

## Traditional practice of naming of people based on plants amongst the Meitei community of Manipur, North East India

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Naming of a person may be based on numerous factors. The Meitei community of Manipur has a tradition of naming people based on plants. In a survey conducted amongst the Meitei community of Manipur state it has been revealed that 85 people names are based on 56 plant species, 9 species each are herbs and trees, 7 species for shrub, 6 species each for aquatic herb and undershrub, 3 species each for climbers, epiphytes, rhizomatous herbs and woody climbers, 2 species each for bulbous herb and scandent shrub and single species each for creeper, stoloniferous herb and twinning herb. Out of the 85 names, around 70% are called in female, 28% in male while only 2% are called in both male and female. Based on RFC values, around 25% of the total names are frequently used, 28% commonly used and 47% are occasionally used. The name Thambal is generally called in both male and female which is adopted from vernacular name of *Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn. and similarly, Parijat is also called in both male and female, adopted from the vernacular name of *Combretum indicum* (L.) Filippus.

**Keywords:** Manipur, Meitei community, Naming of people, Plants name, Traditional age-old practice

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Naming of people may be based on numerous factors, objects or mythological beliefs. The name may be adopted from the names of rivers, plants, animals, colours, Gods and Goddesses, ancient beliefs, planets, season, epics, mountains, cities, countries and so on and so forth. There is no limit and specific nomenclature in the naming of a person but it is based on people's choices and wisdom. Generally, these choices have been influenced by the interactions of the people with various elements in their day-to-day lives, such as components of nature. People can be named after plants, flowers and trees, a common practice globally for creating unique and nature-inspired names. Examples of such names include Lily, Rose, Daisy, Violet, Forest, Oliver, Jasmine, Veronica, Iris, Zinia, Alder, Roselle, etc. Names may be gender specific or gender-neutral as for example, Rose, Lily, Violet, Roselle for females; Basil, Ashton, Palmer, Birch, Reed, etc. for males; Sage, Rowan, Aspen, Linden, etc. for gender-neutral.

In Manipur, the Meitei or Meetei people are named as Ganga (adopted from the river Ganga); Sanarei (adopted from the vernacular name of marigold);

Shamu (adopted from the vernacular name of elephant), Amuba (adopted from the vernacular name of black colour); Indrajit (adopted from the God Indrajit); Jupiter (after the planet Jupiter); Washington (after the city, Washington); Japan (after the country, Japan); Himalaya (after the Mount Himalayas), Basanta (after the spring season), etc. The Meitei community of Manipur frequently names people of both male and female based on plants. Females are more frequently named after plants than males.

Manipur one of the eight states of Northeast India lies between 23°27' to 25°41' N latitude and 93°61' to 94°48' E longitude extends a geographical area of 22, 327 sq. km. Out of it, 2238 km sq, saucer-shaped centrally located valley comprising 5 districts namely, Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal, Bishnupur and Kakching constitutes just 10.02% of the total land area. The state receives high annual rainfall ranging from 1900-2000 mm and maximum temperature from 20 to 31°C and minimum of 3.6 to 23.5°C (Statistical Handbook of Manipur, 2017)<sup>1</sup>. The state has 6 major types of forests namely, (i) Tropical Moist Deciduous Forest, (ii) Tropical Evergreen & Semi-evergreen Forest, (iii) Sub-tropical Mixed Forest, (iv) Sub-tropical Pine Forest, (v) Sub-tropical & Temperate

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Grassland and (v) Temperate Forest<sup>2</sup>. According to 2011 census, the total population of Manipur was 28,55,794 in which 16,33,672 are inhabited in the 10.02% valley areas. The Meitei is the major community of the state and constitutes 43.82% who are mostly inhabited in the valley districts. The other dominant tribal communities are Naga and Kuki who are more dominantly inhabited in the hilly districts.

