

WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE 20TH CENTURY MANIPUR

A Historical
Study



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Tingneichong G. Kipgen

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Mrs. Tingneichong G. Kipgen



Call No. 305.4095417
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Women's Role in the 20th Century Manipur : A Historical Study

Rs. 540

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ISBN: 978-81-7835-803-1

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Published in 2010 in India by
Kalpaz Publications
C-30, Satyawati Nagar,
Delhi-110052
E-mail: kalpaz@hotmail.com
Phone : 9212729499

Laser Type Setting by: Rudra Computer Graphics, Delhi
Printed at : Chawla Offset Printers, Delhi

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Foreword

It is my pleasure to write a brief foreword to this book by Mrs. Tingneichong Kipgen.

The roles of women in Manipur has been discussed and debated in the various academic forums till date. Published books on the roles of Manipuri Women belonging to different communities are very few. Considering the need in this direction, I believe the book will be of immense help to the students, research scholars and users.

I wish her all success in" her endeavour and sincerely hope that the readers will appreciate the book.

(O. Landhoni Devi)
MLA, 35-Khangabok A/C.

Preface

Society is progressing in every field, be it in politics, economy, religion, and also women's role in these aspects. This study tries to bring out the roles of women in every field in order to present their roles as catalyst in the development process. In order to understand the roles played by women in Manipur we feel the need to examine women from the traditional to the modern context. Progressive modernization brought by the spread of education gradually altered the situation, and women in Manipur have begun to participate in diverse modern activities. They began to venture out of homes and their awareness of oneself and society is increasing. This work also tries to reflect that the trend is from ascribed status to an achieved one and that women's role is not limited to the home as was in the traditional society.

Women studies have kindled interest all over the world due to increased public awareness and academic interest.

This study is also carried out to understand the importance of the role played by women in society, religion, politics and economy. Their roles are very important because women in Manipur entered into the 21st century with many

changes taking place in their societies some for good and some not so good. This study has been carried out to take advantages of the changes for growth, prosperity and to keep on developing with the changes. This study also incorporates the contemporary events which have a direct bearing on the socio-economic and political life of the women.

As all necessary materials are not found in the books alone, attempts have been made to uncover information based on primary sources like field work, personal interviews, both formal and informal discussions with knowledgeable persons. Stories of past events from the mouth of the elders constitute no less important a source as it helps the researcher to understand the history of the roles of women played especially among the Kuki and the Naga women.

Journals, Newspaper, Magazines, souvenirs, unpublished books, documents (in tribal dialect), memorandum, booklets, dissertations, etc. written in English and vernaculars which have little or direct bearing on my research topic are also considered within the sources of my study.

Secondary sources which itself is dependent on primary sources are being the major references for quotations and to derive new interpretation and hypothesis. The findings of others are also brought together in support of my own hypothesis. This work will give basic ideas of women belonging to different communities in a complete form.

Therefore, we may state that women of Manipur have achieved much and their work participation rate is also very high. Yet, these achievements have not enabled these women to break the tentacles of patriarchy and enter the decision making channels to subscribe legislation rights in their favour.

The basic objective of the proposed topic is therefore to study the development of women's role not as an isolated

instance but as an essential part of Manipur's problematic entry into modernity. The scope of the study which is to trace the growth of dominant discourses on women from the early twentieth century to the present.

Introduction

The roles of Meitei women.

The roles of Meitei Pangal Women.

The roles of Kuki women.

The roles of Naga women.

The importance of Women and Health

Conclusion.

Acknowledgements

As I write this acknowledgement, I want to thank God for His blessing during the course of my research work.

My first and foremost deepest gratitude are due to my supervisor, Dr. Salam Irene, Associate Professor, Department of History, Manipur University. She has guided me with a lot of patience and understanding. Her valuable guidance, direction and encouragement are the stepping stone without which I would not have completed my work in time. Despite my illness, various weaknesses and limitations which at time did intervene to restrict my progress, she has endured with patience and persuaded me to go on; for this I am forever indebted to her.

Secondly, I owe my gratitude to the faculty members of the Department of History, Manipur University for their help and encouragement.

Thirdly, I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to the entire staff of the Manipur University Library, Imphal, Tribal Research Centre, Imphal and various authors whose works quoted at the appropriate places inside the Thesis help me to undertake the present research in a more objective and logical way.

Last but not the least, I am also deeply grateful to my children and husband for their patience, encouragement and for their prayers. My husband's understanding and encouragement was the real source of strength especially in times of strain and stress.

Tingneichong G. Kipgen

1

Introduction

India has a history which goes back to approximately 500 B.C. But the history of women's movement in India begins much later in the last decades of the 19th century. Interest in women's issues was initiated by the male intelligentsia of this period. In India women live and grow up in a male dominated society. In the pre-colonial period as well as under the colonial rule, the traditional role of women was to be subservient to men. They were not considered part of civil society and were deprived of their rights. Historically, the British conquest of India did not bring any radical change in Indian society and especially in the position of women. It was observed by the East India Company and later by the Crown that any interference in society would be regarded as an encroachment on indigenous religion and social customs and may jeopardize colonial rule. The Government of India in 1975 by forming "Committee on Status of Women" took up issues relating to women. Different approaches are adopted to examine the position and status of women in any given social structure.

The preamble to the Constitution of India declares equality of status and provides equal opportunities to all citizens, thereby making no difference between men and women. Article 14 ensures 'Equality before law' and article 15 prohibits any discrimination. Article 15(3) empowers the state to 'any special provision for women and children'. State policy of the Directive Principles in Part IV of the Indian Constitution pays concern to women directly and has a special bearing on their status. Article 39(a) provides Right to an adequate means of livelihood for men and women. But most of the women could not enjoy the benefits of the Articles of the Constitution due to tradition bound social evils in the society.

