CHAPTER 2
THE STATE OF MANIPUR AND IMPHAL DISTRICT:
UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

The lower Himalayan ranges at the far eastern border of India cradle the beautiful green picturesque valley of Manipur dotted with small hillocks and rivers. Nagaland bounds the state in the North, on the east by the Chin Hills of Myanmar, in the south by the state of Mizoram and in the west by Assam.

The state is located between 23.80 degree to 25.68 degree North latitude and 90.03 degree to 94.78 degree East longitude. The total geographical area state is 22,327 kms of which approximately 90% is covered by hilly terrain that are sparsely populated by the tribes. Thus the valley occupies only about one tenth of the total area of the state and is at an average elevation of 2,500 feet above the sea level. One can reach Manipur by road from Assam through Nagaland National Highway No.39, the Indo-Burma road runs through from Assam through Dimapur and Kohima to the capital, Imphal, Manipur and terminates at Moreh, a lucrative market town at the border of Myanmar, about 107 kms away from Imphal. The New Cachar road runs west from Imphal to Jiribam at the border with Assam. National Highway No 39 links Imphal with railhead at Dimapur in Nagaland links Imphal with railhead at Jiribam 225 kms in the south west of Imphal.

Manipur valley is a fertile plain surrounded by mountain ranges. It is a land of hills, rivers and dales with exotic flora and fauna. The valley slopes down gradually to the south and reaches Loktak Lake, the largest fresh natural lake in north east India. The lake, covering an area of 216 sq.kms is fed partly by rainfall and partly by streams of river. The lake is the biggest natural source of fish supply which is one of the important food items of the people of Manipur. The terrain of hill ranges extends as part of the southern continuation of the Naga hills leading to Myanmar and encircles the plain valley. From Loktak Lake, the land rises on all sides up to the foot of the surrounding hills. The hills are drained by numerous streams down the rivers and the lower valley. The climate of the valley is moderate due to its elevation. During cold season, minimum temperature can be recorded as low as zero degree while during summer months; the maximum temperature can be recorded as high 40 degree centigrade.
Manipur is a small state with a population of 22.9 lakhs. Of the total population, male population consists of 11.6 lakhs as against that of 11.3 lakhs for females (Economic Survey, Manipur, 2006-2007). It has a favourable sex ratio, 978 when compared with all India average of 93 (Census of India, 2001).

2.1 A Brief Socio-Historical Accounts of the Origin of the Manipuris

The main social division in the state of Manipur consists of the Meiteis and the tribes. The Meiteis with a total population of 57.67% are the predominant Hindu community occupying the valley population. They have been described as one of the few Mongoloids who possess written script\(^1\) and a fairly rich literature from the early period. They had a sense of history and most of their manuscripts are historical records (Dubey: 1978). Among the Hindu Meities, there are the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Rajkumars and the Lois or the Scheduled Caste. The tribes consisting of 34% of the total population reside in the hills of Manipur. According to the Census 2001, there are 29 tribal groups in the state. All the 29 tribal groups are broadly divided into two major groups—the Naga and the Kuki.

Of the total nine districts, tribes occupy five districts mostly in hills while the four districts are in the valley. Sources about the origin of the tribes and the Meities reveal that the Nagas, the Kukis and the Meiteis have a common ancestor belonging to the Mongoloid race. Besides the main social division, there are also other communities forming a meagre percent of the total population. These are the Muslims who comprise of 7% of the state population and inhabit the south-central part of Manipur valley. The other communities are the Jains, the Sikhs and the Buddhists inhabiting the Imphal region.

\(^1\) Meitei Mayek is the original archaic Meitei script which was introduced by King Khangemba during 1615-1616 A.D. Cheitharol Kumbaba, Manipur Chronicle mentions that the script and all Manipuri books of the old faiths were destroyed by King Garib Nawaj in 1732-33 when Hinduism was introduced in Manipur. Lal Dena (1988) notes, in the aftermath of its introduction, a down of orthodoxy and conservatism arose particularly among the native aristocrats. Along with coming of Hinduism the Meitei script was eventually replaced by Bengali script. After revivalist movement, the old Meitei script has steadily been introduced as compulsory paper in schools in the recent past.
The Languages of the people of Manipur fall into four main groups—Manipuri, Kuki, Naga and Indo Aryan. Manipuri is spoken in the central valley while in the hill areas, kuki and Naga languages are the major vehicles of communication despite the usage of many dialects among these tribes. Yet, Manipuri language is the lingua franca of the state (Singh: 1982).

The historical accounts of the origin of the Meiteis have been clouded by obscurities more or so due to the influence of Hinduism and the appearance of Hindu names to mark the beginning of the native legend (Hudson: 1908). It however, can be traced to the surrounding hill tribes (Hudson: 1908, Brown: 1873). The Nagas, generally known as the Tangkhuls have been found to have close affinities with other Naga tribes living in the neighbouring Nagaland. They also have been described to belong to the Ningthouja clan, one of the most powerful clans of the Meitei community (Constantine: 1984). The Kuki tribes of Manipur have close cultural links with the Mizos of Mizoram and the Chins of the Chin Hills. However, some authors consider them having raced from the Malya Peninsular while others claim that they have come to Manipur in 1830s and 40s as a nomadic race (Chandrashekar: 1987). Though the historical evidence available on their origins remains obscure, the Meiteis and the tribes have been described to belong to different salais (clans), having a common ancestor i.e. the Mongoloid groups. The social organisation of both the communities have strong kinship organisation based on clan and lineage. Both the social groups practice animistic faith and such form of practice is a response to the functional needs of both the social system (Chandrashekar: 1997).