The Meitei community shares a deep association with Nature and the surrounding environment as they depend on it for their livelihood. The people of the state are worshippers of Nature. Sacred groves, the repositories of Nature's flora and fauna are preserved and safeguarded by the communities and Sylvan deities are worshipped by the people. Naming of people based on plant is prevalent amongst the Meitei community. There are numerous surnames of Meitei as for example, Huidrom, Khunjamayum, Moibungkhongbam, Ngairangbam, Ningthoujam, Sapam, Thokchom, etc. Very interestingly, in tradition, all the surnames of Meitei people end with the alphabet "m". Additionally, second (secondary) surnames are also used such as "Singh" or "Meitei" or "Meetei" for male while "Devi" or "Chanu" for females as for example, Huidrom Birkumar Singh, Sapam Binudhar Singh, Khunjamayum Ibochou Singh, Laishram Kanta Meitei are males and Ningthoujam Abem Devi, Moibungkhongbam Anamika Chanu are females. But in recent times, the second surnames are increasingly being omitted by the new generations. The first name is generally followed by the first (primary) surname e.g. Elizabeth Huidrom, Somananda Thokchom. Also in many cases, the surname is written first which is followed by the actual name e.g. Karam Michael, Longjam Sunil, etc. There are seven clans in the Meitei community called as 'yek salai' – Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Kha-Nganba, Moirang and Sarang Leishangthem. People also use the names of these clans as a part of their names to show their affiliation to their clan such as Ranjit Khanganba, Nimaichand Luwang, Binod Mangang, etc.

#### Nomenclature of name

The names of persons are based on numerous factors. Generally, amongst the Meitei community, the name of the person ends with the alphabet 'a' in case of males while 'i' in case of females. For example, Tomba is name for male and Tombi is for female. Similarly, Chaoba is name of male and Chaobi is for female. But sometimes we find

the names like Tomba, Tombi, Chaoba and Chaobi are used both for male and female means they are gender-neutral.

#### Methodology

Survey work was carried out in the valley regions of Manipur to gather the information on naming of people based on plant's names amongst the Meitei community during August 2024 to January 2025. Personal interview of 15 key informants/resource persons in the age range of 30-80 years from the Meitei community. The details of the 15 informants are provided in Table 1. Questions were asked to every key person about the names of persons whose names were adopted from the local vernacular name of plants. The botanical identity of the plants was established through the vernacular names of plants from available literature<sup>2-6</sup>. Botanical names and families are given following the system of POWO<sup>7</sup> and eFlora of India<sup>8</sup>. The plant habit was given following local floras<sup>2,9</sup>.

The Relative Frequency of Citation (RFC) measures a plant's importance by showing how many informants mention it for a specific purpose out of the total number of informants in a study area. It is calculated as:

$$\text{Relative Frequency of Citation} = \frac{\text{No. of mentions of a specific species or item}}{\text{Total no. of informants}}$$

#### Results

##### Plant species enumeration of naming of person based on plants

In the survey work carried out amongst the Meitei community of Manipur, a total of 56 plant species is

Table 1 — Details of the informants

Name	Male/Female	Age	Qualification
Shri N. Angou Singh	Male	58	Class VIII
Smt. P Kushum	Female	55	Class VIII
Smt. Thambal Devi	Female	70	Class VIII
Smt. Shama Devi	Female	62	Class X
Smt. Saratlata	Female	68	Graduate
Shri Bokul Singh	Male	75	Graduate
Smt. Leibaklei Devi	Female	70	Illiterate
Shri O. Mani Singh	Male	80	Graduate
Shri L.Ibochouba	Male	78	M.Sc
Shri N. Sanatomba	Male	70	Graduate
Smt. Gita Devi	Female	53	Class X
Smt. Radha Devi	Female	55	Class VIII
Smt. Bino Devi	Female	80	Illiterate
Ms. Shilleima	Female	30	M.Sc
Smt. M Purnimashi	Female	69	Illiterate

used in naming of people (Table 2). These 56 plant species belong to 50 genera and 35 families (Fig. 1).