Despite constraints, women are passing through a stage of social change.

Indigenous people of Manipur are composed of a number of ethnic communities and tribes in the plain and hills of Manipur. Women in tribal areas enjoyed more freedom of movement compared to their counterparts in the valley. The evils of the dowry system and purdah system does not plague the society. Generally, in the tribal society, divorce is allowed but rarely practiced. No restriction is imposed on the life of the widow in regard to their food, clothes etc., as it is found in the case of a widow from a Hindu family. A widow is allowed to marry again. The "bride price" custom among the tribals or tribes in Manipur does not appear to have attracted the evils of the usual dowry system. But mobility of people from other states, interaction and intermixing of Customs and affluence of some families led to dowry in some cases among the Meitei society.

The economic dependence of women on men is an acknowledged reason for the low status of women. Women have to work hard; sadly their work remains invisible and marginal. Women's physical labour which remains invisible is not counted as work.

Meitei women are not only major economic contributors but they also have a considerable voice in the political sphere. Manjusri Chaki Sircar has remarked in her book "Feminism in a Traditional Society" that in Manipur Valley, the process of Sanskritization failed to work in the socio-economic and religious areas because of the vital presence of female power, which may be described as a kind of feminism. This can be recognized in women's individual self-reliance and collective solidarity". The rapid increase in the number of English medium schools and also the increased number of girl students show the concern of parents for better education of their children. The impact of education is seen in the life style and size of the family.

Education is considered a potent instrument through which the process of modernization of the society could be affected. Now-a-days, in all the communities of Manipur, it is found that girls prefer to select their own life-partners and educated girls are interested in securing jobs to attain not only economic independence but to live a life free from economic difficulties. It is true that working women suffer from role conflict in a conservative society and traditional family set up. Working women have to bear unbearable burdens in the form of physical and mental strains in discharging duties at home and in jobs. There are instances of the husband's denial of the right of the wife over her own earned money or her privileges and obligations but such a situation has been changed to a large extent due to education of women. Many educated women try to assert themselves in different situations. Education gives women mental strength and self confidence to face problems in life.

Unfortunately, illiteracy of adults especially of women stands as a stumbling block in all developmental programmes for which so much importance has been laid in Adult Education Programme, Non-Formal and Informal programmes.

In Manipur, women always played an important role in all spheres of life. (The state is a home to a large number of ethnic groups, including 29 scheduled tribes.) Historical reasons greatly influenced the independent growth of these social groups with varying degrees of cultural development and civilization of whom the Meiteis are the most dominant and advanced nationality.

The tribe-people, who live in a predominance position, are greatly influenced by the linguistic and cultural affinities between the Meiteis and hill-tribes of Manipur and their folklore.

The Meitei Pangal also settled in Manipur since 17th century and adopted the Meitei language as their mother tongue and now form an integral part of the Manipuri society. In Manipur, social harmony which is the basic requirement of a society is maintained by Manipuris unspoiled and unbroken.

Social progress is closely linked with the role women play in society. It would be impossible to discuss the past, the present and the future of humanity without dwelling on the role played by women. Women play a greater role in society that we are aware of. From early period women have dominated a role or a part in the affairs of the society, from the smallest level in the form of a family to the biggest circle of influencing the development of the state.

Due to the influence of various religions like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity which came to Manipur during different period of times in history, which brought in their taboos and belief, the status enjoyed by women of Manipur deteriorated. Still, despite this regression, the position of women in Manipur remained much better than elsewhere in India.

The political participation of women had completely transformed their nature and pattern of life. The shy domesticated and inferior women gave way to bold, strong and confident women engaged in the public sphere. Fortunately, modern changes are taking place in a transitional phase in the societies of Manipur. “Many women have attempted to develop their lives by drawing power through external sources of financial support polity and society. Others however, have tried to sustain strength and confidence by seeking a spiritual path as well. The spirituality of women today remains a relatively uncharted area. The scholarly literature is confined to religious aspects of women’s lives, rules, roles and rituals of women in various religions, superstitious behaviour, myths and symbolic representations in art, sculpture, dance, music, cinema, television and literature or to research on religious practitioners such as Yogis, gurus and renunciants”.¹

This research work also presents a sociological study of modern secular women for the purpose of understanding the nature of their roles in society, politic, economy and religion.

When academicians and activists highlight the “scarcity syndrome” experienced by a majority of the ignored and marginalized rural women in India – their struggle to procure the most basic necessities of life such as food, fuel and water, their minimal control over the conditions and the products of their labour; their passive role in the decision making process within the family – one may then wonder about the spirit that keeps these women alive and ticking. To many urban women, the positive realities of rural life and the well springs of their strength remain hidden.²

The roles played by women in Manipur in different walks of life are the greatest social fabric of Manipur.

Manipuri Women played an important role in the productive process of the state and they are guardians of the

state, always on the forefront defending human rights. The emergence of Meira Paibis or Women Torch Bearers in Manipur is a revolutionary phenomenon.

In order to bring out the various roles played by the women of Manipur it is necessary to study the roles played by women belonging to different communities, because each community has its own social order that influences women by and large. They preserved their culture and social order upto certain extent inspite of the influence of Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Though there are vast differences in their life styles and social structures, there are considerable similarities too. The high status accorded to her womenfolk is one of the prides of Manipur. As their roles widened they are mentally, intellectually and morally equipped to tackle problems of state, terrorism, violence, conflicting problems between state and insurgents.

