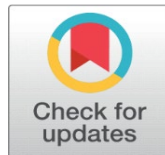


EMPOWERMENT AND WOMEN IN POLITICS: A STUDY OF QUEEN MAISNAM KUMUDINI IN B.M. MAISNAMBA'S NINGTHEMNUBEE

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ABSTRACT

In her book *The Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women Who Made History*, Teresa Rehman (2017) quotes about the collective strength of Manipuri women – “Once we are out of the house and are with women, we don’t care about our family and mundane affairs. Ours is a community in itself. We don’t care what husbands, sons, or our daughters-in-law will think. We feel empowered to take our own decisions.” (p. 20) Women in Manipur have been known for their unique status and their representation in shaping the historiography of the state. Apart from their role as housewives and caretakers, they also took a prominent role in policy framing and governance of the family and the state. It has been witnessed that during the time, the administration of the state was influenced by the two Nupi Lan (Women wars) in 1904 and 1939 as “The Nupi Lan, which started as an agitation by the Manipuri women against the economic policies of the Maharaja and the Marwari monopolists, later on changed its character to become a movement for constitutional and administrative reform in Manipur” (Yambem, 1971, p. 325). The character of Maisnam Kumudini (Ponglenkhombi) in B.M. Maisnamba’s (2006, 2023) *Ningthemnubee* will be analyzed to expose the power and representation of women in state formation and politics. Kumudini, the queen regent and mother of King Chandrakirti (1831-1886), is considered one of the most influential ladies in Manipuri History. Therefore, the paper will also focus on how women took responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in the kingdom, thereby analyzing the roles of mediator, ruler as well as a mother. Also, the analysis will delve further to bring out the status of women, their empowerment, and their representation in the historiography of Manipur as represented in the novel.

Keywords: Authority, Manipur, Politics, Power, Representation, Women

1. INTRODUCTION

As India has declared “Gender Equality and Empowering All Women and Girls” as a historical achievement of the G20 for gender equality, women empowerment, and women-led development, the empowerment of women in all affairs, politically, socially and individually, becomes an essential part of development. With its focus on women-led development, India’s G20 Presidency becomes a torchbearer for progress for women’s empowerment worldwide. Accordingly,

...Nari Shakti (the power of women) is celebrated in all spheres of the economy and society. Building on this vision, India’s G20 Presidency has shifted the focus for the first time from women’s development to women-led development. (Web)

Therefore, there arises the necessity for women’s involvement in different aspects of the workplace to bridge the gender gap between the sexes. In this context,

the role of women in Manipur is put forth for analysis to align with the themes of the G20 women empowerment. As it has been cited historically, women in Manipur have played a crucial role in a vast spectrum of society by contributing prominently to political, economic, and cultural aspects. They are more independent, courageous, skilled, and hardworking as compared to women of other communities. Hence, the Manipuri women contributed significantly to every part of social activities. T.C. Hodson (1908), the then Political Agent in Manipur, exclaimed in his book *The Meithei* about the association of Manipuri women in social and political affairs:

The women hold a high and free position in Manipur, all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them. The habit of the country is to have bazaars at convenient spots by the roadside, where a handful of women congregate at the early hour. (p.23)

Manipur is a state situated in the North-Eastern part of India, which comprises varied ethnic tribes, with Meitei as the major ethnic community. Meitei women are popular for their active participation in not only economic spheres but have exhibited their collective effort in politics, as witnessed in the Two Nupi Lans (Women's Wars) in 1904 and 1939. In this regard, Sonamani Yambem (1971) in his article, "Nupi Lan: Manipur Women's Agitation 1939", said:

The Nupi Lan, which started as an agitation by the Manipuri women against the economic policies of the Maharaja and the Marwari monopolists, later on changed its character to become a movement for constitutional and administrative reform in Manipur (p. 325).

These two wars represented the role of women in reforming and framing the administrative rules of the state. The Meitei women are also popular for their active participation in social activism in protecting justice and civil rights and in controlling drug addictions and alcohol addiction, which they are collectively known as the "Meira Paibis" (Women torch bearers). Teresa Rehman (2017), in her book *The Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women Who Made History*, gives her perspective on the collective strength of Manipuri women. During her interview with the twelve mothers, one of the mothers expressing her participation in the naked protest said:

Once we are out of the house and are with women, we don't care about our family and mundane affairs. Ours is a community in itself. We don't care what husbands, sons, or our daughters-in-law will think. We feel empowered to take our own decisions. (p.20)

The collective strength of women has been profoundly expressed in the above statement. Women "themselves" form "a community" in itself, and within this collectivism, no force can impede. Women in Manipur have been known for their unique status and their representation in shaping the historiography of the state. Apart from their role as housewives and caretakers, they also took a prominent role in policy framing and governance of the family and the state. "Meitei women's socio-economic behaviors is to some extent similar to that of women in southeast Asian societies of Burma, Java and Malasia (Sircar, 1984, p. 7). They are similar in exercising their freedom of economy and political rights, their stability and controlling their household.

