



# MANIPUR CELEBRATES WOMEN'S POLO

A Commemorative Journal



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Polo Yatra by Huntre! Equine

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# 3<sup>rd</sup> MANIPUR STATEHOOD DAY WOMEN'S POLO TOURNAMENT

The State of Manipur is considered to be the birthplace of Modern Polo. Originally called 'Sagol Kangjei' in Manipuri, the game is played on the indigenous Manipuri Pony. The game originated as a 'game of kings' who tested their martial and cavalry skills through Sagol Kangjei. It has evolved to be one of the most expensive games played all over the world and little would the inventors of this game have known that the game would one day be played at an international level.

The Manipur Statehood Day Women's Polo Tournament serves as a tribute to our kings and our ancestors who gifted the world this beautiful game and also commemorates our Statehood Day. It is organized from 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> January every year at Mapal Kangjeibung by the Department of Tourism, Government of Manipur, in association with the All Manipur Polo Association and Huntrel Equine. It is a part of the Department's endeavour to showcase the State as a preferred polo destination to the world at large and also a step towards saving the endangered Manipuri Pony. The Department also organizes the Manipur Polo International Men's Tournament as part of the Manipur Sangai Festival every year from November 21-30.

The Manipur Statehood Day Women's Polo Tournament is in its third edition this year and it is for the first time that the tournament is conducted in an international format with participation from three international teams from Australia, Kenya and the USA. A women's polo team from the Indian Polo Association and two other teams from Manipur represented India at the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the tournament.

We hope to make Imphal the capital of Women's Polo in the years to come. I applaud the courage and resolve of our women players from the State for having made it to the international stage despite several socio-economic barriers. Today two thirds of women Polo players in India hail from Manipur. It is indeed a remarkable achievement.

As the birthplace of this ancient game, the Department of Tourism, Government of Manipur, recognizes that the State deserves the rightful place for conducting these kind of tournaments. There is not a more symbolic place than the Mapal Kangjeibung- the oldest living polo ground in the world, to host this tournament. Keeping this in mind, the department has been right at the forefront in organizing these events. The event is expected to draw participation from more number of countries in the coming years and the Department has included promotion of women's polo as part of its promotional calendar every year.

**Prashant K. Singh, IAS**

*Principal Secretary (Tourism Government of Manipur)*



*Maharaja Sir Churachand Singh,  
KCSI, CBE, of Maniour, with Chief  
Electrical Engineer Blackie.*

*Photo courtesy Imasi Foundation*

# MANIPUR AND THE GAME OF KINGS: FROM MYTH TO MODERNITY

Polo, in its modern form originated about one and a half centuries ago. It is now an International game, but was once an indigenous game of Manipur.

The word Polo does not relate to any Manipuri word though there is some resemblance to “Pal-Ollo”, meaning to change direction or side. According to some views it was the British who adopted the word “Polo” which is a Balti word and akin to the Tibetan word, “Bo-Lo”, meaning a ball. But the modern form of the game is an invention of the British who modified it from the indigenous Manipuri game called “Sagol Kangjei”, sagol for horse and kangjei for stick. They played it for the first time at Silchar, Cachar, Assam in the year 1859. One cannot but wonder then how a game that originated from a Manipuri indigenous game was given a non-Manipuri name.

Anyway there is no dispute or controversy as to its origins it has been now accepted and clearly recorded in the English Guinness Book of World Records that “Manipur is the Home or Place of Origin of the so called Horse Polo”.

## Polo in Manipuri Mythology

The indigenous game of “Sagol Kangjei” is said to be a game which has existed from the mythological period till today. One may say that the game has survived in three periods”: the mythological period, the medieval period, and thirdly, the modern period beginning from the the British period till date.

According to the mythology of Manipur, the gods celebrated the establishment of the kingdom for seven days, including a game of Sagol Kangjei. It was played by two teams of the deities, with seven players to a side, and based on rules invented by the deity, Marjing.

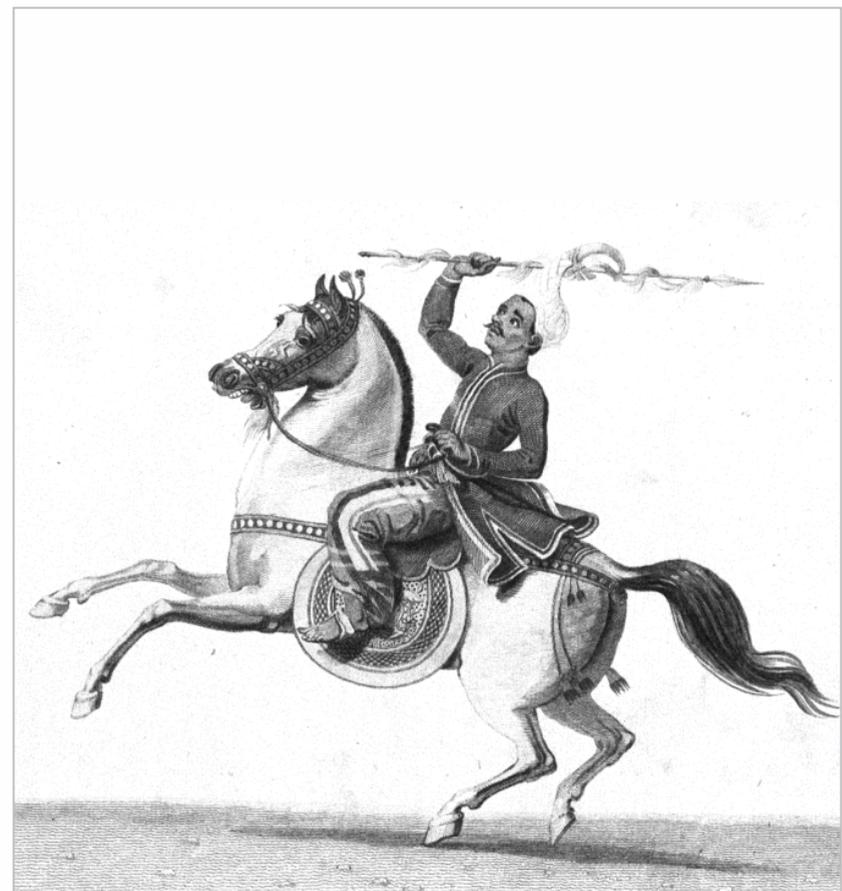
**The team on the North consisted of the following deity players:**

1. Marjing as pan'ngakpa (goal keeper)
2. Khamlangba as pan'ngakchang (back)
3. Irum Ningthou as pallakchang (half-back)
4. Irong Ningthou as pallakchang (forward)
5. Ikop Ningthou as langjei (center half).
6. Nongsaba as panjenchang (forward)
7. Panthoiba as panjanba (scorer)

**The team on the South consisted of:**

1. Thangjing as pan'ngakpa
2. Khoriphaba as pan'ngakchan
3. Wangbren as pallakchang
4. Yangoi Ningthou as langjei
5. Nabul Lakpa as pallakchang
6. Oknaren as panjengchang
7. Loyalakpa as panjenba

Thus Sagol Kangjei is said by Manipuris to be first invented and played by its ancestral deities who handed it down over generations to be played on the occasion of the Lai Haraoba and and other customary festivals and on the coronations of their kings.