Women in Manipur have sustained a distinct tradition of female guardianship within a predominantly male dominated society. Their participation in various social causes and religious ceremonies that are central to the cultural ethos of Manipuri society show that patriarchal discourses however, perpetuating, evidently do not always succeed in drowning women out. Women in Manipur are always in the forefront of various social and political movements. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru aptly remarked that "To awaken the society it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move the family moves; the village moves and the nation moves".

The health infrastructure also needs attention and improvement and there is a necessity of conducting health awareness drives. There is an increasing realization among women that incentives have to be provided to help women overcome their backwardness in almost all spheres.

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Role of Meitei Women

(I) THE ROLE OF MEITEI WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Meitei women have a distinctively higher position and status with greater responsibilities than women of other societies. Mrs. Grimwood in her book "My three years in Manipur" has said that "Manipuris do not shut up their women, as is the custom in most parts of India and they are much more enlightened and intelligent in consequences"¹.

Meitei women have inherited social responsibilities in different forms and in a changed situation. According to E.W. Dun "they are very industrious; in this respect the opposite of the men who are lazy and indolent. Most of the works of the country, except the heaviest, are performed by them and they are consequently the main stay of the family circle. All the marketing is done by women and all the work of buying and selling in public, and the carrying to and fro of the articles to be sold; whilst at home they are busily employed in weaving and spinning. It would be difficult to find a more industrious woman in India than the Manipuri."²

There are different categories of women having different characters in the mythology of Manipur. Characters like Panthoibi, Emoinu and Phouoibi etc. shows that Meitei women are bold, courageous, independent and enjoy their due rights and have an honourable place in the society. Their characters have played a great influence on the present day Meitei women of Manipur in their family, social, economic and political lives. Many educated Meitei women are observing traditional norms and practices in their homes and at the same time discharging their respective duties and responsibilities at their work places.

According to Prof. M.C. Arun, women in the family is a submissive individual bound by a number of patriarchal manacles and on the other hand a woman in the market is a unit of forceful collectivity. This peculiar relation between the individual self and collectivity is because of the unique historical experience of the Meitei society that had emerged out of a series of ethnic amalgamation.³

It is a fact that "the worshipping of goddesses was started from ancient period in Manipur".⁴

The position of women in a subordinate status started with the coming of Hinduism in Manipur. But inspite of the strong ideological impact of Hindu Brahmanas, Meitei women have retained their important roles in the society. The majority of women still continue to perform traditionally assigned gendered roles. Individuals, as members of the families form a society. The social relationship between members of the different families is mainly conducted through women. All domestic works in the family are performed by the women irrespective of their class or status. Meitei women usually take the responsibility for the maintenance of the family. In addition to her household duties, she has to participate in the social functions of their localities, or join the "Meira Paibi"s. It is

the local Meira Paibis who are playing a most significant role for the protection of human rights of the people of the state.

They keep a constant vigil day and night against any possible or actual violation of human conduct and rights of their respective localities. These women are quick to point out that they are mothers, sisters and wives. And, as such, they cannot remain indifferent when the human rights of their social members get seriously endangered.

Meitei women were brave and courageous. It can be seen even in the 17th Century from the example of Pithetleima (1652-1666) who was the mother of King Paikhomba who ruled after King Khunjaoba fought the enemy in the absence of the King and went for an expedition at Tangda Village. After the expedition she came to be known as Tangdakhombi or Tangjakhombi.⁵

Pithetleima ruled after King Khunjaoba as he had no heir.⁶

Luckily, the age-old tradition of exercising restraint so as not to inflict physical harm to women at least in the public have also worked in their favour.

As time goes by their status as human rights activists have increased tremendously. The “Meira Paibi”s play a vital role in the context of the Meitei society, not only in their unending attempts to sustain a sense of moral superiority amongst the people of Manipur, but also in their assertion of their domestic relevance in a politically sensitive region.

Therefore, “Meira Paibi”s have become a new political force that challenges the state and its apparatuses for curtailing human freedom and dignity as well as encroaching upon individual liberty. The “Meira Paibi”s from 1980 onwards

changed their role from being *Nasha Bandhis* to that of *Meira Paibis* (torch bearers). According to Prof. Ksh. Bimola Devi, "The social life of Manipur during the last two and half decades was dominated by *Dharnas*, sit-in-protests, demonstrations, rallies, etc. organized by the *Meira Paibis* in every nook and corner of Manipur. The movement was mainly against the injustice meted out by the state authority, against excesses committed by the security personnel, against violation of human rights, etc. The *Meira Paibis* are also actively associated in the movement for the protection of territorial integrity of Manipur in June, July 2001 and other subsequent programmes launched by social organizations like AMUCO (All Manipur United Organisation), UCM (United Committee Manipur) and other like-minded organizations. Among the women who sacrificed their lives and inspired the minds of the people of Manipur were *Pyari*, who died in 1986 and *Th. Monorama*, whose dead body was found abandoned in the next morning of her arrest in 2004. The name of *Irom Chanu Sharmila* stands distinct for fighting against injustice committed against the innocent civilians by the security forces.⁷ When situation compelled then women came out as soldiers and fight the enemy courageously".⁸

For instance, the latest disrobing of 12 women *Meira Paibis* in front of the gates of the Assam Rifles in July 2004 as a non-violent mark of protest against the rape and killing of their fellow member *Monorama Devi* caught the imagination of those who take cursory interest in justice.

