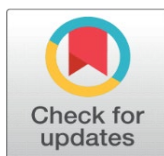


UNDERSTANDING MEITEI WOMEN'S STATUS IN A DISTURBED SOCIETY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF GENDER DYNAMICS IN MANIPUR

Bemthoibi Ngangbam¹¹ University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.4567](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.4567)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the gender dynamics in Manipur from an anthropological perspective. The cultural and traditional practices narrated the gender roles and how they stigmatized the women who went against the set norms. The chapter investigates the hierarchy among women that dictates their freedom and vulnerability in society. Their age groups ranging from a small girl to a maiden, maiden to womanhood, and womanhood to motherhood exercise different statuses in society. In addition to this, social stigmas and taboos are closely linked with these divisions. The woman's suppressed sexuality and the taboo behind it also contribute to the structure of the role of women in Manipur. Meitei women's participation in the political space is also visible but rather as the foot soldiers who propagate the manifesto of the male MP or MLA or any contesting candidate. Women have a more liberated lifestyle within Meitei society, but, still, it is an activity based on custom. While the patriarchy in this society may be played as soft or even libertarian, women must still function within their prescribed lanes. Yet, the socio-political turbulence has hardened women in Manipur. Further, the distinction between the idea of a woman and a mother highlights the limitation of the existing women's heroic narrative. The mother, who is empowered and honoured, experiences a different narrative as opposed to the subjugated young woman. Therefore, the gender dynamics in Manipur are deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural practices and the political instability of the state. This study emphasizes the need for a critical reformation of gender roles, judicial safeguards, and societal norms to facilitate a more inclusive and equitable structure for all women in Manipur, irrespective of age and class.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, Gender dynamics, Meitei women studies, Manipur women history

1. INTRODUCTION

Manipur is a heterogeneous state with layers of its own traditional and cultural beliefs and practices. It is a state in north-east India with a total area of 22327 square Km. Geographically, it can broadly be divided into hills and plains, where the hills surround the plains, forming a bowl-like structure. It is inhabited by 2,570,390¹ people belonging to various communities, namely Meitei, Manipuri Brahmins, Naga, Kuki, *Pangal* (Manipuri Muslims), and many other small tribes, including the Mayang (people from mainland India), along with a large group of Bengalis, Nepalese, and Marwaris. The Meiteis are the majority of all these ethnic groups. There are two major religious beliefs among the Meiteis: the *Sanamahism*² and the Vaishnavism, with the Brahmins as the caretakers of the Vaishnava Gods. Both Meitei and the Brahmins accept some restrictions regarding intermarriage between the two. Irrespective of their religious beliefs, the Meitei community is the people to understand their bloodlines and avoid marrying among the same bloodlines. The names of the clans are *Angom*, *Ningthouja*, *Moirang*, *Luwang*, *Khuman*, *Khaba-Nganba*, and *Chenglei* (*Sarang*

¹ As per 2011 census. It is the latest census as 2021 census was not conducted due to COVID-19.

² Devoted to Sanamahi God. However, all the Meitei household worship Sanamahi God even the follower of Vaishnavism.

Leisangthem). Each of these clans bears its status, pride, and prestige in the society and exercises it. They do not belong to any compartmentalization of their occupation but to a group of their bloodlines; hence, endogamy within the same clan is taboo and prohibited, and exogamous marriage among the class is preferred. Further, concerning marriage, with the Brahmins, the configuration is different – if a Brahmin woman marries into a Meitei family, she is welcomed; however, if a woman from any tribe marries into the Brahmin's Meitei, she is not welcome. She is excluded from the family³ after her marriage unless she gives birth to a son.

The traditional way of Meitei marriage is the arrange marriage or love cum arrange marriage where the process could last for months. However, there are other ways of marriages in Manipur, namely *Nupi Chenhong* (meaning *Nupi* – female, *chenba* – elope, *hongba* – marriage) and *khaoyei* (meaning on the spot marriage). These three modes of marriage are followed by the people of Manipur, irrespective of their beliefs and culture. The *Chenhong* was accepted by Meitei society in the mid-twentieth century⁴. Before this period, any maiden who had gone through *chenba* was excommunicated from her family and had to live with her man. Later, she was *Loukhatpa* by her father or brother(s) and given bridal gifts. On the other hand, *Khaoyei* is a way of consummation where the marriage does not follow many ritual practices; it is generally completed in a day or four to five hours. Apart from the said ways of marriage, there is another way which is considered taboo in Meitei culture – *Keinakatpa* (*Keina* means bride, *Katpa* means to offer). This is generally done by the community towards couples whom the Meitei society does not accept, namely – extramarital affairs, caught consummating or found in an inappropriate manner by the civil groups in hotels or restaurants or any secluded place.

With the acceptance of *Nupi Chenba* in Manipuri society, marriages between inter-class, intercommunity, interethnic, etc., are now opened to the society. To date, if a couple wants to marry without or against their parents' or society's knowledge or approval, the couple can choose marriage through *Nupi Chenba*. The ritual followed under this mode of marriage can last from four days to a month. After eloping with a man, the maiden spends the night with him;⁵ the next morning, a group of men, along with the bachelor's father, goes to the maiden's house to inform about the elopement. In the evening, a group of women from the maiden's family goes to the man's house for *machinhangba* (*machin* – lips/mouth, *hangba* – to ask), where the maiden's opinion is asked regarding the elopement. In most cases, the maiden replies that they eloped willingly, even if they were not willing to accept the bachelor before the elopement. The reason behind such acceptance could be the social stigma that entails a maiden who had gone through *chenba*. as it is a way of declaring that she is no more virgin and the only way to avoid social stigma is by marrying the man who she eloped with. The extension of this cultural practice is *Nupi Faba* or *chingba* (*Nupi* – woman, *faba* – abduction, *chingba* – snatch or pull); here, the consent of the maiden is not asked by the bachelor, instead she is abducted from any convenient place – either from road or college – by the abductor. In most cases, the maiden agrees to marry the abductor.⁶ In cases where the maiden's family does not accept the bachelor or the family, the maiden goes through *Inthokpa* (meaning – push away), leading to marriage at the groom's place. Last but not the least, in case where a man rapes a woman and if he agrees to marry her, he will not be punished by the law or society; one of such representation is Bij Gupta Laishram's *Imphal Ningol* (2010), where the anti-hero rapes the 2nd female lead in front of her boyfriend, but later agrees to marry her and escape punishment. In a personal interview with Kitty Sharma, Women Sub-inspector Singjamei Police Station, Manipur, she said that cases related to *Nupi Chenba* are the maximum recorded complaints that they receive.

The *Nupi Chenba* has opened more chances for exogamy, but the issues related to women are increasing with this practice, namely, domestic violence and marriages below the age of consent. If the families of both the bride and groom are from the same social class and beliefs, then there is lesser conflict in the marriage; however, if the two families are of different social class, the bride and groom face problems during and after the marriage. The major drawback of the *Nupichenba* is the increasing number of elopements of underage girls with adult men or among underage girls and boys.⁷

³ Shown in Oinam Gautam's *Keishamthong Thoibi*. The Meitei or tribal woman who marries into a Brahmin family are not allowed to enter the kitchen and temple. They are to live separately even from her children. In some case, if the first child is a son, she may be accepted by the family.

⁴ As narrated by my grandmother the concept of marrying after *Chemba* happens around mid-twentieth century. My grandfather abducted her on her way to *Likon* game (a traditional game played among maiden and bachelors), she had never worn the bridal attire or followed any wedding rituals. Instead after 10 years, she was *Loukhatpa* (meaning – to pick up) she was called by her brothers and gave permission to enter her maiden home and gave her bridal gifts.

⁵ They generally spend the night at his friend's place or hotel. Recently, bachelor took them home directly.

⁶ In the film *Luhongbagi Ahing* (2011), the heroine fainted from fright of the hero in the market; he took her home without her consent and claimed as *Nupi chenba*. She didn't have any other choice but to marry him.

⁷ As pointed out by Sub-inspector Kitty Sharma.

In most of the narratives that *Nupigi Punshi* and *Women and Crime*⁸ have recorded with cases of polygamy or conflict between husband and wife, the victims are generally the ones who married during their adolescence.