## The Mythological Significance of Polo

According to the mythological beliefs of the Manipuri scholars called Maichous, the game of sagol kangjei was invented by the deities, and holds divine significance.

The stick which is known as kang'hu consists of a wooden head with a hole at its centre through which is fixed a cane stick about 4 to 5 feet long. This represents the divine union of Lairema, the supreme goddess and Lainingthou the supreme god, resulting in the cosmic creation.

The result of this divine union of the two supreme deities was the sun, the life giver of all beings, which is represented by the kangdrum or ball of the game. As the sun sets in the west, swiftly followed by its rays, so does the ball which represents Korouhanba the Sun is chased by the horse which represents sunlight. It is perhaps because of the seven colors in sunlight that Marjing, who invented the rules of the game, had it played by two teams each consisting of seven players.

So, too do the people of Manipur formed by the Meities and their seven cognate tribes or clans called the Seven Salais. The Sun rises from the East and sets in the West and moves from one direction to another to complete the cycle of the day. So also is Sagol Kangjei played, with the ball made to move from one direction to the other, chased by the horse to complete a cycle of play.

The interpretation underlying sagol kangjei is of the two elements of Birth and Death that make the perennial cycle of the lives of the All beings created in the cosmos. So also the sagol, the horse, and the kangdrum, the ball, complete the cycle of play. Death eternally chases and inevitably swallows all beings in the cycle of their lives, like the horse chases the ball and makes it scores a goal to complete the cycle of the game. In other words, the perennial struggle” between Birth and Death can be seen in the struggle between the horse and ball in sagol kangjei.

In this interpretation “Life is a God-gifted game”, with sorrows and obstructions one must face and overcome in the true spirit of the game, and enjoy it amidst all the dangers and obstacles.

## Polo in the Medieval Period

Polo was a game originally played for merriment, it was during the reign of the great king Khagemba, the 46th successor king of the Pakhangba dynasty or line, that rules to this very day. He was coronated in 1597 CE, and under him the game flourished into an active military game. The pana system of play was also introduced during his time. There were six panas at the time of Khagemba, two added to the four original panas that existed since the time of Pakhangba. They were Ahallup, Laipham, Khabam, Naharup, Hidakphaba and Potsangba.

Polo outside Manipur is the confine of aristocrats and rich people. Keeping ponies, either individually or by the local clubs, is burdensome in Manipur too. But earlier in the independent kingdom of Manipur, in almost every Manipuri house in the valley, keeping a pony was a must as the people were required to serve in the compulsory militia. Many of them formed the main force of the cavalry with their ponies. Under a very strict roster known as lallup enforced under the order of the king, disobedience to the call to arms was severely punished. It was therefore in their interests for people to play sagol kangjei regularly during times of peace.

It was during the reign of the great warrior king, Pamheiba, known as Garibniwaz, who ascended the throne in 1709 CE, that the militia of Manipur was reorganized into a powerful army. The main strength of this army lay in its cavalry which consisted of highly skilled rider-fighters mounted on war ponies which displayed great and prolonged endurance.

The Manipuri cavalry were such great and outstanding equestrians that they were regarded as Centaurs, half-man and half-horse. For once mounted on the skilled and sensitive Manipuri Pony they were said to become as one. There were more 3000 such very well trained and skilled cavalry supported by an elephant column of 150 elephants kept at Kokchai Royal Samusang stables. It was the robust game of sagol kangjei that had kept the cavalry and the ponies fit during times of peace.

Sagol Kangjei and the international style of polo are both are very fast games that require a player to be a very good equestrian. His horse or pony too has to be well looked after and trained. For this one is required to have the full knowledge and skill of good



*The Beginnings of International Polo in Manipur: Following the debut of sagol kangjei with Manipuri players in Calcutta in 1864, pictured here, Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh of Manipur hosted the first international polo team made up of English players in Imphal in 1865. The monarch himself played with the visiting team.*

horsemanship that includes stable management for taking care of the horse or the pony in the stable and giving it good and regular riding practice.

Riding in the formation of figure 8 is known as “kisi mari kiba khutong” in Manipuri. It is by this very method adopted by the veteran equestrians of Manipur in the earliest and medieval periods that kept their ponies trim and fit for war and for sagol kangjei.

Manipuri Puyas, or manuscripts, say that the horse is a divine animal created by Lainingthou Sanamahi, the King of the Gods, out of the dust from the soles of his feet and had named it “Samadon Ayangba” as it can run as fast as the speed of light of the sun. The Manipuri Pony is regarded as a divine gift having extraordinary qualities of great courage. They can even swim across big rivers with their riders on their backs.

The most celebrated story is from the Anglo Burmese War of 1825. The Burmese had captured Lieutenant Grant and tied him to a tree in preparation for his execution. The story goes that Chittrabot, the royal pony of the Senapati, Prince Narasingh, swam the Chindwin river of Burma in the dark of the early morning carrying him on its back. The Manipuri Prince-Senapati rode Chittrabod swiftly to Grant and rescued the East India Company officer, taking the Burmese sentinels by surprise. The famous royal pony then swam back across the Chindwin carrying both the Senapati and Grant to safety.



## Modern Polo: Modern Era

The year 1859 AD was a great landmark in the history of the game. A group of British officers and tea planters headed by Captain Stewart and Lieutenant, Lieutenant Joseph Sherer played its first game in Silchar, in the province of Cachar in neighboring Assam.

