer society. This means that the two are different ecosystems of strength. One forged in polished steel and mirrors and the other in open air, movement, memory and rhythms.

Practical difference between the Thang-Ta and Gym culture

Research on Thang-Ta itself is emerging and mostly focuses on its evolution as a sport, cultural value, and physical/mental benefits. Direct studies comparing Thang-Ta with “gym culture” or contemporary fitness practices are not yet available, but related work on other martial arts helps show possible points of connection.

Thang-Ta has transformed from a compulsory war art of ancient Manipur into a codified, competitive modern sport with national federations and school/youth games recognition. This new form of teaching helps newer generations of students maintain their physical health while also conserving their cultural heritage. Thang-ta training systems includes weapons (sword, spear, etc.), unarmed combat (Sarit Sarak), breathing exercises and meditation, aligning it with holistic training rather than just technique practice. A Specific Thang-Ta spear practice (Ta-Khoushaba) develops lower limb strength, coordination, and cardiovascular endurance, and is proposed as useful in physical education and sports science.

Moreover, a study on another traditional martial art (*Bajiquan*) showed an 8-week program improved body composition, explosive power, cardiorespiratory fitness and core strength compared with regular exercise. These findings suggest Thang-Ta training could function as a full-body conditioning system similar to or richer than typical gym workouts, though this has not yet been empirically tested. Modern martial arts/combat sports gyms create inclusive, supportive communities that enhance resilience, confidence, and social connection.

Traditional–modern splits (forms/spiritual vs. sport/competition) seen in other martial arts mirror Thang-Ta’s move into organized sport. This suggests Thang-Ta could similarly inhabit both cultural-ritual spaces and sport/gym spaces.

Available research links Thang-Ta strongly to modern sportization and to holistic physical and mental training, but does not yet directly connect it to commercial gym culture. Evidence from other martial arts indicates that Thang-Ta could serve as a contemporary fitness practice offering strength, endurance, and community, while preserving distinct cultural and spiritual elements. More targeted studies are needed on Thang-Ta in gym or fitness-center contexts.

Thang-Ta is a traditional Manipuri martial art, now also a modern sport, while “gym culture” usually means general fitness training focused on physique, health, or aesthetic physique. The papers here do not directly study gyms, but they compare traditional martial arts with modern sport and fitness cultures, which helps clarify the contrast.

Thang-Ta / traditional martial arts Combine combat skills, physical fitness, and spiritual or philosophical practice. The art aims to improve combat effectiveness as well as weapon mastery, physical fitness of the practitioner, mental discipline, survival readiness, character development and preservation of cultural heritage of the Meiteis.

Traditional Martial Arts practice fosters a strong sense of belonging through group practice and training. They encourage mutual respect and sense of mentorship and bond even between senior and junior practitioners. They strengthen community bonds through festivals, demonstrations and competitive spirit.

Gyms create tight, supportive communities that can resist mainstream norms, but may also reproduce hierarchies and masculinity norms. They do create supportive fitness communities where members motivate and encourage one another while also providing a place for social interaction but, is primarily focused on aesthetical fitness and basic fitness rather than the defensive and combat based fitness of traditional martial arts

Thang-Ta is explicitly a heritage art: linked to Manipuri history, ritual, and identity, now adapted into a codified sport. Thang-ta is a traditional martial art of Manipur that embodies the historical, cultural and spiritual identity of the Meitei people. It was originally developed as a system of armed combat which combined practical martial techniques with ethical values, ritual practices and philosophical teachings of Meitei ancestors. Despite attempts of suppression by external forces, the art had been preserved throughout countless generations as a symbol of Manipuri/Meitei heritage. In the 21st century and 20th century, Thang-Ta has been adapted into a competitive sport through standardized rules, protective equipment and organized competitions.

Gym culture typically has weaker historical or philosophical roots; meaning often comes from individual projects (fitness, appearance, stress relief) rather than shared tradition. The word gym comes from the Greek word ‘gymnasion’- gymnos meaning naked or unclothed. The importance of it is largely dictated by one’s own personal goals (getting in better shape, looking better, getting stronger, etc.) While modern gyms tend to promote discipline, consistency and personal growth, these are mostly individual dedication, not collective cultural traditions or inherited philosophies.

Based on these studies, Thang-Ta (as a traditional/heritage martial art and sport) is more tightly bound to culture, philosophy, identity, and moral-educational goals, while still offering strong physical conditioning. Gym-based cultures, emphasize structured training, performance, physique, and personal transformation, and can build strong communities, but usually with less explicit historical and cultural meaning.