2. WOMEN IN SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN MANIPUR

Manipur does not follow any compartmentalization of any community based on occupation, rather, it is based on religious beliefs and social class. In the film *Thabaton* (2013) by Bij Gupta Laishram, the differences in the social status of the two-family led to conflict after the *Nupi Chenba*. After marriage, the heroine was tortured by her in-laws and thrown out of the house after forcefully taking her newborn from her. And in the film *Keisamthong Thoibi* (2008) by O. Gautam, the differences in beliefs led to conflict with the bride and the groom's family. On the contrary, in Kishan Kangjam's 2011 film *Traffic Thourani*, the Brahmin's daughter was welcomed by the Meitei family, and any conflict due to different communities was not portrayed in the film. The geographical distribution of the people in Manipur also contributes to the hegemonic class hierarchy. In K. Bimol Sharma and Oja Tamba's film *Nongoubee* (2009), a woman belonging to a tribal family from the hills was not accepted by the Meitei well-to-do family in Imphal; this led to harassment of the woman by her in-laws, and she was sent back to her maternal home. Similarly, in another film, a woman from the village or foothills was not preferred by the families in the Imphal. However, there is no scope for conflict when the social class of the two families are in equilibrium or have similar outlooks.

Notwithstanding, since all Manipuri women at some point in their life will be an active part of the *Meira Paibi*, they have a responsibility to protest and protect when they are called for. A woman struggling against her drunk husband or touched by her in-laws should stand guard and protect their loved ones when there is any civil injustice in the hand of the government or non-government organizations. One such instance was narrated by Purnima, a retired member of the non-government organization, when one of the men whom she had to discipline for his wrongdoings was saved by his wife's pleading and protection. Purnima added that if it was not for the wife's pleading, the man would have died. Similarly, many women have bottled up and suppressed their domestic conflict to fight against the social conflict. Teresa Rehman, in her book *The Mothers of Manipur*, recalls a conversation with Rajesh Hijam, the editor of *The Sangai Express*,⁹ regarding the magnification of *Ima Market* and the women in the market as an example of women's empowerment. He said that "...at the end of the day they (the women) have to sell their goods at throwaway prices because they have to catch the last bus home? If they are late, they are beaten up by their husbands and often accused of having an affair. They also have to be in time to cook dinner for the family. Often their husband snatches away their day's earnings." These instances juxtaposed the eulogized idea of women in Manipur in media, both national and international, as the epitome of women's empowerment.

The women in Manipur can broadly be categorized into five groups depending on their age and marital status. They are –

Nupi Mancha – meaning little girls who are between 7 to 18 years.

Leisabi – Maiden, female who crossed 18 years but not married. If a maiden is not married even when she reaches 40 years, then she is termed *aribi* (meaning – aged).

Mou Anoubi – meaning recently married without child. The initial 1-2 years of marriage. The age group can be from 18 to 40, depending on the age of her marriage. If a female marries before 18 years old, she will still be termed as *Mou Anoubi* and will be expected to do all the tasks entailed to her.

Mou – meaning married women, they are normally mothers. She is a member of the *Meira Paibi* group. She must protect the family from any social or political evils when the situation demands. If a married woman has no child but has been staying with her husband for more than 5 years, she will still be considered as *Mou* and be a member of *Meira Paibi*.

Hanubi – meaning aged women, they are normally 50 plus years old female with grownup children. They are the leading members in *Meira Paibi*. The current president of 'Thangmeiband Apunba Lup,' Gyaneshwri Laishram, is a woman of 49 years old.¹⁰ She was one of the 11 *immas* who protested in front of the Assam Rifle, Kangla Gate in 2004.

This categorization of women in Manipur clarifies the murky depiction of Meitei women as empowered. The role of the *Nupi Macha* in a family is to look after the younger siblings and help their mother in the household work in addition

⁸ Women's monthly journal in Manipur.

⁹ Local English Newspaper.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Gyaneshwri Laishram on 18th January 2020.

to their studies. In Mangoljao Samjetsabam and Bijgupta Laishram's 2010 film *Meiranbi*, the daughter of the main lead, Langlen, helps her parents to take care of her younger brother, and when her mother leaves them, she is the one who takes care of the heartbroken father. *Leisabi* are the ones with minimal agencies, as it is the stage where they can be easy prey of the social stigmas. If they are caught in a restaurant or gone through *Keinakatpa*, then the family *Izzat* (reputation) will be ruined,¹¹ or she can be a victim of *Nupi Faba*. Therefore, she needs to follow certain restrictions and live under the protection of their mother, father, or brother. *Mou Anoubi* has some leverage as compared to *Leisabi*, as she will be under the protection of her husband. She does not go out for nightguard duty of the *Meira Paibi*. *Mou* or mothers are generally the ones with both power and agency; she is the one who runs the household, and in time of need, she will be the one standing up to protect and provide for the family. This category also includes the widows. In Paari Luwang's 2016 series *Ei Octabee Natte*, the protagonist Leibaklei has to support her family by selling alcohol after her husband dies.¹² Irrespective of the various social stigmas and male gaze, she stood up for the family of 4 females. Last but not the least, *Hanubi* are the one with maximum power as they are no more vulnerable to male gaze and are respected by the society because of their age. They are the leading members in any socio-political women's group. Regardless of their educational or economic status, all Meitei women, and to some extent other community women, follow these stages in their lives.

The women in the main market are either *Mou* or *Hanubi*; others are not allowed or accepted by the society to enter the public sphere. They are the ones who maneuver the market and its networking in Manipur. They are financially independent and stand before any social evils. However, in some families, they are the victims, too, either of poverty or their male counterparts. In 2008, Paojel's film *Numit Thoklakpada*, the mother of the female lead had to sell fish, fresh and dried both, at the main market to meet the expenses of her unmarried daughter and herself; while her two sons had started their nuclear family and didn't care about their mother or sister. Other than the market, some mothers work at riverbanks to earn their livelihood. In Dhanaraj Khomdram's 2012 film *Sekmai Turel*, the female lead had to work as a labourer at the Sekmai riverbank to support her family, while her husband killed his time playing cards and consuming alcohol. He even snatched the daily wages from his wife to meet his daily drinking addiction. Apart from these means of financial independence, some women work as government employees. In Bijgupta Laishram's 2013 film *Thabaton*, in the second half of the film, the female lead is portrayed as an independent woman leading to the end of her financial dependency. However, in *Thabaton – III*, released in 2019, the same independent and strong mother of two became vulnerable to sexual harassment in her office. It was only with the help of her son that she fought back the harassment.

Some *leisabis* are also financially independent, though they do not deal with the customer directly in the market. If they are not government employee, they either opt for weaving or animal husbandry to generate income, especially in rural areas. In urban areas, a *leisabi* without any income depends on their parents or elders. With the emergence of private firms, such as private hospitals, showrooms, the aviation industry, etc., in Manipur, the opportunity for educated urban *Leishabi* has opened. In Suvas E's 2008 film *Loktak Patki Nungshirabi*, set in Moirang, the maidens generate their income from weaving and selling the finished product either to the locals or to elder businesswomen. The urban women like Mishna, depicted in Sanaton Nongthambam's *Chanu IPS* as an Indian Police Service officer, are also a *Leisabi* of the Manipuri society. As per the 2011 census, Manipur has a population of 28.56 lakhs, of which 1,438,586 are male and 1,417,208 are female, with a ratio of 940 females per 1000 males and literacy rates of 70.26% and 83.58%. Regardless of their educational qualification and occupations, the Meitei women very early in their age earn money and save them. One of the reasons behind the need to save money is for the *Awunpot*, the gift that they take along when they marry.¹³ If the *Leisabi* belongs to upper or upper-middle class family the marriage gift is normally taken care by their guardians, but for *leisabi* belonging to lower or middle class family, they face difficulty arranging even the minimal *awunpot*; in such cases the *leisabi* arrange the gifts herself or contribute her earnings to arrange the wedding gifts. A *mou anoubi* with lavish wedding gifts is appreciated and admired in her new home; on the contrary, if a *mou anoubi* brings no or minimal wedding gifts, then she is criticised or looked down upon in her new home. These cultural practices led to financial crises for families who could not afford them and became the prey of the moneylenders. In Santikumar Thounaojam's 2018

¹¹ In Manipur, restaurants are referred to food joints with dark compartment room where men and women meet. A dating place.

¹² Manipur is a dry state, but the traditional alcohol is still sold and consumed. The selling or consumption of it is against the 'Nisha Band Lup' of Manipur. The *Meira Paibi* bandh the selling and consumption of alcohol. Till today some Meitei women sell alcohol as it is more profitable.

¹³ This includes all the household item – cloth, both for bride and groom, kitchen utensils and appliances, furniture, electronic gadgets, vehicle, etc.

film *Awunpot*, the heroine's family is exploited by the moneylender as her mother has to borrow money to maintain the status quo of the wedding gifts. Later, the hero's mother insisted on giving the heroine's maternal house some money to get her lavish gifts for *Ningol Chakouba*,¹⁴ as the wedding gifts that she brought when she married were not enough to stand out in front of the locality. Therefore, economic independence is very important for women, either to support the family or to provide herself with an agreeable status in her spouse's home.