Out of the 56 plant species used in naming of people, 9 species each belong to herb and tree; 7 species belong to shrub; 6 species each are aquatic

herb and undershrub; 3 species each are climber, epiphytes, rhizomatous herb and woody climber; 2 species each for bulbous herb and scandent shrub and single species are creeper, stoloniferous herb and twinning herb (Fig. 2).

Table 2 — Naming of people based on plants amongst the Meitei community of Manipur, Northeast India

Botanical name	Family	Habit	English name	Manipuri name	Name of person	Sex	RFC value
<i>Acacia arabica</i> (Lam.) Willd.	Fabaceae	Tree	Thorny Acacia	Chigong-lei	Chigonglei	F	0.13
<i>Amaryllis belladonna</i> L.	Amaryllidaceae	Bulbous Herb	Belladonna lily	Modo-lei	Modolei	F	0.13
<i>Andrographis paniculata</i> (Burm.f.) Wall. ex. Nees	Acanthaceae	Undershrub	King of Bitters	Bhubati	Bhubati	F	0.46
<i>Arundina graminifolia</i> (D.Don) Hochr	Orchidaceae	Undershrub	Bamboo orchid	Enga-lei	Engallei	F	0.33
<i>Carthamus tinctorius</i> L.	Asteraceae	Herb	Safflower	Kushum-lei	Kushum	F	0.73
					Kushumlei	F	0.33
<i>Cestrum nocturnum</i> L.	Solanaceae	Shrub	Night jasmine	Thabal-lei	Thaballei	F	0.93
<i>Chrysanthemum morifolium</i> (Ramat.) Hemst.	Asteraceae	Undershrub	Garden mum	Chandramukhi	Chandramukhi	F	0.80
<i>Clitoria ternatea</i> L.	Fabaceae	Twinning herb	Butterfly pea	Aparajita	Aparajita	F	0.26
<i>Coix lacryma-jobi</i> L.	Poaceae	Herb	Job's tears	Chaning	Chaningkhomba	M	0.13
					Changingkhobi	F	0.20
					Changleima	F	0.06
<i>Combretum indicum</i> (L.) DeFilippis	Combretaceae	Woody Climber	Rangoon creeper	Parijat-lei	Parijat	M/F	0.66
<i>Crateva nurvala</i> Buch.-Ham.	Capparaceae	Tree	Three-leaved caper	Loyumba-lei	Loyumba	M	0.73
<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> (L.) Pers.	Poaceae	Stoloniferous Herb	Bermuda grass	Tingthou	Tingthou	M	0.13
					Tingthourembi	F	0.13
<i>Dendrobium densiflorum</i> Lindl.	Orchidaceae	Epiphyte	Pineapple orchid	Mellei-Leisna-Nongjumpal	Leisna	F	0.80
					Mellei	F	0.26
<i>Diospyros montana</i> Roxb.	Ebenaceae	Tree	Bombay ebony	Tomal	Tomal	M	0.80
					Tomalo	M	0.60
<i>Euphorbia helioscopia</i> L.	Euphorbiaceae	Herb	Madwoman's milk	Eraileima	Iraileima	F	0.73
<i>Ficus rumphii</i> Blume	Moraceae	Tree	Banyan Fig	Khongnang	Khongnanghaba	M	0.13
<i>Gardenia jasminoides</i> J.Ellis	Rubiaceae	Shrub	Cape jasmine	Kabok-lei	Kaboklei	F	0.86
<i>Glochidion lanceolarium</i> (Roxb.) Voigt	Phyllanthaceae	Shrub	Indian cheese tree	Ningthourembi	Ningthourembi	F	0.20
<i>Gnaphalium luteoalbum</i> L.	Asteraceae	Herb	Jersey cudweed	Phunil	Phunildro	M	0.13
<i>Hedychium coccineum</i> Buch.-Ham. ex Sm.	Zingiberaceae	Rhizomatous Herb	Scarlet gingerlily	Engel-lei	Engellei	F	0.40
<i>Hedychium spicatum</i> Sm.	Zingiberaceae	Rhizomatous Herb	Spiked ginger lily	Takhel-lei	Takhellei	F	0.60
<i>Helianthus annuus</i> L.	Asteraceae	Herb	Sunflower	Numit-lei	Numitlei	F	0.86
<i>Heliotropium indicum</i> L.	Boraginaceae	Herb	Indian Heliotrope	Lei-henbi	Leihenbi	F	0.06
<i>Hiptage beghalensis</i> (L.) Kurz	Malpighiaceae	Scandent shrub	Hiptage	Madhabi	Madhabi	F	0.40
<i>Iris laevigata</i> Fisch.	Iridaceae	Aquatic herb	Manipuri Iris	Kombirei	Kombi	F	0.06
					Kombirei	F	0.20
<i>Jasminum grandiflorum</i> L.	Oleaceae	Undershrub	Royale jasmine	Maloti	Maloti	F	0.53
					Maloti	F	0.33
<i>Jasminum multiflorum</i> (Burm.f.) Andrews	Oleaceae	Undershrub	Star jasmine	Kundo	Kundo	F	0.13
					Kundomani	M	0.06
					Kundorei	F	0.66
<i>Jasminum sambac</i> (L.) Aiton	Oleaceae	Undershrub	Arabian jasmine	Mallika	Mallika	F	0.60
<i>Kaempferia rotunda</i> L.	Zingiberaceae	Rhizomatous Herb	Resurrection lily	Leibak-lei	Leibaklei	F	0.73