This paper will investigate the participation of women in Manipur, past and present, and how this representation empowers women in their social and political life. The character of Maisnam Kumudini (Ponglenkhombi) in B.M. Maisnamba's *Ningthemnubee* (2006, 2023) will be analyzed to expose the power and representation of women in state formation and politics. Kumudini, the queen regent and mother of King Chandrakirti (1831-1886), is considered one of the most influential ladies in Manipuri History. So, the paper will also focus on how women

took responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in the ancient kingdom and how their involvement and empowerment could unfold the gender gaps in the present context, aligning with the theme of G20, thereby analyzing the roles played by women in ancient times as well as present times. Furthermore, the analysis will delve into the differences in the status of women (past and present), their empowerment, and their representation in the historiography of Manipur as represented in the novel.

2. WOMEN IN ADMINISTRATION: PONGLENKHOMBI IN NINGTHEMNUBEE

The consciousness of women's participation in socio-political and economic activities has necessarily become an integral part of historiography. As women play fundamental roles in determining the destiny of a nation, the recognition of their role and contribution to society becomes necessary. On the role of women in Manipur, Captain Dunn E.W(1992) in his "Gazetteer of Manipur, 1975", explained:

The Women of Manipur...they are very industrious...all the marketings is done by women, all the works of buying and selling in public, and carrying to and fro of all 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 (p. 17).

Thus, the Meitei women hold high and free positions in Manipur, thereby balancing the economy and administration of the state. Unfortunately, the position of Meitei women and their role in society have been neglected and discounted, thereby leading to the degradation of women's conditions in contemporary times.

Belonging to Modern Manipuri literature, B.M. Maisnamba engrosses himself in delineating the strong female characters in many of his fiction. He investigates the narrative elements of the role of women in Manipur history and infuses the elements of boldness and sometimes rebellious women in his fiction through his variant of women characters. Among his greatest collections, Ningthemnubee (2006, 2023) is the first-ever trilogy produced in Manipuri Literature. B.M. Maisnamba is one of the most celebrated modern writers of Manipur, whose writings reflected a challenging attitude toward the traditional values associated with women in society. Brajamani Maisnamba, in short, B.M. Maisnamba, is also one of the acclaimed historical writers, and most of the fiction foregrounds the history of Manipur and the trajectory of historical accounts affecting the characters of his novels. Most of his works deal with women's issues, their role, and representation in society. The idea of "powerful women" or "women in power politics" are the requisite elements in most of his novels.

In order to trail the path of women in politics and the prominent role played by women in ancient Manipur, the character of Ponglenkhombi is taken from Ningthemnubee (Trilogy). As the title indicates, it narrates the stories of different ladies in the palace, including Queen Ponglenkhombi, other Queens, royal attendants, and most importantly, concubines. Furthermore, it highlights the array of issues surrounding women in the royal palace. For instance, they were involved in royal collusions, duties, political conspiracies, and sacrifices to safeguard the kingdom of Manipur. To explain it more extensively, the term "Ningthemnubee" suggests the royal maidservants and concubines. It was used to denote the Ladies of Ningthem (the king) or the "Ladies in the Palace," individually or collectively. In ancient times, the King kept many wives or Ningthemnubee openly or secretly, under some customary laws, for personal needs or political strategy.

Ponglenkhombi was the second wife of Chinglen Nongdrenkhomba (1788–1834AD), also known as King Gambhir Singh, and the mother of King Ningthempishak, Maharaja Chandrakirti. Many names have been used to describe her—Maisnam Kumudini, Leimabi, Ku-Leima, Ku-Tombi, Miren-Ningthemnubee, and Chasat Ngambi. Though a real historical personage, she is tinged with the fictional aspect of the novel. She has been represented as the most powerful woman with the reign of royal politics in her hands. From controlling the royal concubines or Ningthemnubees to the decision-making in the process of choosing a wife for the king, she was pivotal in royal politics as she was the queen regent who was also meticulous in monitoring the political scenario of the Meitei palace thereby balancing her administration through various franchises of power. Whatever happens inside the palace or in the kingdom should be disclosed to her first before the king or anyone else. Even though there was a king and many brave soldiers, she framed strategies and took firm steps to control disorders to make the kingdom peaceful. Her power and superiority represented women's empowerment in ancient times in the palace of Manipur. No one dared to counter and question her decision. Her stature was such that whatsoever she had decided should be accomplished and implemented. Her authority and power are narrated in the novel as:

The one inner thought of Maisnam Kumudini is that no one can imitate her, whatever decision she has taken. She does not speak anything. She is raising her finger high. It is a sign of expressing to remain silent. (Maisnamba, 2023, p.173)

Since the history of Manipur has been marred with sibling rivalries and wars among the royal blood for the throne and power, Ponglenkhombi took firm steps and measures to protect the throne of her son from enemies, conspiracies, and unwanted forces. During that time the royal power was threatened by many internal or external invaders. Accordingly, she acted as a loving mother as well as a tyrant ruler to protect the throne and her kingdom. B.M. Maisnamba described how people perceived Ponglenkhombi. She has been called a monster due to her ferocious quality, a loving mother for her caring attitude, and she was loved by everyone.