Motherly roles of women to look after the welfare of her children, their performance in schools and socialization are spheres in which women play important roles. The situation of conflict and women's engagement in other social activities sometimes greatly affect these responsibilities, which sometimes led to a number of school drop-outs, tendency to join armed-opposition groups among teenagers, taking drugs etc.

In the development of the society, the role of women in the society cannot be ignored as women constituted half of the population of the society.

In Meitei society, there is no strict separation of the sexes in everyday life. They sit together on several festive occasions. This can be seen during the eleven days of Rath Jatra festival, where men and women clap and dance together by singing 'Khubak Isei'. Meitei women show adaptability to different environments and to team up for social and economic survival. Thus, they enjoy a social bond through recreational activities.

In Meitei society, dowry system was absent. However, with the influence of Hinduism, the dowry system became quite predominant. Even though it was not mandatory for the parents to give dowry many economically well to do parents have induced themselves to offering heavy dowries for their daughters in the present state. In Meitei society, it is believed that the concept of dowry has its source in 'Laisemlon Ariba Puja' which mentioned the giving of 'A-oon-pot' as early as 1500 BC.⁹

According to Prof. Gangmumei "with the conversion into Hinduism, some ideals of Hindu women hood had been inculcated. The first instance of Sati burning was in the year 1725 AD when a prince named Murari died his two wives volunteered to be burned along with their husband. The second instance was in 1733 AD; one Khurairakpa of Sapam family died at Chinga and his wife dies along with him. A Brahmin's two wives committed Sati in the same year. Most of these burnings were in the reign of Garibniwas. During the time of Bheigyachandra, it appears that Sati burning was no longer popular."¹⁰

In the Meitei society, parents always adopt equal attitude and behaviour towards their sons and daughters. Even though preference is given to boys, there is no girl-child infanticide.

With the coming of modernity in the society, changes in attitude, behaviour, and dress can be seen in the family lifestyles.

Towards the close of the 20th Century among the Meitei women a class called Elite women of Manipur emerges. We have women who excel in sports – weight lifting (Kunjarani); in boxing; in the field of art and culture; education, business administrations, doctors, engineers etc. In any field they put their heart and mind, Meitei women can do it and will become fore runners and be an example to other women belonging to different societies of Manipur and the world.

(II) THE MEITEI WOMEN'S ROLE IN ECONOMY

Meitei women take major part in the economic life of the state in which they enjoy maximum independence. Women in Meitei society are believed to be of divine origin and culturally esteemed as the defenders of social tranquility. They make crucial economic contribution and hold a distinctive position in social, religious and political life.

“The process of Sanskritisation failed to work in the social economic and religious areas because of the vital presence of female power which may be described as a kind of feminism”.¹¹

Meitei women on the whole are docile and submissive, but on any social issues they are assertive at collective level. In a Meitei proverb it is said “a man who does not go to Loisang and a woman who does not go to the market both are worthless”.¹²

Historically, Meitei women's role widened after the Seven Years devastation. The devastation of the male population in the Seven Years war made her to take up the responsibility of trade and economic activities. Moreover, the advent of

colonialism in 1891 integrated Manipur to a wider capitalist system and improved transportation network enabled them to extend their trading activities beyond Manipur.

According to B. Kulachandra Singh “while the Pacha Loishang and women’s right to appeal have disappeared over the time, the institution of keithel and women’s economic role have persisted amidst the rising hardships. Women also continued to perform traditionally assigned gendered roles such as domestic chores and weeding during paddy season. Subsequent integration of Manipur has not altered the roles of women”.¹³

Since agriculture is the main occupation of the people of Manipur, women participated equally with men in cultivation work and also at the time of harvesting. In the fields women work in teams known as “Khutlang” on payment of money in exchange of work. Sometimes they work as hired labours in order to earn extra income. The Khutlang organisation as a seasonal labour team is a built-in mechanism in agricultural economy both for coordinating the activities of woman individuals, as well as for perpetuating a smooth functioning of the organisation in production.¹⁴

In a Meitei society, women who are at the ages of forty and sixty appear to have avenues of economic activities. She can be a wholesale trader or work as a broker between the outside agent and the village weavers. She can open a shop or a hotel in the market or in front of her home.

An interesting aspect of the economic system prevalent among the Meitei women is the Marup system, a type of co-operative credit and savings organization. There are different types of Marup called Luhongba Marup, Cheng Marup, Phi Marup or Paise Marup. The Marup is also an important institution for economic as well as social bonding.

The Marup at Keithel provides an opportunity for making new contacts for women. In Manipur, especially in the valley, the market is run by the women and the transaction of selling and buying is solely done by women.

There are two categories of women in the market. Women become sellers on essential commodities and women as buyers of the same.

In the Khwairamband Market, women who are allotted reserved seats by the Imphal Municipal Council sell a particular commodity. On the other hand there are women who are not allotted seats but who sell their commodities to the women of the first category. The selling and buying of the commodity is usually done in the early hours of the day.