Modern Polo's origin lies in the British fascination with this thrilling game of played by the Manipuri militia who lived in Cachar in service to their exiled king, Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh. They modified the original indigenous Manipuri sagol kangjei and invented the game of polo. The club established at Silchar in the same year stands as the earliest and oldest Polo Club in the world.

Manipuri sagol kangjei was introduced into India by an exhibition match played by two Manipuri teams of selected from the best players. Renowned players of that time like Keisam Ojha were sent by Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh to Sylhet and Dhaka (now in Bangladesh) in 1863.

The game was introduced in England by the cavalry of the 10th Hussars who served in India. The first game played there in public in 1869. After this event, the first English Polo Association was formed in Hurlingham. With modified polo rules based on the Manipuri rules the Association became the Controlling Board for the International game of Polo in all over the world.





## Polo in Manipur Today

Maharaja Sir Churachand Singh, K.C.S.I., C.B.E. (1891-1941) was the pioneer patron of the modern game in Manipur. It was during his time that International Style Polo under the name Hafta Sagol Kangjei started in Manipur. The king himself played very actively and regularly with all the well known veteran local players like late Thourani Shabi and Samjai Sharma as well as British officers like Captain Blackie.

There are as many as 30 polo clubs in Manipur today which actively participate in the regular annual polo tournaments in both the styles conducted by the All Manipur Polo Association and the All Manipur Horse Riding and Polo Association. Manipuri women's teams have also started participating in the local tournaments showing that they are also as capable of playing the game as the ladies of other foreign countries like UK, USA, Australia, and Kenya do.

In recent years, under the auspices of the All Manipur Horse Riding and Polo Association two series of classic International polo tournaments had been very successfully organized and conducted at Imphal Polo ground in which teams from USA, England, Australia, Germany, and Kenya participated. India was represented by two Teams, one by a team from the Indian Army and another by a team from Manipur. In both tournaments the Manipur Team excelled and came out in flying colors as the Champions.

The foreign players and other visitors from abroad were really amazed and thrilled when they saw the unprecedented huge crowds that had turned up at Imphal Polo ground and to watch the international matches. This was, indeed, a very rare thing to be seen in any part of the world.

Truly, in this regard also, Manipur is very much in the forefront and therefore it is very much befitting to name Manipur as the real Home of Polo.

### **Waikhom Damodar Singh**

*is the Former President of the All Manipur Polo Association.  
This article was written in December 2005 and was adapted  
and edited by L. Somi Roy.*

*Maharaja Sir Churachand Singh, KCSI, CBE, of Manipur with  
Chief Electrical Engineer Blackie at Mapal Kangjeibung, Imphal.*

*Photo: Imasi Foundation*



# ORIGIN OF ENGLISH POLO. Silchar, the First Club in the World

During the recent Jubilee Tournament of the Calcutta Polo Club several writers enlarged on the origin of the game and the oldest polo club, and today when the Club has just celebrated its Jubilee and bids farewell to one of their oldest, keenest, and most popular members, Sir Cecil Graham, it will not, I trust, be out of place if, as an old player myself, I venture to correct these writers on one point and let the public know, and the annals of polo records, what really is the oldest club in existence.

It is quite true, as one writer remarks, that the subject has been so exhaustively written up in the Badminton Magazine that any repetition of it is really not called for, still in support of my statement I must necessarily go over some old ground. And, so before memory grows dim, and possibly before all the principal actors have passed away, I venture to give a short resume from the above and other records, of the manner in which the game came to be played by the English in India and what is really the oldest club.

Polo has been played, as most people know, along the north-east of India for a longer time than can now be traced with any certainty; in Kashmir at Balkistan, at Skardoo, and at Leh where it was played up and down the principal street. It is recorded also that with Akbar the Great it was his favourite game. But the most authentic account of it comes from Manipore, the small State between Cachar and Burma where, tradition has it, it was played in the sixteenth century from before 1550, and which place is probably the real home of polo, where it was a national game, and where it was played by old and young, rich and poor, rajah and peasant, all alike, and where anyone showing special skill was sure of rising to notice in the State. And it will be seen that the Manipuris, as far as the English are concerned, were the first exponents of the game, and that the game always followed in their wake.

Next to Manipore lies the small (in those days) frontier district of Cachar in British Territory into which for political reasons emigrants' and settled considerable numbers of Manipuris, in fact, the valley and villages were full of them. And just as the English take their national game of cricket with them wherever they go, so these Manipuris took their national game of polo (Kanjai as they call it) with them to Cachar and played it regularly there. It can be traced that they were joined in the game as far back as 1853-54 by the few scattered planters of the district.

The District of Cachar with its headquarters at Silchar was, prior to the Mutiny, administered in a semi-military way by an officer known as the District Superintendent or Deputy Commissioner with an assistant to help him, and a Captain Robert Stewart, who was Assistant Deputy Commissioner at the time I write of, always joined the tea planters and Manipuris whenever a game was possible at Silchar. These are the first recorded Englishmen who ever played the game, which they called hock, of ponies, the word polo subsequently coming from Kashmir.

The game lapsed somewhat during the Mutiny in 1857-58 when there was sterner work to attend to, but at its termination the European population in Cachar increased considerably. On the retirement of the Deputy Commissioner in 1859, Stewart succeeded to his place, and Lieutenant Joe Sherer of the Indian Army, who joined him as Assistant Deputy Commissioner, at once took enthusiastically to the game. These two with the local planters decided to start a club to play in conjunction with the Manipuris. Accordingly in March of the same year a meeting was held at Stewart, bungalow and there was formed the Silchar Polo Club which has been running ever since. And thus unhonoured and unsung-almost indeed unknown, as one writer has it-was started by Englishmen in this remote outpost of the Empire the first club to play the game which was destined to become an English national pastime, and which in its season now occupies columns and columns of the sporting papers.

At this meeting the following were present and were elected as the first members of the Club:

*Capt. Robert Stewart, Deputy Commissioner, Silchar.*  
*Lt. Joe Sherer, Assistant Commissioner, Silchar.*  
*James Davidson, of Soubong.*  
*Julius Sandeman, of Chutla Bheel.*  
*James Abernethy, of Hailakandi.*  
*Arthur Brownlow, of Hailakandi.*  
*Earnest Echardt, of Silkuri.*  
*W. Walker, of Bograhat.*  
*A. Stuart, of Urrunabund.*

Cachar at that time, before the advent of steamers and railways was practically unknown to the outside world, and so for two years the game appears to have been confined to that district, till in 1861, a Captain Eustace Hill who was quartered at Dacca with a detachment of his Regiment, the Lahore Light Horse, on a trip to Cachar, saw it played, got the necessary particulars from Sherer, and started the game at Dacca, but whether a club was actually formed at that time I cannot say.