... Contd.

Table 2 — Naming of people based on plants amongst the Meitei community of Manipur, Northeast India (Contd.)

Botanical name	Family	Habit	English name	Manipuri name	Name of person	Sex	RFC value
<i>Leea asiatica</i> (L.) Ridsdale	Vitaceae	Shrub	Bandicoot berry	Koknal	Koknal	M	0.13
<i>Lonicera glabrata</i> Wall.	Caprifoliaceae	Scandent shrub	Himalayan honeysuckle	Madhumati	Madhumati	F	0.46
<i>Luvunga scandens</i> (Roxb.) Buch.-Ham. ex Wight & Arn.	Rutaceae	Woody climber	Indian lavanga	Lavang-lata	Lavango	M	0.40
					Lavangini	F	0.46
<i>Lycopodium clavatum</i> L.	Lycopodiaceae	Creeper	Common clubmoss	Leisang	Leisang	M	0.26
<i>Magnolia champaca</i> (L.) Baill. ex Pierre	Magnoliaceae	Tree	Champak	Leihao	Leihao	F	0.93
					Leihaotombi	F	0.20
<i>Mesua ferrea</i> L.	Calophyllaceae	Tree	Ceylon ironwood	Nageshwor	Nageshwor	M	0.40
<i>Mimusops elengi</i> L.	Sapotaceae	Tree	Spanish cherry	Bokul	Bokul	M	0.46
					Bokulo	M	0.13
<i>Mirabilis jalapa</i> L.	Nyctaginaceae	Herb	Four o'clock flower	Mukak-lei	Mukaklei	F	0.13
<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> Gaertn.	Nelumbonaceae	Aquatic Herb	Sacred lotus	Thambal	Thambal	M/F	0.93
					Thambaljao	M	0.40
					Thambalmanbi	F	0.20
					Thambalmarik	F	0.13
					Thambalngou	M	0.86
					Thambalnu	F	0.20
					Thambalsang	M	0.40
					Thambalsangbi	F	0.33
					Thambaltombi	F	0.46
					Thambou	M	0.86
					Thamchetmacha	F	0.13
<i>Neolamarckia cadamba</i> (Roxb.) Bosser	Rubiaceae	Tree	Burflower-tree	Kadamba	Kadam	M	0.13
					Kadambari	F	0.13
<i>Nyctanthes arbor-tristis</i> L.	Oleaceae	Shrub	Coral jasmine	Singga-lei	Singgarei	F	0.13
<i>Nymphaea alba</i> L.	Nymphaeaceae	Aquatic Herb	White waterlily	Tharo-angouba	Tharongoubi	F	0.40
<i>Nymphaea micrantha</i> Guill. & Perr.	Nymphaeaceae	Aquatic Herb	-	Tharo-asangba	Tharosangbi	F	0.33
					Thembi	M	0.86
					Thembung	M	0.86
<i>Nymphaea nouchali</i> Burm.f.	Nymphaeaceae	Aquatic Herb	Blue lotus	Tharik-tha	Tharik	F	0.20
					Thariktha	F	0.20
					Thariktombi	F	0.20