The participation of Meitei women in different socio-economic activities and their roles and responsibilities towards the family members as girl-child, adult, sister, daughter, wife and mother are clearly demarcated. They are duly confined within the four walls and enjoy an enviable freedom of movement in a patrilineal society in contrast to the restricted movements on woman elsewhere.¹⁵

Mrs. Grimwood rightly remarked that "The Manipuris do not shut up their woman as is the custom in most part of India, and they are much enlightened and intelligent in consequences".¹⁶ R. Brown also remarked that it would be difficult to find a more industrious woman in India than the Manipuris.¹⁷

There are also other women whose business is to sell eatable things like meals, tea, pakoura, etc to the women vendors and other women coming to the market. There are also some women who give loans to other women in the market and earn daily interest and thereby add to their family income.¹⁸

Weaving is another source of income for women both in rural and urban areas. The magic of spider's web is said to have inspired weaving in Manipur. Meiteis believe that Leimaren – the goddess of wealth and prosperity entrusted weaving to women to ensure the well being of the society. The use of light shuttle is very important in the history of Manipur. In no time it became the most widely used loom. Meitei women instead of weaving for her family started weaving for the market too. Weaving is a year long pursuit in Manipur. It provides great economic advantages to women. Artistic designs are created and weaving as an art is at its best on such looms. Weaving has reached a high level of accomplishment and its continuation as a profession or a work of art is attributed not only to economic factors alone.

Finer fabrics with new designs are the favourite of the day and the front runner is a woman named Rani. She taught others how to weave. She also buys the finished products of others and sells them in the market.

Chungkham Rani a weaver, designer and entrepreneur lives in Wangkhei. She lost her husband at a tender age of 21 years. Dismissing the advice of remarriages Rani returned to maternal house and instead concentrated on magical colours and skilful designs in clothes she produced on her loom.¹⁹

She also made silk phi which was called "Engineer Phi". And on these new range of Phi, Rani also revived old and traditional designs like Namthang Khuthat, Luhong Phijin, Ningkham Mayek, Thambal Chepki, Kanap Phibal, Salai Mayek, Lanngam Phi, etc. In her modern design Rani used different types of flowers such as Wakhong, Thambal, Siroi Lily, Takhellei, Leihao, Juba Kusum, Nongyin, etc.

Though Rani's artistic designs and her contribution to the handloom industry are well known, she is yet to get due

official recognition at par with her achievement. However, she received certificates of honour for her outstanding contribution and achievement from both the state and the national governments.

In fact, one of the means of Manipur's progress is weaving as it has tremendous export potentials. According to legends "Ima Leimaren" took charge of the market to bring peace and harmony. Women maintain the tradition as they are considered the descendents of 'Ima'.

Handloom products have a wide market not only in Manipur but also outside the state. Traditionally Meitei women weave only for the household. Soon, she realized that weaving could be a reliable source of income. Thus a mutually beneficial relationship began between the vendor and the weaver. The trader provided the weaver with yarn and the weaver in turn brings in her merchandise. However, it is sad to know that the earnings are not commensurate with that of the traders. Entrepreneurs like Bimolata are experimenting with the traditional motives and have found many usages and means to earn more income.

Another designer and entrepreneur is Ng. Bimolata. In her range of marvelously embroidered gossamery innaphi which captures the swan in mid flight and the flowers of heaven among many women of Manipur find their dreams unfolding. And the realization of their dreams is closely interlinked with Bimolata's own dreams. Bimolata opened her shop from the loan she got from Prime Minister Rojgar Yojna (PMRY). The full-fledged production cum-training unit started giving intensive training to educated unemployed girls and women of the society. Bimolata has been instrumental in organizing various fashion shows in the state. She also participated in many exhibitions (Melas) across the country. Not only this she also participated

in many entrepreneurship development programmes (EDP) vendor development programmes, etc.

There are many Meitei women who got National Awards in textile designing. Demands for hand woven saris brought in sophisticated looms. Rani-phi and saris from Rani's shop are in great demand. Shops like "Ningthibi Collection" and "Mem's" are exclusively run by women alone. Realising the commercial potentiality, the Ministry of Textiles established a Weavers' Service Centre to impart training and help the weavers in their trade.

Educated Meitei women's role and contributions is immense. There are many educated women working in different government and semi-government services thereby contributing substantial share to the household income.

Apart from these women, there are some women who spend their days toiling hard in the river banks to gather sand and shingles. Their daily earnings range from Rs.60 to Rs.100. With no fixed time for work, these women work as demanded. Working for long hours with lots of physical exertions has taken toll on the health of these women. For these women the sand granules are treasure. With no minimum wage standard, no health care facilities, no insurance for emergencies, they carry on with their work with utmost pride and dedication. May be it is time their needs are taken into consideration and some kind of welfare activities are taken up. In spite of their labour and contributions in the family maintenance they are not given their due share. Though men and women work equally, women are not given equal wages as male labourers. This shows that Manipuri women are given lower economic position and status in the society in spite of the extent of labour given equally.

(III) MEITEI WOMEN'S ROLE IN POLITICS

In India, the constitution guarantees equality of status to all citizens, which is implicit in the preamble, the

fundamental rights and directive principles of state policy. Independent India has accorded equal rights and privileges in all spheres of life, be it social, economic or political.²⁰ According to Prof. M.C. Arun of Manipur University's Anthropology Department "Our deep rooted hypocrisy toward man and woman in relation to the power equation comes out sharply when a woman is penalized or ostracized for indulging in habits beyond the traditional settings".²¹

Thus, there is no legal obstacle today in the path of the women preventing them from assuming an equal status with men. In Manipur, Meitei women played an important role in shaping the policies and programmes of the state in their individuals and collective capacities. Right from the reign of Pakhangba in 33 AD women actively participated in the administration and state policies as can be seen when Queen Laisana, wife of Pakhangba became the head of the 'Kuchu', an administrative body, along with nine other women. They were known as Laishram Pham. The Kuchu was again divided into two i.e. Lakhong and Laton. The members of Lakhong were the mothers of the King and the Queen and other older women. Other fifteen women known as 'Achoubi' assisted them. Every morning they would discuss the internal matters of the palace. These bodies had the power to judge on the King if he did not follow the rules prescribed by the Lakhong. Laton is also known as 'Leimakhubi Phamlup' which consisted of twelve women members under the leadership of Leimakhubi. Leimakhubi Phamlup discussed the matters of the palace and the state. It is concerned with finance, food-grains, cloth, infantry etc. Thus women were involved in the administration of the state.