The *Imma Market*¹⁵ is a symbol of women's economic independence since the monarch. Captain E.W. Dun in the *Gazetteer of Manipur* wrote praising the industriousness of the women in Manipur as, "Most of the work except the heaviest is performed by them[women]. It would be difficult to find a more industrious woman in India than that Manipuries."¹⁶ Therefore, the need to be financial independent was something implanted since the very beginning in Manipuri society; it is often said that "A man who does not go to Loishang and a woman who does not go to the market, are both worthless",¹⁷ this emphasizes the gender roles in Manipur. One of the reasons that made women shoulder the responsibility for handling and providing for the family may be the *Lallup system*.¹⁸ The system was introduced during Nongda Lairen Pakhanba's reign (33-154 AD), and it remained with little changes till it was abolished by the Britishers after the 1891 war. During the British occupation, many socio-economic measures were introduced to the people of Manipur that affected the people and the main market in various ways. The people were allowed to own land but had to pay land tax, along with the annual house tax. Later, in 1904, the free trade policy by the local officials was introduced. The system of collecting tax from land ownership was prevailing and systematised during the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652), but the payment was in paddy. Since 1891, the tax had to be in the form of both kind and cash.¹⁹

Before the British colonial rule in Manipur, leaving aside the critical phase of Seven Years Devastation,²⁰ it was a self-regulating, self-sufficient, and self-sustaining kingdom with a stable economy, with the rice economy as its backbone. In addition to the rice economy, there were household manufacturing, husbandry, and forest products. The trade in the main market was based on supplement exchanges, so the market was not commercialized. The concept of currency was there in then Manipur, but the goods were not commodified; rather, it was an exchange of the products, thereby maintaining an equilibrium of the economic cycle. However, the private ownership of land and taxation led to the commercialization of the main market. This affected the economy of Manipur as the tax that they paid was not used for the upliftment of the state but to strengthen the administration of British India, leaving Manipur with a peripheral economy.

After merging with India, the economy worsened, and the modern nation had appropriated and internalized the old policy, leaving Manipur at the mercy of the Central government. The five-year budget planned by them was not focussed on the growth of Manipur but rather on territorial sectors, negating its agrarian and industrial sector, with no concrete direction or implementation plan. This led to the formation of many non-government organizations²¹ protesting the rule of the Indian Government and believing in the idea of separatism. Their main objective was "to preserve a distinctive national identity and to create a free and wholesome human existence for the people of Manipur."²² However, the formation of these groups, an extension of the communist party, contributed to the existing turmoil after attaining statehood. The boycotting of the first general election of 1952 by the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1951 at Nagaland and the failed attempt to suppress the movement by the Assam rifle and the state police led to the formation of the Federal Government of Nagaland in 1956. With this incident, the then President Dr. Rajendra Prasad promulgated the

¹⁴ A Meitei festival celebrated to strengthen the brother-sister relationship. It is celebrated in October – November. The maternal family invites the *mou* for lunch and bestow gifts and in return they wish the good fortune.

¹⁵ The Main Market in Imphal

¹⁶ E.W. Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur*. Mans Pub: Delhi. 1992. P. 17

¹⁷ Manjusri Chaki Sircar, *Feminism in Traditional Society*. Shakti Book House: Delhi, 1967. P 38. Loishang – means the administration department for each occupation.

¹⁸ The *Lallup system* was a practiced followed during the monarchy in Manipur. In this system the adult male members, between 17 to 60 years of every family are forced to work for the King for 10 days in every 40 days. In return the family gets land for agriculture. If they fail to do report for the labour, they were punished.

¹⁹ As pointed out by Oinam Ranjit Singh in his essay *Pre-colonial and Colonial source of Revenue*.

²⁰ For seven years Manipur was under the tyranny of Burma from 1819 to 1826 AD. It was the darkest period in the history of Manipur.

²¹ Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) was formed in 7th January 1967; United National Liberation Front (UNLF) in 24th November 1964; People's Liberation Army Unit (PLA) in 25th September 1978.

²² Singh N joykumar *Revolutionary Movements in Manipur*. Akansha Pub: ND. 2005. P-65

Armed Forces Special Power Ordinance on 22nd May 1958 in Manipur and Assam. Later, on 11th September 1958, it was replaced by the Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958.

After attaining statehood in 1972, the State government planned the budget, with a change in the institutional approach. However, Manipur was trapped under the underdeveloped condition. Hingbam Isworchandra, in his essay *Post Statehood Economy: A Critical Analysis* points out that, "One possible reason (for being underdeveloped) is that the State was faced with the Herculean task of restoring the economy, shattered by centralised planning and mismanagement, to keep pace with the rest of the country."²³ Later, in 1973-74, with the Loktak Lift Irrigation project, the issue related to irrigation was controlled, but the economic crises of Manipur didn't cease. By the end of the Ninth plan, the implementation and administration process of the irrigation process failed, disposing the hope for double cultivation, except for few pockets in the valley. As per the research of the Institute of Human Development 2006, only 6.73% of the total geographical area of Manipur was clarified as agricultural land. Therefore, to meet the demand of the State, the people turned towards industrial goods and forest extracts.

All these led to the disappointment of the people in Manipur, especially the men, leading them to alcoholism and drug abuse. Amidst all the conflicts and struggles against the economic crisis, the women in Manipur had to face domestic violence and come up with a solution. The 'Manipur Mahila Samelani', which was formed in 1940 to fight against the Britishers, the 'Women's Assembly Demand Committee' formed in 1960 to support the demand of the statehood movement, now created the 'Nisha Bandh' organization to stop consumption and sale of alcohol and drugs in Manipur. The reason behind the formation of this organization was the increasing crime and violence in Manipur, crimes like stealing, murdering for money, killing in the state of intoxication, immoral trafficking, etc. The men used to shout irrationally after indulging in heavy drinking, beating their wives and children, forcefully taking their wives' hard-earned money for drinking and socially discouraging the family or his surroundings; and for financially independent men, they stop contributing to the household needs. This also increased the shortage of paddy supply as Meitei rice was being used for preparing the alcohol, in addition to the hindrance in the production due to lack of work force.²⁴ In *Keishamthong Thoibi*, the hero Pameshor is chased by the Nisha bandh group on his way back home drunk.

All these domestic as well as external conflicts that the Meitei women are facing indeed prove that they are strong, but it will be unjust to call them empowered and negate the need for women's awakening. Does economic independence lead to women's empowerment? Does women's social empowerment contribute to individual woman empowerment? Does their social activism contribute to women's political empowerment in Manipur? These are some of the inquiries that need to be resolved before any assumption or discussion on the status of an individual Meitei woman and, further, the collective women in Meitei society.

3. STIGMAS AND TABOOS TOWARDS MEN AND WOMEN IN MEITEI CULTURE

Manipur is a traditional society where the traditional beliefs and guidelines are respected and passed down from generation to generation, from mothers to daughters. It is through her that a family's honour in the society is measured. If a woman of the family 'misbehaves' – does not do the household chores, neglects her child and any children of the family, or does not listen to the elders – then she needs to be 'disciplined' by her husband. As per 2009 *National Family Health Survey*, McDuie-Ra points out that 89.7% female and 85% male of people in Manipur agrees to wife 'disciplining' if "...she goes out without telling him, she neglects the house or children, she argues with him, she refuses to have sexual intercourse with him, she does not cook food properly, he suspects she is unfaithful, and she shows disrespect for in-laws."²⁵ This belief of the women in Manipur further contributes to the ideology of the self-sacrificing nature of the women.

In the anthology of poetry *Tattooed With Taboos*, the three poetess – Chaoba Phurishabam, Shreema Ningombam, and Soibam Haripriya- talk about the suppressed sexuality of the Meitei women caught in their everyday duty as daughter and wife. Haripriya's poem *I Died A Little* talks about the importance of being a virgin on the first night with the spouse. If "impure little droplets/ Deflowered/ He celebrated/ Being the first/ That became his flag/ Worn proudly around his neck." And if "...refused to trickle/ On the wedding night/ Condemned/ His disappointment/.../ Refused to shake hands with me..." This is one of the reasons for abduction and rape victims to marry their perpetrator. Moreover,

²³ Thangjam Homen & Sharma H Isworchandra ed. *Quest for Development in Manipur*. Concept Pub: ND. 2013. P-50.

²⁴ As most of the men were wasting their time drinking.

²⁵ Idibi P. 123

the dignity or Izzat of the maiden's family will be tarnished if she is either raped or abducted by any man irrespective of her desire or fault.