Meanwhile Calcutta merchants on their various trips to Cachar had also seen the game and decided to play it themselves. Sherer gave them every assistance and in 1861 or 1863 under the leadership of Mr. C. B. Stewart a start was made on the Ballygunge parade ground but only in a spasmodic knock-about practice fashion. In 1863 however, when Sherer visited Calcutta and acted as mentor to the players, so popular did the game become that in March of that year was started in Calcutta the Club which has just celebrated its Jubilee. Probably its books record who the first members were, but in my notes I find the following as among them:

*C. B. Stewart,*  
*R. H. Hills,*  
*John Thomas,*  
*Elliott Angelo,*  
*Colonel Richard Readon, etc.*

Sherer had promised when in Calcutta to sometime bring down a team of Manipuris to play them, and in 1864 when an invitation to do so arrived, a subscription was raised by the Silchar Polo Club to defray their expenses and a team of Manipuris who were known as "The Band of Brothers" left for Calcutta by country boat and where after great transport difficulties they at length arrived, after a journey, or rather a voyage, of over two weeks.

At that time each team consisted of seven players and the side first scoring seven goals was declared the winner. The goal posts were the two corner flags and anywhere across the end lines between them constituted a goal. The names of this "Band of Brothers" were:

1. *Toolsi Sing*
2. *Chowba Song*
3. *Ammu Sing*
4. *Omah Sing*
5. *Tubal Sing*
6. *Aema Ba*
7. *Mooge Pa*

With their little handy tats of about 11-2, and scientific combined play, they easily defeated the larger and faster ponies of the Calcutta men, who, before the Manipuris left, purchased the best of these ponies at very remunerative prices to the Manipuris. Some of these ponies survived to play before the Prince of Wales as late (I think) as 1877.

Sherer was feted at the old Indigo Mart in Calcutta and at that dinner by Calcutta itself he was given, as well as a handsome presentation, the title which he has ever since been known by, and which is inscribed beneath his portrait in the old Retreat Club in Silchar, "Joe Sherer, the Father of English".

All honour to Calcutta for what they have always done for the game. but leave to the remote little club in Silchar the credit-honour, we might I think well call it-of being the first recorded club to play polo in the world.

*Julius Sandeman, of Chutla Bheel.*  
*James Abernethy, of Hailakandi.*  
*Arthur Brownlow, of Hailakandi.*  
*Earnest Echardt, of Silkuri.*  
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### **An Old Cacharee**

*This anonymous article from February 27, 1913 hangs today in the Cachar Club in Silchar, Assam.*

*The History of Modern Polo from Manipur to USA:  
Permanent exhibit in the International Museum of the Horse,  
Kentucky Horse Park. Lexington, Ky USA.*



# AN AMERICAN YATRA

One time, six or seven years ago, I had driven down from the Appalachian Mountains into Lexington, Kentucky, when my friend Evelyn Knight told me she could introduce me to Ed Armstrong of the United States Polo Association. We had been talking about the white fenced rolling green of the breeding farms of the Bluegrass State around us. I had vented my frustration at not being able to get the government of Manipur to move beyond sweet talk to provide a home for the street ponies of Manipur. I thought American polo might help. Manipuri polo was weak and those I had talked to could not do much. A mild how-about notion has increasingly become a preoccupation since my first visit to my homeland after almost twenty years away in New York. Not being a particularly political or activist kind of person, much less an animal rights or environmentalist one, I thought polo might help. Here I was, a native of the birthplace of modern polo living in the superpower with the largest polo association in the world.

From that initial introduction grew a friendship and an American Yatra, a journey that yoked polo and pony in a cause of sports and preservation. Ed dimly recalled reading about Manipur as a polo-mad boy in Massachusetts. As Manipur is pretty much a blank spot in the American mind, I needed to show rather than just talk, I approached Bill Cooke, a fellow museum curator and the director of the International Museum of the Horse in town. We agreed we should add Manipuri polo and pony to the permanent exhibit at his museum on the Horse in Sports. Over the next two years I shuttled between New York, Imphal, and Lexington. With the ready help of then Governor Gurbachan Jagat, through the kind offices of his Secretary, my cousin Dr. R.K. Nimai Singh, we had Khelen Maisnam, erstwhile captain of the Manipuri polo team, to prepare a set of authentic polo costumes and gear. By the time the consignment arrived at Bill's museum, Ed was interested enough to come to check out its contents. As he tested a swing on the strange polo sticks of cane that Khelen had included, I asked if he and the USPA might send a team to play polo in Manipur. He sure was.

When Team USPA came to play at the Manipur International Polo Tournament organized by the Manipur Horse Riding and Polo Association during Manipur Tourism's Sangai Festival in November 2013, it was the first international team that came with a researched handicap, of 9 goals, for Manipur. Nothing was more telling of this landmark step the USPA instituted for Manipur than the tournament's opening night dinner. As the smartly uniformed and emblazoned American team, handsome, young, athletic, lined up at the reception the German team, which had played in Manipur before, seethed among themselves, Why didn't you tell us? We could also have brought a team like this, turned out like them!

The adventure that Ed and I had embarked upon had found its first calling: helping Manipur's polo community where we saw it needed help. Huntre! Equine, as we came to be called, would provide value added services to Manipuri polo.

The first step was an exploration of international polo tourism. The next was women's polo.

## The Yatra as Tourism

Polo Yatra has two objectives. The first is the development and promotion of women's polo in India with Manipur as its center but fanning out to the rest of India. The second is the development of and promotions of tourism in Manipur using polo as the vector. Tourism is one of the priorities because of the foundational and presenting sponsorship by Manipur Tourism. Starting in 2018, it also has the support of Incredible India! of the Ministry of Tourism which underwrites the travel of the international teams from the US, Australia and Kenya.

Our approach to tourism is that it is pretty unavoidable as the North East Region of India opens up. Moreover, under the Act East Policy of India, Manipur is emerging as the gateway to Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar. We worked with Gautam Mukhopadhyay, the Ambassador of India to set up Chartered flights from Myanmar to Imphal for the Sangai Festival when the men's tournament is also played. We expect Manipur and NER to be the next global frontier with the ongoing democratization of Myanmar.