<i>Nymphaea pubescens</i> Willd.	Nymphaeaceae	Aquatic Herb	Pink waterlily	Tharo-angangba	Tharongangbi	F	0.46
<i>Ophiopogon japonicus</i> (Thunb.) Ker Gawl.	Asparagaceae	Herb	Mondogross	Sanarik	Sanarik	F	0.26
<i>Pandanus odoratissimus</i> L.f.	Pandanaceae	Shrub	Fragrant screwpine	Ketuki	Ketuki	F	0.80
<i>Pisum sativum</i> L.	Fabaceae	Climber	Sweet pea	Hawai-tharak	Tharak	F	0.06
<i>Rhynchostylis retusa</i> (L.) Blume	Orchidaceae	Epiphyte	Foxtail orchid	Samji-lei	Samjirei	F	0.13
<i>Rosa indica</i> L.	Rosaceae	Shrub	Rose	Gulap	Gulap	M	0.40
					Gulapi	M	0.40
<i>Rubia cordifolia</i> L.	Rubiaceae	Climber	Indian madder	Moyum-lei	Moyumba	M	0.26
<i>Stephania glandulifera</i> Miers.	Menispermaceae	Climber	East Himalayan Tape Vine	Ayanglei	Ayangleima	F	0.40
<i>Stixis suaveolens</i> (Roxb.) Baill.	Resedaceae	Woody Climber	Fragrant caper vine	Uirei	Uirei	F	0.26
<i>Syzygium fruticosum</i> (Roxb.) DC.	Myrtaceae	Tree	Kak-jam	Silleima	Silleima	F	0.26
<i>Tagetes</i> spp.	Asteraceae	Herb	Marigold	Sanarei	Sanarei	F	0.80
<i>Vanda coerulea</i> Griff. ex Lindl.	Orchidaceae	Epiphyte	Blue vanda	Kwak-lei	Kwaklei	F	0.20
<i>Zephyranthes ajax</i> Sprenger	Amaryllidaceae	Bulbous Herb	Ajax rain lily	Kunda-lei	Kundalei	F	0.13

Out of these plants, 59 are named for females, 24 are named for males and only two names for both male and female representing 70%, 28% and 2%, respectively (Fig. 3). The highest number of families of plants used in naming are Nelumbonaceae (11 names), followed by Nymphaeaceae (7 names), Asteraceae (6 names) and Orchidaceae (5 names).

Eleven different names of persons like Thambal, Thambalmanbi, Thambalngou, Thambalnu, Thambou, Thamchetmacha, Thambalsangbi, Thambalsang, Thambalmarik, Thambaljai and Thambaltombi are called based on a single plant namely, Sacred Lotus, *Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn., whose vernacular name is Thambal. Some of the names like Kaboklei, Ketuki, Leibaklei, Leihao, Ningthourembi, Sanarei, Thambal, Thambalngou, Thambou, Tharoungoubi, Tharoshangbi are commonly used names.