During this period, there was also a separate court which was known as 'Pacha Loishang' consisting of women only.

Meitei women inherited an established tradition of movement for social justice, administrative oppressions and

misrule of the state authority. The history of Manipur reveals a role of the people, their love for independence. During the Seven Years' devastation or Chahi Taret Khuntakpa (1819-1826), Meitei women rendered valuable help to the princes and freedom fighters of Manipur in their struggle to liberate the land from the hands of the Burmese. Meitei women emerged as a strong political force in collective capacity during the British period. The British authorities took up vigorous measure against the villages which took active part in the Anglo-Manipuri War, 1891. From these villages the British had collected a large number of people and used them as workers on the construction of Mao-Manipur Road". The autocratic policy of the British authorities became unbearable for the people of Manipur.²²

According to Dr. Chandramani Singh, "The Pressure of colonization has left a mark on the courageous Meitei male population. Meitei men in the past were men of courage and men of pride. Since the British came to Manipur, they have lost it. They wanted to work as servants. They have lost their 'national character'. Our women retained their character. They remain independent and confident. Time has not changed this."²³

In Manipur, large market centres run by women have a history of providing moral consensus on the political problems of the state, because market is an important venue of social and political interaction. "In the years 1939 and 1904, the state witnessed a great mass movement against colonial and feudal authority of the state solely by the women of Manipur. These movements are the turning points in the emergence of a political and national consciousness."²⁴

Women voiced their grievances against the oppressive measures of the British with the introduction of the new colonial

administrative system in Manipur. Movements were launched against the increase in water tax rate and Lallup system. These movements "greatly help in the growth of the political and national consciousness."²⁵

Again in 1938-39 there was a poor harvest in Manipur. It was caused by several factors. Excessive rainfall in 1939 damaged the standing crops and vegetables. There was near famine in the land due to this. Over and above this the British policy of exporting the rice outside Manipur resulted in the scarcity of rice in the market. Another deep rooted cause of the movement was due to the irregularities and malpractices in the administration of the state. Administrative reports of Manipur of December 1939 said that one Aribam Chaobiton Devi from Tera Keithel organized a small group of about five women and tried to stop the bullock carts carrying paddy for the Marwari traders.

In no time all the women of Khwairamband Bazaar dealing in different trades joined the movement and started to demand the export of rice to be stopped and the workings of the rice mills in Manipur. The movement was spontaneous and very little time was taken in building up the movement. From this movement the demand for introduction of democracy emerged for the first time in Manipur. It is also a fact that the demand for change is always met with resistance".²⁶

This proved that women of Manipur are always ready to take mass political action if any action of the Government affected the interest of the people. Meitei women are always alert in protecting the social and political rights of the people. The women of Manipur enjoyed universal adult franchise for the first time in 1948 held under the Manipur State Constitution Act 1947. Women who had attained the age of 21 years exercised their franchise in electing the members of the Manipur State Assembly. It was an important landmark in the political history

of Manipur where women were granted adult franchise without any struggle.

Since 1952, Manipuri women have been participating in the political process of the state as voters in every elections. In the parliamentary and Electoral college elections in 1952, Ishwari Devi, wife of late Maharaja Bodhchandra Singh contested election as an independent in the parliamentary constituency. M.K. Binodini contested from Khurai constituency in the Electoral College election as an All Manipur National Union (AMNU) candidate and was elected. But Ishwari Devi was not elected. In the Territorial Council elections in 1957, another women called Smt. Shabi Devi contested as a Communist candidate from Wangkhei Kongba constituency. But she was defeated. There were female members in the Territorial Assembly from 1963-69 by means of nominations. They are Smt. R.K. Mukhra Devi and Smt. A. Bimola Devi and two tribal women were also nominated.

In the Assembly Elections held in 1972, and mid-term elections held in 1974, no women candidate got elected. Only in the year 1992 by-election, Smt. K. Apabi Devi, wife of the sitting MLA K. Bira Singh got elected on Congress ticket after the sudden demise of her husband.

In the Assembly election held in February, 2000, out of the 11 (eleven) women candidates, only Smt. W. Leima Devi got elected.

In the 8th Assembly election, 2002, out of the seven women candidates, only Smt. W. Leima Devi won the election.

In the 9th Assembly election 2007(Mid Term), Smt. Okram Landhoni Devi, wife of Shri O. Ibohi Singh, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Manipur, was elected from the Khangabok Assembly Constituency.

In Manipur, women could hardly get elected in the Parliamentary elections to join the higher political decision making body.

In the local bodies like Municipalities and Panchayats, after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 and 1993, 33% of the total seats were reserved for women. Even in the Zila Parishad and Gram Panchayat elections, women were elected as Pradhans and Gram Panchayat members on the basis of reservations.

In spite of their involvement and the Panchayati Raj system, women are not free from the power of men from influencing their decisions and actions. Sometimes, these elected women were not capable of addressing the gender issues because most of them were not educated and lacked awareness of the importance of women's participation in the decision making process.