But as a social enterprise based in Manipur (with partners in Mumbai and New York and Massachusetts) we see tourism beyond the incoming visitors and tourism dollars. One sees see tourism as both boon and bane, as last year's demonstrations in Venice and Barcelona attest. The exotic character and draw of Manipur is undeniable, but a primary concern is not to turn it into a tourism dependent economy that impacts the culture negatively. The question then is, How will it impact the host people and culture who stay on after the tourist has gone back home. And to develop tourism, the first change has to come locally, where the hosts have to understand what it is about this culture that is going to the unique selling point. And for this the people of Manipur have to know their culture: a challenge with all young generations in this emerging globalized world. If we do not know ourselves, how will we know what we can show our visitors? That knowledge will determine what it is that we show the visitor. Therefore, those aspects of the culture have to be conserved in order to be presented without catering solely to the vulgarizing influence of market tourism. Polo Yatra therefore builds on activities beyond polo and entertainment events. They have included unique unticketed events that show the real Manipur: the 108 dishes of the Pranalika feast at Shree Shree Govindaji Temple, a traditional cooking class, a ritual women's choir of the Jalakeli at the royal temple of the Palace, prayers at the shrine of Lord Marjing the polo god, visits to Allied as well as Japanese World War 2 cemeteries, guided tours of Kangla Fort, a traditional dinner at a Naga village, and so on.

## **The Women of Manipur**

The notion of filling the void of women's polo in India came about when pretty young lady served Ed and me tea at a game. A polo player! How about playing with American girls? She almost dropped the tea in her excitement. We will start practicing tomorrow! she exclaimed. It became a real idea when Steve Armour, Governor at Large of the USPA, similarly remarked on its possibility when he came to watch the men play the next year.

It was really quite remarkable, what the Manipuri women were doing, we discovered. They had fielded teams before in the state tournaments. Polo not being a very gender bound sport, there was even a Kenyan ladies team that came to play when the first international tournament took place in 1992. But what we thought we needed was a women's only event.

A complaint I had heard in Manipur, and indeed, all over India, was that the girls never get enough games to play, never get the best horses. They were always an addition, a sidelight, a curtain raiser. Steve, Ed and I thought a women's tournament would be a strategic development for women's polo; another value added service that Huntre! Equine would undertake.

We certainly had the raw material, for Manipur is always impressively rich when it comes to sports and performance. A tiny powerhouse of sports – We come second only to the Armed Forces in the national games, and the Armed Forces is all Manipuris, Governor Jagat remarked wryly to me one time – Manipur accounted for about two-thirds of the women polo players in the whole of India. Thinking on it, it is not surprising. After all, this is where the British took the game from in the mid-19th century to turn it into what has become modern polo. Distinctively and uniquely, here it is not the Game of Kings, though Manipur's monarchs during the course of the kingdom's history, but the Game of the People. Egalitarian, village-based, popular, Manipuri women's polo rests on the fabled power of Manipuri women, confident, and outspoken. Whether in politics, culture, or the economy, women in Manipur are at the forefront. Their control of the state's dominant cottage and retail sectors, the traditional markets are manned by women, so to speak.

Yet for all that, women's polo in Manipur is weak. They need their own discrete arena to develop and grow, we felt. And then, who will they play with? So Huntre! Equine's women's polo initiative centers on Manipur, but reaches out to women players all over the country.

So when Steve brought Team USPA Women to Manipur, I reached out to Jaipur, the Crown Jewel of Indian Polo, or as its Princess Diya Kumari said to me, pithily and charmingly, Many places play polo but Jaipur plays only polo. It turned out that even Jaipur did not have enough women players.

## Polo Yatra 2016 and 2017

The 1<sup>st</sup> Manipur Statehood Day Women's Polo Tournament was held in January 2016, with the finals on January 21, Manipur's Statehood Day. Manipur fielded three teams for a mixed tournament of four teams. Each was led by one of the American players – Team USPA Captain Cristina Fernandez, Tiamo Hudspeth, Carly Persano, and Julia Smith. Then it was off to Jaipur. Two players from Manipur, Sumita Salam and Tanna Thoudam, with their coach Khelen Maisnam, travelled with 30 Sankirtan dancing drummers to Jaipur. Together with Manisha Malhotra Pattu and Avshreya Pratap Rudy, the Indian contingent played with their American counterparts. An exhibition game humorously titled Cowgirls v Gopis took Jaipur's polo community by storm before the finals of the Maharaja Sawai Bhawani Cup named after the late monarch and father of Princess Diya Kumari.

The connection became Polo Yatra the next year in 2017, an international polo journey threading powerhouse giant US to tiny birthplace of modern polo Manipur and to glorious royal Jaipur at the impressive ground of Vikram Singh Rathore in Mundota, and, reaching southward, to Hyderabad, the hi-tech city of Google and the Nizam of yore. Steve brought back another Team USPA, this time led by Anna Winslow, with Stephanie Massey, and Audry Persano joining her sister Carly Persano. The young and sleek Nasr Polo of Hyderabad was the host. time the Indian contingent was composed of Hyderabad Chaiyya Vaibhase from the Hyderabad Riding and Polo Club, young Rajvi Rao and, from New Delhi, Sonia Jabbar.

Polo Yatra added another dimension in Imphal, when a ladies team from Hurlingham Polo Association joined Team USPA for a three cornered 2 Manipur Statehood Day Women's Polo Tournament, presented once again by Manipur Tourism. English pro player Annabel McNaught Davies came by way of Buenos Aires to lead the team composed of Charlotte Sweeney, Maime Powell, and Sarah Hughes. A hard fought tournament with drama and stunning wins, Team USPA prevailed.

## Polo Yatra 2018: A Home for Indian Women's Polo

The takeaway from the experience of the first two Polo Yatras was that the long term mission of Huntre! Equine to support, develop and promote women's polo in India and to give it a home. The conceptual framework of Polo Yatra was honed to provide just that, in Manipur. The Yatra started from West Palm Beach, Charlotte and Maryland in the US; from Sydney, Adelaide and Auckland; and Nairobi in Kenya, courtesy of Incredible India! It gathered players from New Delhi and Hyderabad, and 18 women polo players gathered in Imphal for the 3 Manipur Statehood Day Tournament.