After the Seven Years Devastation, also known as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa, which occurred from 1819 AD to 1826 AD, King Gambhir Singh, with his queen, Ponglenkhombi, fled to Cachar to re-organized soldiers and waged war against King Nunglenkhomba and restored the Meitei Thorne. Her role in regaining the throne of her king displayed the presence of women in decision-making, administration, and even in war during ancient times.

History has chronicled the courage and wisdom of many queens participating in politics and decision-making. Despite the overwhelming presence of gutsy and spirited women in the history of Manipur, women's empowerment in the present time is directed towards the collective aspect of women, thus emphasizing the role of Meira Paibis. The individuality of women has been neglected, and the potentiality of women individually is not explored much in contemporary Manipur. In politics, even though the constitution of India has given equal status irrespective of gender, we could see the depletion of women's participation in politics. The question poses a serious issue of suppression of women in society and the apprehension of trusting women's capability in the decision-making and framing of policies. Women, though, have rendered a powerful force as a group, but individual participation is much less.

The decline in the ratio of women in politics may have some inherent reasons. Therefore, there is a need to go back to the ancient texts and archives to locate the participation and empowerment of women in Manipur. Ponglenkhombi was not only a mother to King Chandrakirti but also a queen regent whose involvement in political intrigue and governance had outshined any other women. She was the most

powerful female ruler who exercised her power in the political and internal matters of the state. As quoted in Wikipedia,

After the death of her husband at an early age, she took full responsibility to protect her minor son, Prince Chandrakirti, from the evil plots of palace intrigues. After her son ascended the throne of the Manipur kingdom, she is best known for being the most extraordinary royal lady holding the utmost powers in history. (Web)

Moreover, in the Puya (the archived manuscript), Ponglenkhombi was referred to as a devoted woman to King Gambhir Singh. She played a fundamental role in the imperial court, supporting her husband politically, socially, and culturally. Therefore, after the death of her husband, she entrusted Narasingh and Debendra, whom her husband trusted the most to rule the palace. With their support, she made her only two-year-old son Ningthem Pishak, the King of Manipur. Nevertheless, she was an astute woman who was cautious in protecting the royal palace from power politics. She exclaimed, "Whatever it may be, I have to save the throne of my son!" (Maisnamba, 2023, p.193). To maintain peace in the imperial court, she planned to kill her most entrusted brother, Narasingh and even used women in her political games as a weapon to negotiate with the opposite troops during many wars.

3. CONCLUSION

Women in Manipur have proved time and again that they are equal to men in many areas. Looking back in the historical context of Manipur, there were a number of women who took great roles and responsibilities in the administrative policies of the Meitei Kingdom. Narrating the role of powerful women in Manipur, history has witnessed Goddess Yabirok, considered the original mother of the Ningthouja clan, the astute worrier, Queen Linthoinganbi, who protected the kingdom of her husband from external invasions. Also, the wife of King Pamheiba, Gomati, who fought many battles for the throne of her son, may be mentioned. It may also be referred that Queen Laisana, wife of Pakhangba was the head of the administrative body of the kingdom called "Kuchu".

Though B. M. Maisnamba has represented Ponglenkhombi through his historical rendition, the role of queen Ponglenkhombi is also written in the history of Manipur with golden color. She sacrificed her whole life for her husband, for her son, and for the Meitei throne. She has been regarded as the most powerful woman in the historiography of Manipur, as she has written a narrative of the kingdom that represents women as an authoritarian power in administrative policies and the process of decision-making of the state. With her wits and ample knowledge in administration and palace politics, she betrothed her son as the king of the Manipur kingdom for a long period of time.

As the G20 on women empowerment has emphasized enhancing women's empowerment in the economy and society, empowerment in politics is also crucial, as without empowering women in politics, there will be no empowerment, only subjugation. Women's participation in politics will give an equal platform in the policy making pertaining to women related issues. Empowerment also means giving recognition to the contributions of women and promoting their rights. The inherent problems of depleting participation of women in politics also need to be studied explicitly to understand why women are powerful collectively but not individually. Only after that, real empowerment will come into force.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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