Izzat's stigmatization in Meitei society is engraved in the mind of the people as the woman herself starts questioning her worth: "They say I lost everything."²⁶ When a victim of *nupi chenba* does not marry the man who abducted her, she is stigmatized as not a virgin and believed to be not worth it for another man. The abductors sometimes hide their sexual exploitation experience. In Bijgupta Laishram's film *Luhongbagi Ahing* (2010), the hero Koirang abducts Purnima, who faints after being frightened by Koirang, and spends the night with her, declaring himself as *nupi chenba*. Irrespective of Purnima's resistance, she was not trusted by her parents and threatened by her mother saying, "Why did you elope if you don't want to marry him. Now, you don't have any choice but to marry him and save your father's honour."²⁷ In another film *Imphal Ningol* (2010) by the same director, Nungshi the second lead was raped by Nongein in front of her boyfriend, as revenge against her brother. After the incident, she refused to be with her boyfriend and instead married Nongein. After marriage, she also faces verbal abuse from Nongein, but she bears the hardship and fulfils her duty as his wife. As the film ends, her hardship was rewarded with Nongein becoming a loving and caring husband. In both cases, the women are aware of the social norms in which they had to follow their 'fate'. On the other hand, as the Meitei saying *Nupadi chamma gi mapuni* – meaning man are owner of hundred – they do not face any taboo even after *nupi chenba* multiple times with different women. His punishment is either to marry the woman that he eloped with or, if he refuses to marry, he has to pay a fine, known as *Izzat dabi*, to the woman's family.

Meitei society allows widow remarriage, but it should be arranged by the elders from both families. If the widow elopes or is seen with a man in the restaurant, she will be discouraged publicly and is preformed *Keina Katpa*²⁸ by the *Meira Paibi*. Manipuri films also depict such cultural practices in the Maitei society. In Rajen Leishangthem's film *Wanted Linthoi* (2011), Thaja, a widow of an overdose victim, was accepted by Chinglen's family only after an accident where she saved his life. Throughout the film, Thaja had to face criticism from her family, especially her brother, for being wooed by a man. Similarly, in Bijgupta Laishram's *Thabaton* (2013), Thabaton, a widow, was arranged by her family to marry a widower, Yambung, without any obstacle or criticism.

Polygamy, which has prevailed in Meitei society since the prehistoric period, is still practiced. However, polygamy is never portrayed affirmatively in the society. When a man brings another woman in the presence of the first wife, the blame is either on the second wife or the first wife and sometimes entirely on the situation, which is fate. In Ibochouba Samom's film *Leikaigi Radha* (2008), Radha marries Tompok as his second wife and abuses his first wife, Thoibi. In the film, Radha is portrayed as the vamp and Thoibi as a national woman who faces all humiliation and abuse just to be at her husband's place. Although Tompok was punished for smuggling, the film condemns Radha for being the vamp not just in the film but also in the society and ruins the family of women like Thoibi. The film ends with Radha left stunned when her poor ex-boyfriend thanked her for leaving him, thus shifting the evils of polygamy to the vamp that ruined the family. On the other hand, in Mangoljao Samjetsabam and Bijgupta Laishram's film *Meiranbi* (2010), Memthoi, the protagonist, married with two children, started trading from Moreh as her husband was suspended from his work, and the family was facing a financial crisis. At Moreh, she was deceived by a police officer on duty and tricked into being his second wife. Later, she realises her mistake and sends her second husband to his first wife and turns herself to *Iskcon*²⁹ and becomes a devotee. The film ends with self-realization and giving up of worldly things by Memthoi, who crosses the boundary of married women, whereas her second husband was welcomed and continued his life with his first wife. Many cases that are recorded in the journals – *Nupigi Punshi* and *Women and Crime* are related to polygamy and the violence entailed to it. In January 2013, *Nupigi Punshi*, the first wife, raised a complaint against the second wife, saying she wanted to take care of her unwell husband and leave him alone. When enquired, the second wife replied that it is not her fault if the husband says he cannot be at peace with the first wife.³⁰ The conflict between the wives and the wives' forgiving and loving nature until the end projects the utmost devotion of the women to the patriarchy of the family.

To sum up, Manipur is a society where women are allowed to go freely within a certain set of boundaries following the set traditional norms. Superficially, the patriarch that is practiced in the society seems soft or libertarian, but the continuous obligation of the women to function in the absence of their husband have built the women in Manipur to be

²⁶ Shreema Ningombam *Unburdening the Dead Spirits*.

²⁷ Translation of the dialogue in the film.

²⁸ Instant marriage after shaving the hair of both the man and woman and by exchanging sandals garland.

²⁹ Holy place for devotee of Lord Krishna

industrious and courageous. It is the necessity of the women to manoeuvre within the complex net of ruling party and the insurgents that lead to the present visibility of women in the public domain. Underneath this visibility, women are exploited and are victims of patriarchy. Some are victims of domestic violence; some are of prey of heinous crimes like rape and murder; and the remaining are holding onto the thread of motherhood and national woman. However, all the domestic conflicts with their counterparts were eclipsed by the overpowering conflict with the ruling party or the insurgents or both.

4. THE GAP BETWEEN WOMANHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

Within the Meitei culture, the position of women is linked to the socio-cultural and historical background of the society. There is a clear contrast between the glorified status of mother and the precarious young woman or girlhood. Motherhood is venerated as the embodiment of strength, power, and social responsibility; girlhood and the status of young women are often defined by vulnerability, in which men expect to curtail their agency and enslave them to their personal freedom. This contrast between the two stages of life underscores the differences in how women are treated at two different facets where the Meitei society believes she holds sway — the private and the public spheres.

In Meitei society, motherhood – the *Mou* and *Hanubi* – is not merely a biological role but an institutionalized site of power and respect, as well as a social obligation. Ima (mother) and Iben (grandmother) reflect a universal idea of a deified woman, or deified women, a dutiful mother, or her mother, representing an ideal of what the moral and cultural pillar of society ought to be. Mothers are respected not only for nurturing lives but also as the guardians of the culture and spirituality of the Meitei community. Their veneration is closely related to their involvement in performing traditional rituals, maintaining household economies, and their collective movement, like their initiative of *Ima Keithel* (Mother's Market) as a symbol of economic independence and empowerment.

The Ima Keithel is an eminent semblance of the link between motherhood, power, and respect in a patriarchal Meitei society. Women who have become mothers are often considered the leaders in this area, and they can steer both economic and social issues. Additionally, the political role of mothers—particularly seen in the *Meira Paibi's* movement—demonstrates that in many instances maternal figures have been at the helm of community leadership, often leading local activism against different forms of violence, insurgency, and military oppression. The female activists continue to act as protectors of their children and community as a foundation of not only their activism but the overall structure of the maternal role. Thus, the authorship of motherhood in the Meitei culture is not limited to that of worship but is also illustrated as the source of strength in the society where the mothers act as the moral guides and protectors of the integrity of the community.

On the other hand, the women – especially *nupi macha*, *leishabi*, and *mou anoubi* – in Meitei society are in a vulnerable and socially confined position. Motherhood is powerful and a sacred space, whereas *nupi macha*, *leishabi*, and *mou anoubi* is a space along the arc of a female's life, a space of care and social domination, of social control, lack of freedom, and egalitarianism. Before a woman becomes a mother, the rite of passage into womanhood is surrounded by ideals of virginity, chastity, humility, and obedience to the conventional duties prescribed by society. It's a phase where social agency tends to be at its lowest and dependency upon family at its highest. The treatment of young women in the mainland society is based on a demand that they must conform to certain standards of conduct; they are regarded as an attribute to be possessed in the future, when they will be wives and mothers. Young women are supposed to epitomise cultural ideals of modesty and obedience, and such ideals hinder their ability to pursue ambitions outside of these predetermined roles. In Manipur, the narrative is not intricated due to the prolonged socio-political conflicts, and it affected tremendously in civilian life, this vulnerability is further worsened by the backdrop of gendered violence and harassment exacerbated by age-old militarization and insurgency predominantly affecting the women. As Deepti Priya Mehrotra shows in her work on Irom Sharmila and the women-led protests the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), girls and women are often scapegoated and targeted on grounds of culture and identity in the context of militarized violence, both at state and non-state levels.

In a Meitei society, the agency of women remains inexorably tied to their community-centric roles. In the absence of a prominent father in the family, the mother, being a protector and nurturer, exercises her authority and agency to do anything both in public and private life. They are better represented in the public discourses, they occupy leadership positions in the market and political domains, and they are more commonly generalized as societal value protectors. This maternal authority is not limited to the household but grants mothers a political and social voice in justice movements,

as seen in human rights movements spearheaded by mothers such as the *Nupi Lan* (Women's agitations) and *Meira Paibi*. On the other hand, the inexperienced young woman, one who has not yet taken on the role of mother, is presented with a societal circumstance of disempowered social agency. For them, being a woman often means being subjected to gendered expectations that diminish their autonomy and limit their function as public activists by stripping them of social power. For example, a young woman might participate in political movements or activism, but they do so in the shadow of the maternal figures who have inhabited this space. This distinction in agency further emphasizes the unequal status of motherhood, a path dignified and foregrounded, versus girlhood, which is only notional and temporary, a corridor, an impression of dependency and impotence.