### **L Somi Roy**

*is the Principal of Huntre! Equine, a social enterprise of equestrian sports based in Imphal and Mumbai.*



*Women polo players from the USA pray at the shrine to Lord Marjing, the god of polo. Heingang Village, Manipur.*

# MAIDENS TO THE RESCUE OF THE MANIPURI PONY

## “No Pony, No Polo. No Polo, No Pony”

*Jodhpur Polo, 2017-18 Edition*

To understand the status of the Manipuri Pony, one would have to first make a concrete effort to appreciate the heritage of horse polo in the state. Back in the day, when mallets were made of cane, whilst the ball was fashioned out of the humble bamboo root. The etymology of the name suggests that it may have been inspired by the Tibetan word “pulu”. So entrenched is the game in the culture of Manipur, that it is not known nor strange to mark the passing of a player (known as shraddha, 13 or 14 days after his funeral) with a game of polo. In earlier days of the kingdom, victories on the battlefield were commemorated and celebrated with a round of polo! Through these traces of ancient history, we can grasp at the fine threads that are wound around the central figure ubiquitous to the game of polo in the state – the Manipuri Pony.

According to the figures available from the livestock census conducted in 2012, there were about 1100 ponies left! Unfortunately, it is believed that this number has fallen further and just about 500 ponies remain, as of 2014 (according to a report generated by the Comptroller and Auditor General).

This is the dismal state despite the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) regarding the pony as “one of the purest and prestigious breeds of equines of India” and having recorded that it is the only “original polo pony of the world”.

Amongst myriad reasons for the pony's fate, such as loss of grazing land, urbanization, and encroachment of wetlands etc., another reason for the dwindling numbers is - smuggling. There is a great demand for the Manipuri Pony in Myanmar; they are either being sold by porters, transporters, and owners or are being smuggled or stolen – to be taken across the border. This the latter, is considered to be among the key reasons for the decline of the breed's population, in the present day.

Stealing the ponies is a cakewalk, as owners release them for the stable to graze outside. Increased pressures arising as a result of economic blockades, sanctions, and decades of political upheavals – have all led to a shrinking job market, inflated prices etc. which have impacted the lives of pony owners, who are forced to make the tough choice of parting with the animals.

Come January 2017, the polo scene in Manipur suddenly heats up! The state's formidable women riders meet for a neck to neck fight for divot supremacy, locking horns with the USPA Women's India Tour players. The initiative draws attention not just to the composed and nimble Indian women riders from Manipur, but also their beautiful ponies.

Steve Armour of the Houston Polo Club, Ed Armstrong and L. Somi Roy from Huntre! Adventures [sic] Company choose to champion the cause of these erstwhile regal mounts. The tournament was organized by the All Manipur Polo Association, which is celebrating its 60th “Diamond” anniversary in 2017. Four Manipuri women's teams (a worthy mention that each took on a USPA player to play in the first Manipur Statehood Day Women's Polo Tournament from January 17-21. The maidens of Manipur played for their mounts – for its posterity and well being.

Enthusiastic crowds cheered at Mapal Kangjeibung as the players thudded across the divot on the agile Manipuri Ponies. The final proved to be a clash of titans – Team Siroy led by Julia Smith and Team USPA led by Tiamo Hudspeth. The former was leading for the most part of the game and, the final score was 6-5 Siroy.

Dogged determination and the never say die attitude of polo enthusiasts and equine activities, alike, have goaded the Government of Manipur to accept the state cabinet approved Manipuri Pony Conservation and Development Policy as more such tournaments create an enthusiast patron base, and as funds flow in – happy days may just herald a new lease of life for the Manipuri Pony whose cause is championed relentlessly worldwide.



# THE TEAMS

## TEAM AUSTRALIA

Polo is played throughout Australia; there are approximately 50 Clubs and State Associations in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, WA and South Australia. The Australian Polo Federation (APF) is the governing body for all forms of polo in Australia, from juniors through to high performance for regular field polo and variants including arena, beach & snow polo. Its members are the 5 State Polo Associations. Its objectives are to promote the playing and interest in polo; to co-ordinate international teams and matches; to set rules, policies and guidelines; and to supervise handicapping of all Australian players.



**Alessia Russo** has been playing polo for the last 9 years as a member of the South-East Queensland Polo Club. A constant highlight for her is playing alongside her father in various tournaments throughout QLD and NSW. A particular tournament highlight playing alongside her father was placing in the top four teams in the Ellerston Autumn 8 Goal Tournament this year. A ladies'

tournament highlight was representing QLD and winning the "State of Origin" at Ellerston at the beginning of 2017. She grew up in Brisbane but now lives in Sydney.



**Billie Mascart** has been playing polo for the last 10 years and is a member of Windsor Polo Club in Richmond, NSW. She has played across Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Argentina in tournaments ranging from 0 to 14 goals. Her polo highlights have been winning the Riverlands Ladies tournament in 2010 alongside Nina Clarkin, winning the

Ellerston Women's Circuit 2016 for NSW as well as the Malaysian Ladies Championship in Oct 2016 against Sunny Hale. Billie is looking forward to travelling to India, Manipur and captaining her country in such a tournament as well as discovering the heritage and history of the birth place of polo!



**Chloe Warren** grew up with horses and has been riding since the age of 5. A family interest in polo and love of horses contributed to a natural progression into the sport. She has been lucky enough to play, train and work with horses throughout Australia and around the world. She looks forward to travelling to India for the first time and representing

Australia.



**Indiana Benneto** has been chasing the polo dream and summer in both the northern and Southern Hemisphere since she left school, now 23 she spends half her time in Australia and New Zealand. Hailing from Gundy, NSW where she has been involved in polo all her life, however played from the past 5 years. Indiana is super excited to travel to India and play along side

and against world class players in such a historic polo country.



**Whitney Warren**, from South Australia grew up playing polo in small country clubs with close friends and family. Through polo she has met some amazing people and has been able to travel Australia and the world playing, grooming and training horses. A lot of these experiences have been shared with her younger sister Chloe, together they have had a blast! She is excited to head to

Manipur and participate in the Women's Polo Tournament.

## TEAM INDIAN POLO ASSOCIATION

The Indian Polo Association was formed in 1892. Some of the prominent teams at that time were Alwar, Bhopal, Bikaner, Jaipur, Hyderabad, Patiala, Jodhpur, Kishengarh and Kashmir. Majority of the Cavalry regiments of the British and the British Indian Army also fielded teams.