The political role of Meitei women, by and large, is passive but they are socially active. This is partially due to the behavioural constraints the women suffer from. Moreover the society at large is still conservative and clings steadfastly to the traditional role of women as home makers.²⁷ Women are involved in the women's wings of the various political parties but they have not emerged as leaders at party level.

In order to initiate a breakthrough and to accelerate development with gender equity, social networks of women should be strengthened and women's participation in the decision making should be enhanced. Family members also should co-operate by sharing family responsibilities.

(IV) RELIGIOUS ROLE OF MEITEI WOMEN

Religion has been a constant function in the growth of human civilization. It is readily accepted that "all know-societies

have been to some degree religions”²⁸ It has also been stated that ... given the biological and social nature of man on this planet, some kind of religious system is a cultural universal: no human society can get along without a religion any more than it can survive without an economic system. The actual cultural content found in the religions of different societies may vary enormously, but underlying this diversity there may be impressive similarities in basic functions, involving the culturally prescribed solutions of human social and psychological problems and the way of expressing and reaffirming the central values of a society. Viewed in this light, religion appears to be an essential ingredient of society.²⁹

Historically, the religion of the Meiteis can be broadly divided into two namely (i) Traditional religion or Pre-Hindu religion of Manipur, and (ii) the advent and rise of Hinduism in Manipur. R.K. Jhaljit is of the view that the Meiteis worshipped natural objects like Fire, the Sun, Soraren (the God of rain and thunders), the God of the homestead, Wind etc.³⁰

About the traditional Meitei religion J. Shakespear states that “The worship of the Umanglai or forest God and other lesser supernatural beings, such as, Sa-roi-nga-roi, evil spirits which are always on the look-out to injure human beings: The Hellois, beautiful female forms which lure foolish men into waste places and then disappear, leaving their victims bereft of reason and Hingchabis and Witches. Originally, there were only nine of these forest gods and seven goddesses, but these have now increased to 364 and the pundits claim that from their books they can trace the pedigree of every one of these 364 divinities back to one or other of the original nine gods and seven goddesses.”³¹

The ideas of Hinduism which began to arrive in Manipur with the immigration of a group of people from North India who are referred as Nongchup Haram or Westerners in the

traditional manuscripts came to be known Bamon or Brahmin since the time of Pamheiba or Garibaniwaza.³²

Cheitharol Kumbaba and Sanamahi Laikan record the destruction by Garibaniwaza of Abodes of nine Umanglais were destroyed.³³

The king started constructing new shrines for Hindu gods and goddesses of the Ramanandi cult. But, inspite of all out efforts of the King and his guru Shanta Das they could not root out the traditional belief of the Meiteis altogether. After facing strong resistance from the people led by one great Maichou popularly known as Lourembam Khongnang Thaba, King Garibniwaza gave royal permission for the worship of the old faith of the Meiteis.

The rise of Vaishnava form of Hinduism reached its pinnacle during the time of King Jai Singh or Bhagyachandra (1763 – 1798 AD). Jai Singh spared no pains to bring about spiritual and material regeneration of his country. His daughters would look after the 'Pujas of Govindaji'. Among the Maha Raj Kumaris, Sija Lairoibi, through her devotion to Govindaji, had high spiritual attainments. Her dance and song reflected her intense devotion. It was 'Lairoibi Sija' the 'Radha of Manipur' who gave concrete shape to an extremely devotional form of dance, conceived by her father Jai Singh. This is the history of the origin of the famous "Rasa dance of Manipur". The princess did not marry. She used to dance before Govindaji, playing the part of 'Rajeswari' she also composed some devotional songs in Bengali to sing for the pleasure of her beloved Lord Govindaji.³⁴ Sija Lairoibi accompanied her father upto Nabadwip where she spent her days in singing and meditating to Lord Krishna.

Every Meitei home has a tulsipung (basil plant on an earthen mound) in the courtyard as a sign of adherence to the

Vaishnava faith. Almost all Meitei women, orthodox men and children who were Vaishnavites wear Chandan marks on their nose and foreheads.³⁵

Meiteis women's role in religious life of the society is very unique, especially compared to other Hindu societies in India. The traditional roles of Meitei women are too deep rooted to be subverted by Brahmanic influence. In the Meitei society apart from the Maibis, there are also women who are somewhat religions specialist. They were called Kithumpuba, or Sadhika (holy female). They are self-styled holy people without any formal training or recognition from the Loishang. They can only perform senmit and rites but cannot attend Lai Haraoba festivals. These women wear normal clothes but each of them has personal idiosyncrasies, concerning food colour of dress or some other aspect of lifestyle.

These Sadhika sometimes give prediction and some politicians also go to them for pre-dedication and protection. They were known to have got sudden power and received mantra in a dream or trance.

In fact, while vaishnava culture received major attention from the royal administration, the ancient faith of the Meiteis retained its place in the core religions conceived of the society. Even though sanskritic rituals were introduced into Meitei society these rituals are modified to suit the Meitei ethos. It can be seen in the replacement of Bhratridvitiya (brothers' ritual and feast) with Ningon Chak-Kouba (sister's and daughter's feast) in the mid nineteenth century. This feast or Ningol Chak-kouba strengthened the brother and sister bond of love and also gave security for the sister in a rigidly male dominated society.

Therefore, Meitei religious life is marked by the co-existence of the traditional belief and Vaishnavite Hindu faith.

In religious festivals equal status with men is given to women. In Manipur, women dancing in ceremonies are regarded as 'thougal' (dedication) cuts across all social classes and age groups.