The relative frequency citation (RFC) of each people's name is provided in Table 2. High RFC value (>0.6), medium RFC value (0.3-0.6) and low RFC value (<0.3) holds 22%, 31% and 47%, respectively (Fig. 4). High RFC value indicates more frequently used names. In the present study highly used names with RFC values 0.93 are Thaballei

(*Cestrum nocturnum* L.), Leihao (*Magnolia champaca* L.), Thambal (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.), followed by the names with RFC values of 0.86 are Kaboklei (*Gardenia jasminoides* J.Ellis), Numitlei (*Helianthus annus* L.), Thambalngou (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.), Thambou (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.), Thembi (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.), Thembung (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.), names with RFC values of 0.8 are Tomal (*Diospyros montana* Roxb.), Ketuki (*Pandanus odorattissimus* L.f), Sanarei (*Tagetes* spp.) while the least called names (with RFC value of 0.06) are Chaningleima (*Coix lachrymajobi*), Leihenbi (*Heliotropim indicum* L.),

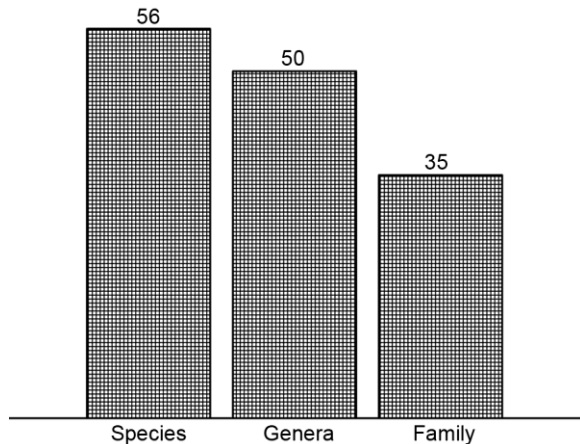


Fig. 1 — Number of plant species, genera and family used in naming of people amongst the Meitei populace

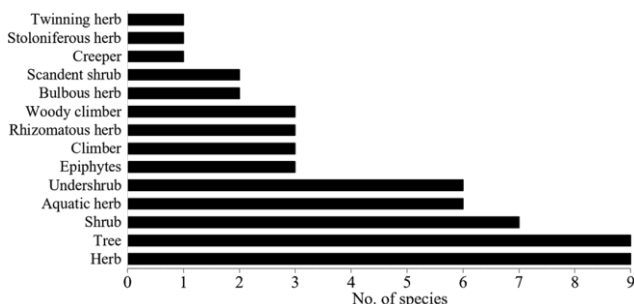


Fig. 2 — Habit types of the 56 plant species used in naming of people

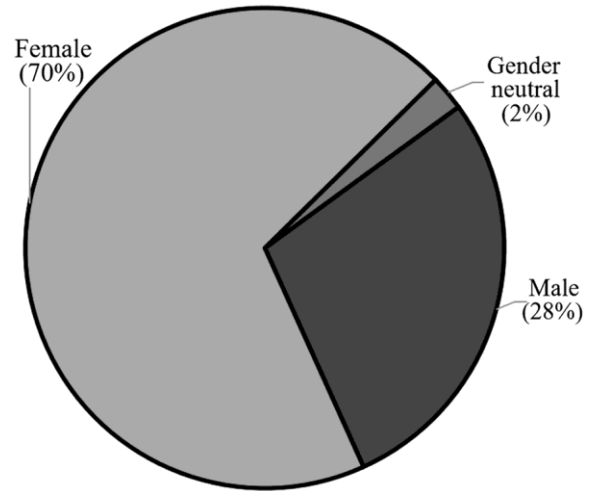


Fig. 3 — Gender representation of people whose names are adopted from the vernacular name of plants in Meitei community