This distinction between the strength of being a mother and the weakness of being a girl is also prevalent in Manipuri media and literature, as depicted in the films of Manipur. In films and stories, mothers are often represented as strong central figures who lead communities and fight against oppression, while young women are observed in more passive, often victimized roles. Young women grapple with the tension between personal desires and patriarchal repression and militarized violence in films such as *Love Story*³¹, where a maternal figure emerges as thick as blood, symbolizing the epitome of social reform and resilience. This repeated story in Manipuri film denotes the — already deceptive — social impression that adolescent young ladies influence just in a limited capacity to focus the time in the event that they become the mother and with this a character they are treated the similar and regard and overpowering as reference of best size being a mother. Girlhood and maidenhood here, then, are constructed as highly vulnerable phases of life, and motherhood is constructed as the height of female empowerment.

The division of motherhood and womanhood also replicates itself in the legal arena, with antiquated customs contradicting recent legislative boundaries. In Manipur, the existing customary laws orient towards the maternal goddess, and women are revered and protected, but only as mothers. But Mairembam Rita Devi, drawing from her socio-political study of women in Manipur, argues that younger women or those who fall outside of the traditional roles face even harsher consequences for continuing to push back against this framework of power.³²

In this research work, the grounded theory analysis of more than 1415 articles included in the study indicates that legal protections often only reinforce the status of women as mothers, leaving younger, unmarried, or childless women with lower social privileges. As a result, this highlights the intersection of womanhood that intersects gender with age and sexuality to define the extent to which a woman is given societal acceptance and legal protection.

Moreover, the contrast between the sanctification of mothers and the precariousness of young womanhood in Meitei society is also a mirror of the wider clash of tradition with modernity. In traditional views, mother or motherly nature are seen as holy patrons of culture and morality, and modern influences are slowly beginning to change how womanhood is defined outside of this bubble. Brara, in her analysis of indigeneity and gender, marks out a need to reassess such hard cultural binaries considering the changing socio-political conditions, especially since modernisation has begun to speak to the very young women who today partake in such education, work, and activism.³³ Meanwhile, in the face of these emerging norms, cultural mythology surrounding motherhood dominates, and girlhood and young womanhood continue to be perceived as vulnerable phases requiring protection and regulation. For modern Meitei society, the key challenge is to identify from the youth of today the women who will one day become mothers, not just mothers but agents.

5. WOMEN IN LEGISLATIVE PARTIES IN MANIPUR

Election is a way where the public chooses a person to represent the collective people and head the state administrative office. Manipuri women had contributed to shape the political framework in Manipur since the union of Manipur to India. To date, women outnumbered the male voters in any election, whether parliament or legislative election.³⁴ They had maneuvered to the areas where male members cannot enter for election campaign. The involvement of these women in the political pyramid was not as decision makers – Member of the Parliament (MP) or Member of the

³¹ Sunanda's mother protest for her daughter's justice wins the heart of the corrupt police officer to arrest the perpetrator.

³² Devi, Mairembam Rita. *A Socio-Political Study of Women in Manipur*. 2002. Manipur U, PhD dissertation

³³ Brara, Vijaylakshmi. *Culture and Indigeneity: Women in Northeast India*.

³⁴ In 2022 state legislative election women voters outnumbered the man voters by 52%

Legislative Assembly (MLA) – they are rather the foot soldiers who propagate the manifesto of the male MP or MLA or any contesting candidate.

The involvement of women and their organizations in the state administration is visible during the time of Pakhangba in 33-158 A.D. Manipur. During this period, the queen, Laisana, as head, along with nine women³⁵ formed an administrative body named *Kuchu*. This was further divided into two sub-body – *Lakhong* and *Laton*.³⁶ The *Lakhong* was membered with the Queen, the mothers of the king, along with fifteen elderly women known as *Achanbi*³⁷ to assist them; every morning, they consulted issues and rules related to the smooth functioning of the internal palace. The king, too, follows the rules set by the *Lakhong*. Under the sub-group *Laton*, the 6th wife of Pakhangba, Leimakhumbi, led a group of twelve women members to discuss and handle issues related to foodgrain, cloth, infirmary, finance, etc., of the palace. Later, a separate court named *Pacha* was formed to handle cases related to women and crime, such as divorce, domestic violence, auditory, etc. *Pacha* comprises eleven women, led by the chief queen, Laisana, as the president of the court.

The involvement of Meitei women in the smooth administration was visible in the history of Manipur in every time frame. Yaoreiba Chanu (421 A.D.) to Maharani Kumudini (1825 A.D.) who had guided their sons in maintaining peace in the realm during pre-colonization; the Meitei women who fought against the Britishers – the two *Nupi Lan* – 1904 and 1939 respectively to protect the men from force labour and save the people from famine that struck Manipur due to drought and export of rice by the Marwari traders. The women who fought for independence under the leadership of Hijam Irawat in the 1940s; the women who fought for Manipur statehood in the 1960-70s; the women who fought against the AFSPA. Following this terrain, the Meitei women had set numerous milestones that are recorded in the history, one of recent such milestones will be the July 15th 2004, naked protest by twelve women against the custodial rape and brutal murder of a suspect, Thangjam Manorama, a 32-year-old Meitei woman. These are some of the instances from the vast records of Meitei women.

During the colonial rule numerous civic organizations were formed. Among the organization, there were women's organizations too, that stood up for the upliftment of society. Under the guidance and leadership of Hijam Irabot³⁸ the Manipuri women who fought against the British set up Bhadra Mahila Samaj in 1933. In January 1940, a political organization called Manipur Mahila Sanmelani (MMS) was formed under the advocacy of Manipur Praja Sanmelani (MPS), led by Irabot. Both MMS and MPS died out soon after Irabot, along with nine women leaders of MMS, who were exiled and jailed at Sylhet.³⁹ Post-Independence in 1946, after Irabot was released, a committee called Manipur Praja Mandal was formed with 12 members under the leadership of Sri Karam Bidur Singh. Among the members of the committee Khaidem Pramodini, a member of MMS was also a member. In June 1948, Manipur had its first State Assembly Election. The members of MMS played the role of mobilizing and campaigning for Hijam Irabot's party, Manipur Krishak Sabha (MKS). In August 1948, when the Manipur State Council was formed, MKS was changed to the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the District Organizing Committee was formed with eight members, with one active member from the MMS. Three members of the MMS, namely Laishram Ningol Agni Devi, Takhellambam (O) Jubati Devi, and Hijam Ningol Indurekha, were among the Twenty-eight founding members of the council.

The MMS was the front organization for women's political participation. In October 1973, the organization was named All Manipur *Nupi Marup*, bringing together the women of both hills and plains. This group carried out various activities for the betterment of the society in terms of social-economic, cultural, and political issues in Manipur. They had raised voices for women's handloom development industries, women literacy, reserved seats for employment and in public transports, improved facilities in maternity hospitals, dowry, or gift for bride, etc., both in town and village. They had also volunteered at relief camps in times of calamity, both natural and human conflicts. Regardless of this active involvement, since pre-independence, for the betterment of the society as a whole, Manipur has never had a woman Chief minister.

Manipur had its first Chief Minister, Mairembam Koireng Singh, with 30 MLA, in 1963. The women who fought against the colonial rule and, later, for statehood were not visible as members of the legislative assembly of Manipur. In 1972, when Manipur attained its statehood, the members of the legislative assembly were increased from 30 to 60, which

³⁵ These positions were known as *Laishra Pham* – meaning position for women.

³⁶ *Lakhong* – means the lower portion of the banana stem; *Laton* – the budding leaf of the banana tree.

³⁷ *Achanbi* – favourites (used for female genders)

³⁸ He was a freedom fighter and political leader of Communist Party in Manipur. He had supported the 2nd *Nupi Lan* (1939) of Manipur and for the same he was jailed at Sylhet.

³⁹ Ng Liklaileima Devi. *Women Wings of Political Parties and Socio-economic and Political Problems of the Society*.

was directly elected by the people of Manipur; of these, one seat is reserved for the scheduled caste, 19 seats are reserved for the scheduled tribes, and 40 seats are reserved for the general category. Manipur had its first female MLA in 1990, Mrs. Hangmila Shaiza from the Ukhrul constituency, and its first Meitei female MLA in 2000, Wahengbam Leima Devi from Naoriya Pakhanglakpa. Since 1972, Manipur has less than 10 Meitei women MLA even though their involvement in the uplifting the social-political and cultural movement are prominent in the local newspapers and channels.