In Meitei society, it is the duty of the women to worship god and goddesses for the welfare and prosperity of the community and the state. Therefore, in every Meitei home the worship of Sanamahi can be found. Hinduism had forbidden women to sing and dance in the ritual arena because the Brahmans regarded them as polluting agents. The present popularity of women Sankirtana can be attributed in part to the courage and seal of a famous female Sankirtana singer called Manimacha Devi. She was the first professional woman to give up the plain looking attire and wear the traditional attire with gold jewelries. She bravely rejected the use of tiny cymbals (manjera) and adopted large khartal (large cymbal) till then used by men. Manimacha Devi formed Sankirtana group of women and started to perform like group of men.

In the midst of such an exuberant Vaishnava environment, the traditional system and belief maintains its strength and character in the Meitei society. Instead of the Brahman priests the Meitei Maibas and especially Maibis play highly important roles in officiating for Meitei Lai worship. Maibis are Manipuri origin and they got assimilated into the social system of the Meiteis. A woman can become a Maibi if she becomes possessed at an early age. But older woman of the age of 50 or 60 can also become a Maibi. Once a woman becomes a Maibi, she does not conform to the standard of Meitei social roles.

The most interesting aspect of a Maibi role is that she holds a special ritual status outside the nonuse of the social frame-work for women. The dress of the Maibi is different from other women of Meitei society. The 'phanek' and 'chaddar' are

all white and additional waist wrapper also of white colour is worn on top of the 'phanek'. A long sleeved white blouse is worn and flowers are usually placed in the hair and behind the ears.

"In the contemporary society, the social religious functions of the 'Lai Haraoba' have been greatly affected. During the early and monarchical times its functions was to bring about social solidarity amongst the people of the land; its functions was to serve as a kind of cementing force and establish the control of the monarch over the people through the agency of religious institutions like Pundit Loishang. The Pundit Loishang controlled the performance of the Lai Haraoba festivals by granting permission, sending Maiba, Maibis and pena singers and in some cases sending royal horses, elephants etc for the performance of a Lai Haraoba. However, due to the change in the political and social systems of Manipur, particularly after the abolition of monarchical system and 'merger' of Manipur with the Indian union on 15th October, 1949, the control of Pundit Loishang in the religious matter of the land has been greatly diminished if not lost altogether. Whatever little power and privileges left for the king was also removed in 1972. Under this changed political system, the king of Manipur lost its meaning even in the religious system, and the same was the case with other institutions associated with the monarchical system such as Pundit Loishang. This process of democratization in the body polity and society of Manipur in turn affected the social role of Lai Haraoba, which is, of course, an inseparable part of the traditional religion of Manipur. There has been recently a great increase in the number of traditional deities for which Lai Haraoba is performed. These trends reflect the urge to re-assert the unique cultural identity of the indigenous people of the land".³⁶

It is religious belief which empowers these women mystics and through which they can claim moral power in the name of God. And it is this belief that cut across gender divisions as it

is by definition shared by men and women. It neither individuated nor apparently emerged from their conviction of a subjection to God and their dedication to a higher cause, which enable them to overcome certain man-made customs and which provides them with a sense of intimacy with the divine. The mysticism of the Maibis allows them freedom to move above and beyond not only from an expected role of a domesticated housewife or a nurturing mother, but also the precondition for access to wisdom of self sufficiency and spiritual growth. The break with domesticity is also in effect a rejection of a primary domain where sexuality is customarily regulated.

The Maibis of Manipur reflect an interchangeable aspect of priesthood and shamanism. They can take on the roles of both priestesses performing religions rites and mystics preoccupied with acts of exorcism and healing or cursing. The old tradition of paying homage to local Meitei lai or gods merged with the other forms of appeasing more popular gods such as, Krishna, Shiva, etc. The invasion of the vaishnavite tradition into the social strata of the Meitei society, could not stop women devotees and women mystics to participate in the religions rites of the Meiteis.

The influx of the Vaishnav tradition of worship resulted simultaneously in the transgression and reformulation of patriarchal ideologies. In the course of time, the Maibis became sometimes the preferred mediums than their male counterparts. The Maibas in some cases for conducting religions affairs in the palace and at other religious places in Manipur.

There is an implicit understanding here that gender is both a social function and an expressive mode, that gender is culturally constructed and so gender function may be interchanged.

The religious fervour of the Maibis and the mystical overtones that surround their very being empowers them and to a large extent enables them to transcend andocentric cultural categories. In Manipur, the Maibis occupy a position that is no less that of a cultural connoisseur. The lethal combination of the Meira Paibis who would agitate against perceived threats to their society and the Maibis who would give them complete spiritual support reflect the peculiar conditions of women's lived experiences within the Manipuri society, ordinarily the shared experiences of a 'subculture' may be marginal to the male public/political world, but that is equally acknowledged and indispensable to the healthy functioning of a balanced society. The energies of the women participants in the various social and religious movements is more than often channeled into strong female bonding networks that cut across caste and class structures.

An exploration of the tradition of the Maibis not only tells one about certain social value and pressure operating in the Manipuri society but also offers a glimpse into the symbolic universe of the local culture in which its various traditions are embedded.

Thus, Meitei women's role in religion is something unique. Unlike other parts of India, there is no restriction for women to participate in the religious Kirtans or festivals observed in the temples. Women are allowed to sing in the Shradha ceremony as well as in weddings. In spite of being patriarchal society Meitei women participated actively in every religious festival observed in the society.

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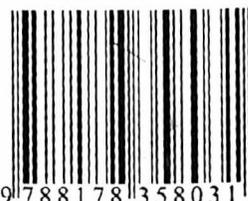
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ISBN: 978-81-7835-803-1



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