Self-Defense for Thang-ta Players & healthiness for gym players

The difference between gym trained individual and a practitioner of Thang-ta in self-defense is a bit different due to some things like training specificity Thang-Ta practitioners specially train for combat scenarios, timing, distance and reaction, offensive and defensive techniques. These include weapon handling (sword, spear), unarmed combats (sarit-sarak), situation awareness. Gym trains muscle strength, endurance and physique and typically do not train combat applications. As stated by *Schmidt & Lee (2011), Motor control and learning*

Also, Thang-Ta practitioners learn distance management, attack to defense transitions and reading the movements of the opponent and develop situation awareness which is a key factor in real life self-defense. While a gym trained individual may lack tactical awareness, experience under confrontation and strength without strategy can lead to inefficient or predictable reactions. *Abernethy (1990), research on expertise in sport.*

Thang-Ta training often includes sparring or simulated battles/combat with high pressure movement sequences and builds composure under threat. But Gym environments are more controlled and predictable unlike the sparring and combats and usually does not simulate adrenaline-driven conflicts. *Grossman & Christensen (2008), On Combat.*

Likely advantages of gym trained individuals are greater raw strength, higher muscle mass and better brute force capability. While Thang-Ta practitioners have advantages of technique efficiency leverage and timing and the ability to use minimal force effectively. *McGill (2010), Ultimate Back fitness and performance.*

Thang-Ta directly trains weapon use and defense against weapons this is a critical real-world advantage while gym training has no exposure to such exposure. *Traditional martial arts studies (e.g., Indian martial systems documentation in physical education journals)*

Conclusion: Blending modernity to tradition

In conclusion, Thang-Ta is much more than a traditional art of Manipur. It is a complete system of techniques and movements that develop physical fitness and self-defense skills along with mental discipline. Though there is still no direct research data on the relation of fitness and health with Thang-Ta, questioning several practitioners has revealed various benefits of the art along with many advantages in comparison to normal gym workouts. However, it is not right to understand that gym culture is being undermined. All physical fitness trends and exercises are equally important for staying well and healthy. For youths in particular, it is good for them to engaged in gym workouts pertaining to modern lifestyles backed by shrinking public spaces.

The society now have fewer spaces where children would run and play happily to stay healthy. They ought to stay indoors with mobile phones or tablets with high-speed internet connections to build a virtual world where they all are members, without any physical activities. Such lifestyles need gym culture as need to the demand of the time faced by the passing generation. Just like how there are competitions and tournaments for gym practitioners, Thang-Ta has also developed its own form of tournaments on different fields such as Phunaba 1/2, Thang haiba, Ta khousaba, Shajel kanglon and many other.

Though gyms provide a place for socializing, it lacks reach in various aspects like self-defense and movement skills like martial arts. It helps greatly for maintaining healthy lifestyle and aesthetic fitness routines. Depending on both the techniques for physical fitness and martial arts is an important element that the youths need to instill in them for preservation of tradition, blending with modernity. Nevertheless, discarding or undermining Thang-Ta and preferring gym culture would simply lead to discouraging our own tradition. It is the collective responsivity of the people of this state that initiatives should be taken up to promote Thang-Ta to gain international recognition so that a traditional game our state origin becomes an international sporting event.

References:

1. Alter, Joseph S. (1992). *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*. University of California Press.
2. Bompa, Tudor O., & Buzzichelli, Carlo (2019). *Periodization: Theory and Methodology of Training*. Human Kinetics.
3. Bourdieu, Pierre (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
4. Grossman, Dave, & Christensen, Loren W. (2008). *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and Peace*. PPCT Research Publications.
5. McGill, Stuart (2010). *Ultimate Back Fitness and Performance*. Backfitpro Inc.
6. Pope, Harrison G., Phillips, Katharine A., & Olivardia, Roberto (2000). *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession*. Free Press.
7. Ratey, John J. (2008). *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. Little, Brown and Company.
8. Schmidt, Richard A., & Lee, Timothy D. (2011). *Motor Control and Learning: A Behavioral Emphasis*. Human Kinetics.
9. Sheppard, Jeremy M., & Young, Warren B. (2006). *Agility Literature Review: Classifications, Training and Testing*. Journal of Sports Sciences.
10. Lourembam Sundeep Meitei et al.2020, Exploring Motivation and Prospects of Thang-Ta, Ancient Manipuri Martial Arts Among The Students in Manipur. Int J Recent Sci Res. 11(07), pp. 39227-39233.
11. Wehner, Christian, Cornelia Blank, Marjan Arvandi, Carina Wehner, & Wolfgang Schobersberger. (2021). Effect of Tai Chi on muscle strength, physical endurance, postural balance and flexibility: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*, 7(1), e000817.
12. Wang, Chi-Te, Cheng-Wen Tien, & Wen-Ching Huang. (2025). Bajiquan martial arts training as physical activity for enhancing physical fitness, body composition, and perceived exercise benefits: A quasi-experimental study. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 7, 1545481.
13. Abernethy, Bruce. (1990). Anticipation in squash: Differences in advance cue utilization between expert and novice players. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 8(1), 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640419008732128>
14. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India. (2020). *In major thrust to indigenous games, Sports Ministry includes Gatka, Kalaripayattu, Thang-Ta and Mallakhamba in Khelo India Youth Games 2021*. Press Information Bureau.
15. Rajkumar, Tapasjit, Amit Dhar, Sapam Sanatombi Devi, & Suparna Debbarma. (2025). Analyzing the Development of Modern Thang-Ta Sports in India. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 7(3). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2025.v07i03.43564>