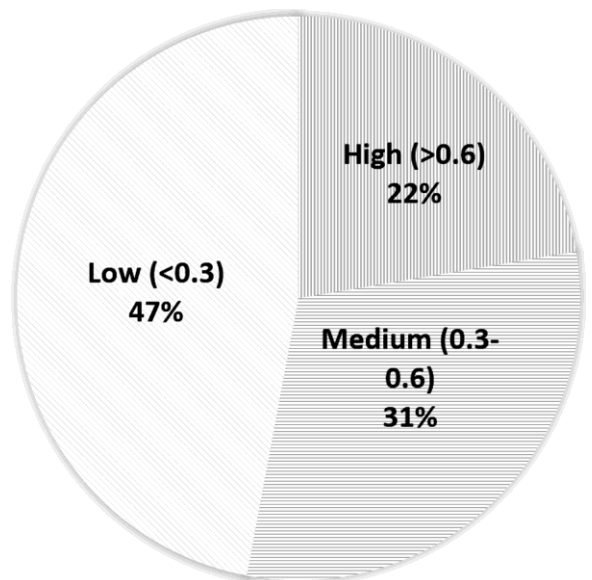


Fig. 4 — Relative Frequency Citation (RFC) of people's name based on plants

Kombi (*Iris laevigata* Fisch.), Kundomani (*Jasminum multiflorum* (Burm. F.) Andrews), Tharak (*Pisum sativum* L.) (Table 2).

### Discussion

The naming of people based on plants is an age-old practice amongst the Meitei community of Manipur. More than 85 names are adopted from the plant names in which 25% are very commonly named and highly preferred. The naming of people based on plants may be adopted based on the vernacular name of the plants or their parts. For example, people are named Thambal (based on Lotus plant), Thambalmanbi (refers to a look-alike with the sacred lotus flower), Thambou (refers to the root of lotus), Thamchetmacha (refers to fruiting body of lotus), Thambaljao (bigger Lotus), Thambalmarik (Pollen grain of lotus), Thambalngou (White Lotus), Thambalsang (Green-coloured lotus for male), Thambalsangbi (Green Lotus for female), Thambaltombi (Lotus but borne as last female child of the parents). Leibaklei is generally named in local tradition after a strong woman who has faced adversities in life bravely similar to the situation of *Kaempferia rotunda* L. (locally called Leibak-lei). It is a metaphor for the actual way the flower blooms, straight out of the ground, as a symbol of resilience in the society. There are certain plants having mythical, cultural and religious significance but with tragic end. Generally, people do not prefer naming of people based on those plants. For example, due to the tragic loss of life in the folk-based story Kombirei (local name of the plant, *Iris laevigata* Fisch.) who is the female lead character, so people are reluctant to name after the name of the plant but sometimes we find females named after it<sup>10</sup>. In the present-day context, the practice of naming after plants has apparently declined due to changing times, and people's outlook has invariably changed and now, names are usually preferred to be based on symbolic goodwill and luck.

### Conclusion

The Meitei community of Manipur are worshippers of sylvan deities. They hugely rely upon their needs of food, shelter, clothing materials from the surrounding bioresources. Plants are associated in religious and cultural practices. Almost all the households in the villages of Manipur maintain

bamboo colonies in their private lands and plays a significant role in local economy. Bamboo is needed from child birth to death. Naming of people based on plants is an old age tradition and practice. Naming of females based on plants are more than males which is an indication of female's significant association with the bioresources. If this trend of naming is continued, people may have better knowledge of plants and may put more effort in conservation of biodiversity. But in the recent times, naming of people based on plants amongst the Meitei community are observed in a declining trend in some section of the populace as they prefer vintage baby names. This may be assumed as a sign of a widening gap between plant and human relationship.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

### Author Contributions

HBS conceptualized, established the data collection model, data analysis and finalized; EH, NYD, ST & NAD collected data and analysed & prepared the manuscript.

### Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

### Informed Consent

Prior informed consent was obtained from the informants prior to the survey.

### Data Availability

Ethnobotanical data will be automatically made available to public domain once published.

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