The invisibility of these outspoken Meitei women in the political sphere could be of various reasons related to the women's role in a family, her status in the society, and her ideology for patriotism. Mothers like Ima Jamini⁴⁰ said to Teresa Rehman in the book *The Mothers of Manipur* that she has less faith in the politicians and politics, and so she, along with other mothers, depends on social activism to attain their demands. On the other hand, in one of the *Eastmojo* articles,⁴¹ the wife of the late W Brajabidhu Singh, former MLA, Pukhrambam Sumati Devi, a contestant of the 2022 election, complains that women are needed in every function or protest, but when they enter the political sphere, they are discouraged by society. In the same article, she added that her election rivals ridiculed her publicly on her campaigns. Sharda Devi, the president of BJP Manipur Pradesh, is of the opinion that women are involved in shaping the socio-political structure in Manipur but failed to be a part of the legislative party. Therefore, she insists on the need for women's political empowerment.

Under the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution, one-third of the seats are reserved for women, which was exercised in other parts of India, both at the village and district level institutions. However, this reservation was not extended to the Northeastern states, leading to a negligible number of women in the legislature. Akoijam Mirabai Devi⁴² said that to attain political women empowerment, there is a need for seat reservations for women in state assembly as well as the parliament. They are of the opinion that being a male-dominated society, the women's upliftment in the political sphere is hard to obtain. Although the Women's Reservation Bill – 33% reservation for women in state assembly and parliament – is still pending to be passed, it initiates the awakening call for women's political empowerment. In the 13th Manipur Assembly election, 2022, it is visible that the political parties, namely – BJP, Congress, National People's Party, and Janata Dal – had initiated giving tickets to women candidates and encouraging women's political empowerment. Contrary to the previous Legislative assembly election, in 2022, five women candidates were elected out of 17 nominees, of which two are Meitei.

In the electoral history, the 12th Assembly is the term with the maximum women candidates elected. Although the number of female voters surpasses the male voters in almost all the terms since Manipur attained its statehood.⁴³ In the 2022 term, there were a total of 20,48,169 voters, of which 10,57,336 were women, 9,96,627 were men, and 206 were third gender. However, the women candidates elected were 6.42% across all communities. Meitei women, being active participants of socio-political affairs of the state, had participated in the political sphere too, even before the merger with India. In 1952, distinguished women such as Ishwari Devi⁴⁴ and MK. Binodini Devi⁴⁵ contested the Parliamentary election. Later, in 1957, Smt. Shabi Devi⁴⁶ contested the Territorial-Council election but was defeated. Subsequently, from 1957 to 1969, women, namely Smt. R.K. Mukhra Devi, Smt. A. Bimola Devi, Smt. Lhingjaneng Gangte and Smt. Akim Angnal – were members of the Territorial Assembly. After the attainment of Statehood, women candidates tried their faith in politics. However, they were not elected. Later, in the 1984 Assembly election, women had to run as independent candidates as the leading political parties would not nominate them.⁴⁷ In 1990, out of 7 women contestants, only one woman candidate, Hamgmila Shaiza, was elected from the Ukhrul constituency, owing to the sympathy of her late husband Yangmasho Shaiza, former Chief Minister of Manipur, who was assassinated by the insurgent group NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland) in 1984. During the time of her campaign, her brother-in-law was also assassinated. In 1992, K. Apabi Devi from Oinam constituency was elected owing to the death of her Husband, K. Bira

⁴⁰ One of the 12 nude protesters in front of Kangla Gate

⁴¹ Press Trust of India. *Manipur 2022: For Women, Political representation is still a mirage*. Feb 21, 2022

⁴² MLA in 2 terms – 2012 and 2017

⁴³ In 1972 male voters were 49.9% and women voters were 50.1%; in 1980 – male 49.4% and women 50.6%; ... in 2017 9,68,312 were women voters out of 18,93,743

⁴⁴ Wife of late Maharaja Budhachandra Singh. She did not get elected.

⁴⁵ Member of the royal family, Indian novelist, playwright, short story writer. She manages to defeat her 3 rivals in the Parliamentary election.

⁴⁶ Active member of 1939's women's agitation.

⁴⁷ Except W. Joymati from Congress.

Singh MLA of Manipur. In 2002, Wahengbam Leima Devi was the only woman MLA, owing to the political background of her husband, Wahengbam Angou Singh, Assembly Speaker and, later, Rajya Sabha Member. Similarly, in 2007, O. Landhoni Devi was the only women MLA, owing to her husband Okram Ibobi Singh, former Chief Minister of Manipur for two terms (2002-2017). Between 1992 and 2002, some women candidates got tickets from the leading political parties, but they failed to attain enough voters.

The tide of women MLAs to be backed by family or husband from the political party was stopped by women such as Akoijam Mirabai, without any male influence. She was elected as MLA from the Patsoi constituency in 2012. In an online journal, Mirabai, declaring her decision to be a spinster, said that men in Manipur, although they encourage and allow their women to share social and economic space, will hesitate to share the political space. No family will want their women to be in politics. Since she aimed to enter the political sphere since her childhood, she had to remain a spinster to fulfil her dream.⁴⁸ Many such women without political backing were nominated but failed to be part of the legislative Assembly.

In 2016, the Iron Lady, Irom Chanu Sharmila, set foot in politics after ending her sixteen-year hunger strike against the Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958. She sees the need to possess power to fulfil her dream and therefore, she established her party – PRJA (People's Resurgence and Justice Alliance). In the 12th Assembly, she contested against Okram Ibobi Singh, the former CM. She manages to get only 90 votes, facing a humiliating defeat contrary to her dedication to society. Similarly, in 2022, Thounaojam Brinda, a former Additional Superintendent of police, joined politics as a believer in rectifying the corrupt framework of governance. She said that although women in Manipur have a leading role in shaping life in Manipur, they still cannot enter the political space as it is dominated by money and muscle, of which women have none. She also insisted on the need to stop the banking on black money and muscle to buy voters.⁴⁹ She was defeated by Thouchom Satyabrata Singh, a BJP sitting MLA.

Irrespective of the contribution of these women to their society, the invisibility among the ruling voice triggers the essence of the political web in Manipur. The Voting Behaviour of the masses is dubious. Voting Behaviour is the conscience of the voter in choosing his or her candidate to vote. In a survey on women's voting behaviour, 80% of educated women cast their vote based on their belief and understanding of the contestant, while the remaining 20%, mostly uneducated and unaware women, follow the step and guidance of the head of the family.⁵⁰ 80% of women voters might have the chance to elect women candidates, however, the invisibility in the leading voice still lingers. The reason for not electing women candidates may be – first, the women are not keen to the need of women political leaders; and secondly, due to the psychological inferiority of the women towards their male counterparts. As the saying *Nupina toubabu* (meaning – work done by women) generally used to criticise the work done by women, *Nupina Panba Yumbanbu* (family run by women) used to criticise a family where the male is less or no authoritative, *Oigi Thabakne* (left hand's work) mean that the work is easy as that of women's work, *Nupi Angangga Manaba Tanle* (Don't want to Confront women) is a saying used by men while avoiding confrontation with women, etc. these are some of the phrases where women are criticised by their male counterparts on daily conversations. Moreover, the title *Ipuroiba* – can roughly be translated as my owner – given to the husband and the wife as *Loinabi* – companion – projects a sense of inferior position for the women. Therefore, assuming that the political sphere is a male space and lacks the need to understand the voicing of women candidates.

William McCulloch in his book *Account of Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes*⁵¹ said that the women in Manipur are not confined as in Hindustan, and these women manage and support all the domestic concerns entirely. Similarly, Grace Jajo⁵² was surprised to see the dominance of women in the main centre – the main market – of the state and as frontal to any issue in the society. At the same time, she was shocked to see the invisibility of women in politics. Dr. Chinglen Maisnam, an Associate professor at Manipur University, pointed out that the WPR (Work Participation Rate) of the women in Manipur are higher juxtaposing the mainland India, both in urban and rural. He further pointed out that the invisibility in the political sphere is due to the strong gender bias of the political leaders as well as the masses. This led to lesser acquisition of (illegal) money and muscle power by the women, which was essential to be a part of the electoral battle. The general Manipuri masses believe that the political sphere is a territory where men exercise their

⁴⁸ Snigdhendru Bhattacharya *The curious Case of Women in Manipur Politics*. 13th March 2022.

⁴⁹ Idb.

⁵⁰ M. Rita Devi *A Socio-Political Study of Women in Manipur*. School of Social Science, Manipur University. 2002

⁵¹ Published in 1859, Calcutta. He was the East India Company Political agent in Manipur.