The Calcutta Polo Club which is the oldest polo club in the world, was the first club to start holding tournaments again post-independence. Jaipur, Delhi, Bombay and Hyderabad also now hold regular tournaments. In the year 1992 the IPA completed 100 years and since then polo is on an upward trend in the country. Today IPA has 33 registered Polo Clubs.



**Abigail Slater** is a 0 goal open handicap, Ladies 3 goal. Abigail is Vice President, Commercial Servicing Network at American Express and is currently based in Gurgaon. Abigail moved to India six months ago with her job (and horses!) and is thoroughly enjoying life in India and the polo scene. From the UK originally, she started playing polo six years ago at

Singapore Polo Club. She loves to travel and India is the fifth country she's been based.



**Ameera Pasrich** started riding at the age of 3. She mainly does Dressage but when given the opportunity she also plays polo, jumps and does a bit of tent pegging. She was the junior national champion 2016-17 and was given the best rider trophy as well. She has also been in the winning team of the 40km National Endurance race in Jodhpur and played the junior IPA. She

hopes to win laurels for the country in the near future.



**Monica Saxena** is the only mother of two playing competitive Polo in India. A member of the Army Polo and Riding Club, New Delhi, Monica is a tough rider and has been playing competitive Polo since 2010. She regularly participates in Delhi Polo season each year. She was winner of DGRVS Cup (2012) and has been runners' up in several 2/4 goal tournaments.



**Rajvi Rao** is from Hyderabad. She's been riding for about three and a half years. She's always had an affinity for horses which led to my looking up a local riding club for lessons. She's grateful for the chance to be a part of International Women's Polo 2 years in a row and an opportunity to learn from amazing ladies in polo from the world over.



**Sanya Suhag:** My grandfather played the game when he was in the NDA as a cadet. He instantly liked the game and later went on to play for the country a few times and captained the ASC team in the army. Having seen polo in his childhood my father, Samir Suhag also took up the game once he grew up. He was one of the 1st professional polo players this country has seen. Having such a background it was inevitable for me to take up the game. I started riding a few years ago but unfortunately had a bad injury after falling off the horse. That did stop me to take up riding again but since my love for animals and horses is so strong it was just a matter of time that I got back on the horse. I took this game on earlier this year and have been fortunate enough to play some tournaments in Delhi and a couple of Ladies international tournaments In Jodhpur. I am 19 and currently pursuing my studies in law and I do intend to play polo for as long as I can.

## TEAM KENYA

Our Kenyan ladies team are all members of the KPA (Kenya polo association) and members of 3 different polo clubs scattered across Kenya. North Kenya Polo club situated at the foothills of Mount Kenya 5 hours north of Nairobi where polo is played at one of the highest altitudes in the world at around 8000 feet. Manyatta polo club situated near Gilgil town 2.5 hours North of Nairobi near Lake Nakuru and Naivasha in the Rift Valley famous for their millions of flamingoes. And Nairobi Polo Club which is over 100 years old and hosts the Kenya Polo Open every September with players from all over the world still at an altitude of around 6000 feet.



**Imogen Voorspuy:** I was born and brought up in Kenya. My family operate riding safaris accross kenya so I have ridden all my life and horses have always played a big role in my up bringing. I have been very lucky to be able to ride accross the Masai Mara with the wildlife and am currently working on the safaris now that I have finished university. My family also play polo so I began when I was about 12 years old and have enjoyed playing in Kenya ever since. I am looking forward to the opportunity to visit India for the first time and to experience playing different ponies as well as playing in the tournament to promote women's polo.



**Kaila Millar:** Born and growing up in beautiful Kenya, into a dedicated polo playing family, I had the privilege of riding and of course playing polo from a very young age. I learnt everything I know from my father and brother and was pretty soon playing and loving polo competitively. Returning from education in the UK, I am now a teacher in Nairobi, Kenya. This will be my first time representing my country and indeed touring abroad for polo, I am both hugely honoured and excited.



**Nicola Barlow:** Nikki, aged 38 started playing polo in her early 20's in Kenya. She has represented Kenya twice playing against Zambia ladies. She studied textile & interior design and runs her own interior design business based in Nairobi. Her passions are horses, travel, art, exercise and health.



**Tiva Gross:** I am 24 years old and I was born and brought up in Kenya. I have ridden horses since I can remember and played my first polo tournament at the age 10. I have been lucky enough to play in some amazing countries with ladies polo which include; Zambia, Zimbabwe, South-Africa, Singapore, Thailand, Florida, Australia, UK and Barbados. I am really looking forward to playing polo in India for the first time.



**Rowena Stichbury:** I started playing polo after my eldest son was born 17 years ago and subsequently have had another 4 children. Polo has become a family passion with 5 out of the 7 of us now playing. I run a small polo yard at home and school our horses throughout the year. I am the Nairobi Polo Club vice captain. We moved to Kenya 20 years ago prior to which I was a horse safari guide in Botswana in the Okavango Delta. Riding in the wild is so exhilarating that only polo has managed to get my adrenaline pumping as much. The joy of polo in Kenya is that we have many lady and children players all competing on equal footing with all the men. Our oldest active player is 78 years old and our youngest 12. There is no other sport like it!

## TEAM MANIPUR MARJING

The Manipuri women's teams are named after two guardian deities who played Polo according to the court chronicle of Manipur.

According to the mythology of the Meiteis, Lord Marjing, in whose honour Team Manipur Marjing is named, is also the god of polo. Team Manipur Thangjing is named after another of the four guardian deities. It is written that both played in the first game of polo held in honour of the wedding of Lord Pakhangba, deity king of Manipur.



**Asem Romabati** hails from Ithai Wapokp Mayai Leikai, Thoubal. She overcame initial objections from her family and started playing Polo since 1993. In the early 1990s, she played for three consecutive years as players of Kumbi Polo Club. Presently she played for Thangmeiband Youth Polo Club.



**Soibam Langlen Devi** hails from Ithai Wapokpi Mayai Leikai, Thoubal. She overcame initial objections from her family and started playing polo since 1993. She played for Thangmeiband Youth Polo Club.



**Ningthoujam Ashakiran** has been playing polo since 1991. Hailing from NambolLourembam, Bishnupur, she started her polo career from the Kumbi Polo Club. Presently she played for K & M Memorial Rising School, Singjamei.



**Victoria Oinam** from Langol Housing Complex type II, Imphal West started Playing Polo in 2017. She has taken part in many state level polo tournaments. She played for Thangmeiband Youth Polo Club.