⁵² An independent journalist.

power struggle amongst themselves, leaving women as mere contributors, agents, or members campaigning for their trusted male candidate. This also contributes to the psyche of the masses to distrust female candidates to surpass the males.

This being the reason, Manipuri films, too, do not reflect women's active political participation. In films, they are generally portrayed as vamps or immoral women in the society when the contestant is not from the family or kind, gentle, and helpful companion when her husband is the contestant. For instance, in the telly play *Ashengba Lan*, directed by R.K. Amarjeet, the heroine who becomes an active member of the MLA is portrayed as a vamp who negates her role as a mother and wife. On the other hand, in *Kaboklei* (2012), directed by Pillu H., the titular hero's mother, Imashe,⁵³ was depicted as a kind, sympathetic, and welcoming woman who supports her spouse in election campaigning. Juxtaposing these women, Manipuri films had always depicted women with financial agencies to support themselves and, in some cases, their family too. They are portrayed as IAS officers, IPS officers, lecturers, doctors, bank managers, assistants, freedom fighters, insurgents, entrepreneurs, farmers, social workers, lawyers, etc. However, all these women are bound by the beliefs and cultural practices of the Meitei community. In sum, "Men in Manipur allow and encourage women to share social and economic responsibility but not the political space..." Akoijam Mirabai.⁵⁴

6. WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE IN MANIPUR

Manipur is an agrarian society where 52.81% of the working population is engaged in agrarian activities,⁵⁵ with rice as the main production. Apart from agriculture, other sources of income are horticulture, livestock, forest goods, fisheries, manufacturing, sericulture, trading, transport and communication, tourism, and civil services. According to the 2013 Economic Census, 2,29,838 establishments are there in Manipur subjected to various economic enterprises, excluding its agrarian production. Employing 4,09,617 work force, with 2,50,873 in rural and 1,58,744 in urban. Irrespective of occupation, women worked alongside their male counterparts, except in weaving, where women outnumbered the men. All the products, both from rural and urban areas, are marketed at the *Ima Market*, either as a producer or retailer. Apart from *Ima Market*, every town and village in Manipur has its own market where all the women sell their goods to the locals or merchants.

The *Ima Market*, which is the launching pad for almost all women's agitations and protests, is the epitome of economical transection since pre-colonial. It was ingrained in the 16th century, during the regime of King Khagemba. During the monarchy, it was a place where the monarchs interacted with the subjects through charity, celebration, or punishment. Since then, the market was run by women only where they sell or barter their goods. The market is divided into two wings – in the north is the Thangal Bazar, and in the south is the Paona Bazar.⁵⁶ Depending on the goods that the women are selling, the Thangal market can roughly be divided into four major groups and three other parts as an extension of the market. *Purana Bazar* (since 1915), *New Market* (1997-98)⁵⁷, *Lingthoinganbi* (1990)⁵⁸ and *Laxmi Bazar* (1974)⁵⁹ are the four main groups and *Session Court* (1994, eastern extension from the Session Court), *Chakrikom* (established in 1994, northern side of Imphal Session Court), *Naga Nullah* (1997, western extension on Naga Nullah) are the three extensions of the market. The seat capacity, goods sold, and by whom are shown in Table 1. Apart from these permanent seats, there are also women selling fruits and vegetables on the foot of the shades. In addition to these women, there are some shops in Thangal bazar operated by men, women, or both. The goods that are sold in these shops are either imported from Myanmar or mainland India and are sold by non-Manipuri⁶⁰ businessmen. The other wing, namely the Paona market, is a cluster of shops and shopping complexes, selling books, imported clothes, machinery, glasses, watches, party supplies, etc. Here, the market is predominated by men, or if there is a female shopkeeper is accompanied by their family or it is a family business.

⁵³ A title used to call a motherly woman who belong to or ancestor of Rajkumari.

⁵⁴ Snigdhendru Bhattacharya *The curious Case of Women in Manipur Politics*. 13th March 2022.

⁵⁵ *Economic Survey Manipur 2020-21*. Government of Manipur.

⁵⁶ Paona Bazar named after the hero of Manipur Paona Brajabashi and Thangal Bazar after General Thangal.

⁵⁷ Earliest record recorded by the Municipal Council Office.

⁵⁸ Named by the Municipal Council office on 25th Many'1990.

⁵⁹ In 1974 the licenses for marketing were issued by the Municipal Council.

⁶⁰ People from mainland India.

Dr. Chinglen Maisnam, a retired Manipur University Associate Professor, points out the economic contribution of Manipuri women in the society. He said that the female WPR (Work Participation Rate) in Manipur as of 2011 is higher than any state in mainland India – 41.2% against 30% for all mainland in urban and 33.2% against 15.4% for all mainland in rural. Table 1 shows that over four thousand women are engaging in trading affairs every day, in addition to other main workers as well as marginal workers⁶¹ in both government and quasi-government sectors. The total number of women employees in the public sector, as recorded in the *Economic Survey Manipur 2020-21*, is 14789 in government offices and 457 in quasi-government offices as of 31st March 2016. However, it is 28% in government and 19% in quasi-government. total employee in Manipur, with maximum number of women employees xzafrom Imphal East and west district – 3640 out of 11268 in government sector and 93 out of 499 in quasigovernment sector; and in Imphal west 4266 out of 16456 in government sector and 287 out of 1593 in quasigovernment sector. The recorded number of women literacy rate in Manipur had increased from 15.93% in 1961 to 70.26% in 2011,⁶² and the number of women who have completed postgraduate is higher than the men (481:648). The reason behind the lower rate of women's employment in the public sector must be the tradition of buying jobs in Manipur.

Nonetheless, the minimal employment of Manipuri women in the public sector does not hinder their economic contribution to the family and, further, to the society. Meitei society is an agrarian society where the people work together in the field irrespective of their gender. They work in a system known as *Khulang*, a collective working system where they work at other's fields, they are either paid monetarily or as shared labour. The economic contribution from textile and weaving are predominantly women's contribution to the society. Further, for sustainable financial planning, the Meitei family takes part in *Marup* – it is a kind of lottery where a group of people contribute a fixed amount of money either weekly or monthly, and the collected money is given to the winner. The winner of the *Marup* is either a pre-decided list or a lucky draw system. Every Meitei household takes part in at least two to three *Marup*–*Phanek marup*, *yumpham marup*, *gas marup*, etc., and for a maiden and family with an unmarried or to-be-married son or daughter, *Luhong marup* is joined.⁶³ All the women in Meitei society, both employed as well as unemployed, contribute to their family financially either by their wages or frugal family management and savings.

Tingneichong G. Kipgen, in her book *Women's Role in 20th Century Manipur*, points out the courage and industrious nature of Meitei women in Manipur, along with their sociocultural and political participation in the society. She quotes Mrs Grimwood when she says, "My three years in Manipur...Manipuries do not shut up their women, as in the custom in most parts of India and they are more enlightened and intelligent in consequences."⁶⁴ The reason behind this conduct of Meitei women is the prolonged management of the family without male members in the family. Since pre-colonial the Meitei men were under the *Lallup* system – service assistance to the king where all the men from the family aged between 17 to 60 years; and the terror of Seven years devastation (1819-1826) and after the independence the continuous the intoxication and implementation of AFSPA, hindering the free movement of the men in Manipur. The women have to survive in the absence of the men, and that has made the women courageous, bold, and independent. This ideology has been passed down through generations and is still practiced in Meitei society.

This enterprising behaviour had evolved due to the continuous absence of men in the family. Regardless of their collective activities, they are submissive and sacrificing in nature, bound by the patriarchal structure. Duncan McDuie-Ra in his article *Provincial Men, Worldly Women* points out that in an environment where there is a continuous conflict and the violence with the "...nationalist-infused masculinity of the occupying military, the ethno-nationalist masculinity of insurgency and the gun culture"⁶⁵ have horrible impact on the women but the consequences faced by the men were abhorrent. This led to the need for protecting the young men in the society by their mothers and wives and hence the emergence of *Meira Paibi*. Women being the protector of the society cannot unhook the Meitei community from the patriarchy. McDuie-Ra calls northeast patriarchy as soft patriarchy where the women literacy rate is high as compared to other mainland states, where the women can marry as per their choice, and where women are visible in the public domain. But a Meitei society follows a set of decorum that binds the community together – the stigmas and taboos that entail anyone who violates the traditional beliefs of the society.

⁶¹ Main workers – working more than 183 days per year, and marginal worker – working less than 183 days per year

⁶² And men's literacy rate had increased from 45.12% in 1961 to 83.58% in 2011.

⁶³ *Phanek marup* – marup where *Phanek* was given as prize, *yumpham marup*– marup for making house, *gas marup* – marup where gas cylinder was given as prize, *luhong marup* – saving for marriage or marriage gift.

⁶⁴ Kipgen *Women's role in 20th Century Manipur*. P 23

⁶⁵ Duncan McDuie-Ra. *Provincial Men, Worldly Women*. P. 124

To conclude, in Meitei society, motherhood is revered and framed with agency as the zenith of power and respect by women. She occupies a prominent position in family and public life as nurturers, protectors, and activists. Whereas girlhood and young womanhood are spaces of entrapment and vulnerability, a time when social norms hinder their freedom and agency. This difference highlights the larger gender politics in the Meitei community wherein the power that women hold is very much rooted in motherhood and hinders younger women in terms of social hierarchy. Bridging this reality of motherhood empowerment being juxtaposed against the question of vulnerability of young women continues to confer the central challenge towards the direction of where gender justice must travel in Meitei society.

In other words, the distinction between motherhood and womanhood is not only a cultural construct but also a snug social reality in Meitei society, where gender dictates the people in the community. Motherhood adored—an embodiment of power, power, responsibility, and social respect. Mothers are regarded as key elements in preserving cultural ideologies, financial prosperity, and even political action. By comparison, womanhood — at least for younger women — is all about vulnerability, dealing with the limitations placed upon her by men and male-dominated society, and forgoing autonomy. This juxtaposition is also deeply rooted in both media and literature; there remains a significant tension where in popular media and literature, the public sentiment is to view mothers almost as sacred, recent literature⁶⁶ shifts to women as more than simply mothers.

Women have a more liberated lifestyle within Meitei society, but, still, it is an activity based on custom. While the patriarchy in this society may be played as soft or even libertarian, women must still function within their prescribed lanes. Yet, the socio-political turbulence has hardened women in Manipur. Men are frequently absent — because of war, because of militarization — and women fill that space in the public sphere. Their presence has turned them into beacons of bravery and enterprise, threading the power equation between the ruling regime and rebel factions. While there is a growing trend for women to be more visible in the public sphere, they continue to be exploited and subjected to the yoke of patriarchy. Others, lose out to domestic violence, rape and murder, again, while the ones that survive hold tightly to being mothers, to becoming mothers, and to the myth of the national woman. While the state or the insurgent or the fight with them grabs headlines, what goes unseen is the everyday domestic domain that women continue to grapple with. Ultimately, the segregation of motherhood and womanhood in Meitei society mirrors the larger conflicting ideals of tradition and modernization. Young women are restricted and subjugated, while mothers are honoured and empowered. Here, the multiple layers of this experience of gender simultaneously illustrate the complicated interplay of social, cultural, and political forces that affect the lives of women in Manipur, as well as the personal battles that women face against the public and the ruling forces.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Devi, Thangjam Shanti. Ed. (2013 – 2020 with gaps in between). Nupigi Punshi, Imphal
- Geeta, Sapam. Ed. (2013) Vol. XXVII & XXIX. Nupigi Punshi. Imphal
- Leima, Arambam Ongbi Robita. Ed. (2011 – 2013 with gaps in between). Nupigi Punshi. Imphal
- , ---. Ed. (2013 – 2020 with gaps in between). Women and Crime. Imphal
- Bhattacharya, Snigdendu The curious Case of Women in Manipur Politics. 13th March 2022
- Brara, Vijaylakshmi. Culture and Indigeneity: Women in Northeast India. Indian Sociological Society, Vol. 1.1. 2017.
- Chatterji, Jyotsna. Ed. (1996). Customary Laws and Women in Manipur. Uppal Publishing House
- Dasgupta, Susmita. (Sep. 30 - Oct. 6, 2000) Civil Society Through Clear Eyes. Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 35, No. 40 , pp. 3614-3615. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4409811>

⁶⁶ 21st century women writers in Manipur such as Chaoba Phuritshabam, Shreema Ningombam, Soibam Haripriya, etc.

- Dena, Lal. Ed. (2019) History of Modern Manipur (1762-1949) (IInd ed). JBS
- Devi, Mairembam Rita. A Socio-Political Study of Women in Manipur. 2002. Manipur U, PhD dissertation
- Devi, Rajni. (1980) Nupi Lan [Women Agitation]. Cheichat
- Devi, R.K. Helen. (2012). Women and Socio-Political Movement in Recent Past and present Manipur. Sunmarg Publication
- Devi, Thokchom Binarani. (2011) Women's Movement in Manipur. Concept
- Dun, E.W. (1992) Gazetteer of Manipur. Mans Pub: Delhi
- Englehart, Neil A. (July 2011) What Makes Civil Society Civil? The State and Social Groups. Polity, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 337-357. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23015027>
- Geetha, V. (2007). Patriarchy. STREET: Calcutta
- Hinjabam, Isworchandra. (2006). Post-statehood economy of Manipur: A critical analysis. Alternative Perspectives, 2(3), 15-29
- Kamei, Gangmumei. (2019) History of Manipur: Pre-colonial Period. Akansha Publishing House
- Kipgen, Tingneichong G. (2010). Women's Role in 20Th Century Manipur: A Historical Study. Kalapa
- Kumar, R. and S. Ram. (2013). Human Rights in North-East India. Arpan Publication
- Kshetrimayum, Urmila. Women Vendors of Khwairamband Market, Manipur. 2002. Manipur U, PhD dissertation
- Lahiry, Sujit. (1 Jan.- March, 2005). Civil Society Redefined. The Indian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 66, pp. 29-50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856111>
- Laishram, Dr. Dhanabir. (2013). Trust Deficit in the Largest Democratic Country: A Study on Civil Society and Governance in Manipur. Ruby Press & co
- Manipur, Directorate of Economics and Statistics. (2021). Economic Survey Manipur. Lamphelpat
- McDuie-Ra, Duncan. "Provincial Men, Worldly Women." Northeast Migrants in Delhi. Amsterdam University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mv07.9>.
- McCulloch, William. (2016). Account of Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes. (IInd ed). Akansha
- Mehrotra, Deepti Priya. (2022). Burning Bright Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur (IInd ed). Penguin Books
- Phuritshabam, Chaoba, et.al. Tattooed with Taboos. Partridge, 2011
- Rehman, Teresa. (2017). The Mothers of Manipur. Zubaan
- Sircar, Manjusri Chaki. (1984) Feminism in a Traditional Society: Women of the Manipur Valley. Shakti Books
- Bridal Gift [Awunpot]. Directed by Santikumar Thounaojam, screenplay by J S Konsam, BHS Film production, 2018
- I am not a Whore [Ei Octabee Natte]. Directed by Paari Luwang, screenplay by Paari Luwang, Loveboy films, 2016
- Kaboklei [Kaboklei]. Directed by Pillu H, screenplay by Narendra Ningombam, Khaidem Pramodini Production, 2009
- Love story [Love story]. Directed by Bijgupta Laishram, screenplay by Bijgupta Laishram, Ireicha film production, 2008
- Moth [Meiranbi]. Directed by Mangoljao Samjetsabam & Bijgupta Laishram, screenplay by Bijgupta Laishram, Sonia Arts Production, 2010
- My lover from Loktak [Loktak Patki Nungshirabi]. Directed by Suvas E, screenplay by Em Kay Jeet, Shankat Film Production, 2008
- Numit Thoklakpada Directed by Surjit bb, screenplay by Kumudini Moirangthem, PKM film Production, 2018
- Sekmai River [Sekmai turel]. Directed by Dhanaraj Khomdram, story by A. Robita Devi, Angels Digital Media Service, 2012 9 produced by Young women help organization)
- Thabaton [Thabaton]. Directed by Bijgupta Laishram, screenplay by Bijgupta Laishram, BB Films, 2013
- Thabaton 3 [Thabaton 3]. Directed by Bijgupta Laishram, screenplay by Bijgupta Laishram, BB Films, 2019
- Thoibi from Keishamthong [Keishamthong Thoibi]. Directed by Oinam Gautam, screenplay by Narendra Nigonbam, Diana Films, 2008
- True Wealth [Ashengba Lan]. Directed by R.K. Amarjeet, screenplay by Rajesh Hijam, DDK Imphal, 2019
- Wedding Night [Luhongbagi Ahing]. Directed by Bijgupta Laishram, screenplay by Bijgupta Laishram, Baruni Films, 2011
- Woman IPS [Chanu IPS] Directed by Sanaton Nongthomba, screenplay by Sanaton Nongthomba, Nongthombam Films, 2018
- (name of an insect) [Nongoubee]. Directed by K. Bimol Sharma and Oja Tamba, screenplay by K. Bimol Sharma and Oja Tamba, N.M. Production, 2009