**Irom Sangeeta** picked up the art of playing polo at the age of around 15 years. She hails from Sagolband Tera Amudon Leikai, Imphal. She played for K & M Memorial Rising School, Singjamei.



**Salam Sumita Devi** Hails from Keirak Makha Leikai, Thoubal. Apart from polo, she also engages with other non-horse related sports events (2nd place at the 5 km. race in the 1996 National Level Meet). Presently, she played for Thangmeiband Youth Polo Club.

## TEAM MANIPUR THANGJING



**Khungdongbam Habe Devi** is the sister of Deventy. She started playing polo since 1993 as a player of the Kumbi Polo Club. Currently, she plays for Thangmeiband Youth Polo Club.



**Khungdongbam Deventy** hails from Porompat Thawwan Thabal Leikai of Imphal East District. She started playing polo since 2004. She played for Thangmeiband Youth Polo Club



**Laishram Thadoi Chanu** comes from a polo loving family and picked up the game in 1997. Currently, she plays for Thangmeiband Youth Polo Club.



**Neelu RK** hails from Sagolband Tera Amudon Akham Leikai, Imphal and started her polo career from RKSSS polo club, Imphal in 2011. She played for K & M Memorial Rising School, Singjamei.



**ThoudamTanna Devi** hails from Kongpal Kshetri Leikai, Imphal. She started playing polo in 2011. She has taken part in major polo tournaments. Apart from polo, she also takes keen interest equestrian events. She played for K & M Memorial Rising School, Singjamei.



**Jetholia Thongbam** was introduced to the game of polo by her uncle. She hails from ThangmeibandYumnamLeikai and started playing in 2012. She played for K & M Memorial Rising School, Singjamei.

## TEAM USA

The USA team was assembled by Edward Armstrong, Adviser Partner of Huntre! Equine and Secretary-Treasurer of the American International Polo Foundation. A social enterprise of equestrian activities, Huntre! Equine has linked American Polo to Manipur since 2013.

"With USPA endorsement", says Armstrong, "the participation of the US team continues a long tradition of international polo. As an approximately forty percent of USPA membership, women are an important and growing segment on the international scene. AIPF was formed to support US teams in international competition and the third annual Statehood Day tournament embodies that mission." That mission, branded as Polo Yatra, an international and national journey of women's polo, works to support, develop, and promote women's polo in India. "The inspiration of this initiative", adds Roopa Barua, Huntre! Equine partner from Mumbai, "is the woman polo player of Manipur. She has enabled us to build the American partnership that today brings you Team USA."



**Belinda Brody** graduated from the University of Connecticut with a degree in Animal Science, while playing three years of Varsity Polo. She was accepted to Team USPA in 2010, and played tournament polo throughout the East Coast, Mexico and Argentine including lady's polo up to 20 goals. She is originally from Brooklyn, NY. She is an Assistant Polo Manager at Vero Beach Polo Club and is also the Polo

School Director.



**Eva Crossman** is a freshman at the University of Kentucky and is on the Women's varsity polo team there. Both of Eva's parents train horses in her home town and she grew up riding and training horses. She is excited to travel to Manipur with her teammates and to represent her country.



**Marissa Wells:** I have been riding horses all of my life. My mother taught me how to ride and play polo, which I started when I was 8 years old. Since the 7th grade I have competed on the Maryland Girl's Interscholastic Polo Team, coached by my mother. I was nominated the team captain my 8th grade year and won the 2012, 2014, and 2015 National Title, being elected to the National All Star Team

every year from 2011-2015. In 2014, I was nominated as the PTF Female Player of the Year. I currently am the captain of the Texas A&M Intercollegiate Women's Polo Team. We have been the defending Central Regional Champions for 2016 and 2017. I have been nominated to the National All Star Team for 2016 and 2017 as well. Just this past year I was selected to be apart of the Team USPA.



**Olivia Stringer Berube:** I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland riding show horses and started playing polo at 13 years old for the Baltimore Interscholastic team. I then captained the team at Colorado State University where we made to 3 National Championship Finals and I was a 3 time National All-Star. I've been playing and teaching polo since, and my husband Nate and I run our farm 'Berube

Polo' in Aiken, South Carolina where we train and sell horses and teach polo. We go north in the summer months to run the Maryland Polo Club where he manages the club and I run the Intermediate and Junior polo. We also compete in tournaments on the east coast and the south for our 'Berube Polo' team.



## BSE CUP FOR WINNING TEAM GOES TO TEAM KENYA

Manipur Governor, Dr. Najma Heptulla (middle) hands over the BSE Cup, the 3rd Manipur Statehood Day Women's Polo Tournament trophy to the victorious Kenya women polo team at Mapal Kangjeibung Polo Ground in Imphal, Manipur.

Team Kenya came from behind to pip Team USA 5-4. The Americans led with three quick goals in the opening chukka. Handicap 3 player, Marissa Wells, notched a field goal hat-trick. In the second chukka, Team Kenya captain and handicap 2 player, Tiva Gross, slotting in a penalty to cut the deficit and followed up with a beautiful goal from the centre of the field to bring the score to 2-3 at the break.

Wells took her tally to four by scoring another field goal for Team USA but Imogen Voorspuy struck for Kenya to bring the score to 3-4. In the dramatic last chukka, Nikki Barlow made it 4-4, and with 20 seconds to go, Kaila Millar sealed Team Kenya's victory with an under-the-neck-shot.

Team Kenya was awarded the BSE Cup, a custom made trophy of bell metal based on a traditional royal wedding gift called a kaosel. Gifted by Ashish Chauhan, Managing Director and CEO of BSE, formerly the Bombay Stock Exchange, it was presented to the team by H. E. Governor, Dr. Heptulla together with a cash award of Rs 60,000. Her Excellency also presented the Runners Up trophy, also of kaosel design, to Team USPA with a cash award of Rs 40,000. Both teams donated their cash awards for the preservation of the Manipuri Pony to the Ibuthou Marjing Khubam Kanba Lup of Heingang Village, an association tasked with the preservation of the shrine and the ponies of Lord Marjing, Lord of the Manipuri Pony. A pony preserve is being built in Heingang Village dedicated this God of Polo.

★ 3<sup>rd</sup> MANIPUR STATEHOOD DAY ★



— *Women's Polo* —  
**TOURNAMENT**

January 17-21, 2018  
Mapal Kangjeibung Polo Ground  
Imphal, Manipur, India



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