2.2 Emergence of Hinduism

Before the emergence of Hinduism in the state in early 17th century, animism was practiced both by the Meities and the hill tribes. Animistic faith, UmangLais and rituals continue to play a significant role in the organisation of their lives till date. Among the Meiteis, the practice of animism is evidenced from the existing priest and priestess.

Hinduism in the state is of recent origin. There has been sequence of different stages, which marked the introduction of Hinduism. The penetration of Hinduism during the rule of Garib Nawaz during 1709-1748 A.D has been described as the most important period during which the king was initiated into Hinduism. This event marked the beginning of Ramanadi cult in the state.
After the penetration of Hinduism in early 17th century, the majority of the valley population were forcibly converted into Hinduism while the tribes remained untouched by such processes. And those Meiteis who refused to be converted to Hinduism were punished by the King by sending them to the foothills. They later came to be known as the Scheduled Castes or the Lois, the Yaithibis by local names (Brown: 1873). Among the Meitei Hindus, there emerged the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Rajkumars. The Rajkumars are the descents of various rajas of Manipur. All the Meiteis of Manipur except the Brahmins and the Lois wear sacred thread. Another class of people who do not wear sacred thread is the Lairikyenbam who retain Bengali titles such as the Basu and Das. They are class of writers who have been absorbed into the general mass of the Manipuri population.

However when compared to the general Hindu caste society of India, caste rules in the region are much relaxed as the social structure of the Meitei society is not essentially based on ascriptive hierarchy. Absence of occupational caste, the mutability in the economic and occupational patterns among various sections of the population has facilitated unrestricted choice of occupation and lateral mobility among its different population groups. Apart, it has also helped the social groups to develop a community life based on cooperative labour. Despite the existence of majority population under the fold of Hinduism, especially in the valley, the notion of pollution and purity is practically non-existent. Sircar (1984) observes, ‘There is no stratified caste system among the Meiteis. The Lois and Nagas live apart in their own villages without ritual obligations to the Brahmins and kshatriyas’. Social organisation of Manipuri society is seen as relatively unaffected by Hinduisation. Caste system, Sati, purdah, notion of pollution and purity which were some of the evil practices of Hinduism did not play any significant role in Manipuri society (Brown: 1873, Chandrashekhar: 1997, Lokendra: 1998). Unlike in the rest of caste society of India, Brahmins do not hold high status, as the social structure of Manipuri society is not essentially based on hierarchy.

The Brahmins were provided with lands by the kings and generally lived by cultivation and trade, in which the occupation is not different from the type of occupation, other caste members take up. Though the Brahmins occupy high ritual position, they, like any other social group
engage in agricultural activities, adapt to the Meitei life style completely including the animistic faith (Brara: 1998). Hudson, in this context observes that the essence and the philosophy of Hinduism did not penetrate in Meitei society. Thus Hudson describes the Manipuris to be still animists and contented that the hold of Hinduism in Manipur was at a superficial level. The Brahmins have adopted the Meitei life style completely even including the Meitei faith such as the worship of Sanamahi - the traditional household deity of the Meiteis.

The communal way of life and the cordial existence between the tribes and the Meiteis since the early times continue till date. That, presently, there are many instances where tribal villages have sprung up in Imphal valley (Roy: 1973). The character and equality of these local Institutions such as the leikais (villages) of the region tend to be far more superior to the caste ridden feudal Panchayats in much of rural India. The social life was that of an egalitarian type.

### 2.3 Social Status of Women

The women of Manipur are seen to hold high social status and enjoy more freedom both in economic and socio-political domains. Allen in 1905 observes that the women of Manipur are capable of who at all stages of their career are allowed the fullest liberty (Lokendra: 1999). Scholars such as Brown, Roy, Hudson, Sircar argue that the women of Manipur enjoy more freedom than in other parts of India s they are not only the major economic contributors in the state but also have relative considerable voice in social and political domain in the state which is reflected in higher social status of women with a favourable sex ratio in the state is favourable for women such as 978. Associated with the high social status of women is that crimes against women such as female infanticide, child marriage, purdah systems etc. are almost nonexistent which are widely prevalent in many parts of the country (Hudson: 1908)

### 2.4 Economic and Political Organization

During the pre-British period, the economic organization of the state has been described to be closed, traditional and pre-capitalistic. Barter system existed between the hill tribes and the valley population (Laiba:1992). Jhum cultivation in the hill and wet rice cultivation in the valley were practiced by the Manipuris besides other allied occupations such as weaving and sericulture as worth mentioning. However agriculture remained the mainstay of the economy in the state. Trade
in the state existed only to meet the local demands. The economy of the state is predominantly agrarian where the largest numbers of the labour force, 63% ply on agriculture for their livelihood (Census of India, 2001). However, agricultural practice remains unorganised and unskilled and greatly controlled by the physical and cultural factors such as climate, topography and socio-economic conditions. Milton Sangma maintains that the economy of Manipur is characterised by poorly developed economy and remains outside the strong territorial networks of the rest of the country.

Gradual changes in the economy and occupational structure occurred after the occupation of the kingdom of Manipur by the British in 1891 A.D (Dubey:1978). Movement from agricultural to non-agricultural occupation became quite prominent during the British period. However, while there had been no developments of any form of modern industries, some of the traditional industries such as silk industry, traditional handicrafts and artisan productions were thoroughly crippled in heavy competition with cheap imported textile goods by the British (Lokendra Singh: 1998). The Kingdom of Manipur suffered the same fate of political and economic exploitation that other colonised states experienced.

When Manipur was integrated into the Indian Union in 1949, politically, she was given the status of Part-C state where the governing of the state was entrusted to the president of India whose administration was carried out through the Chief Commissioner appointed by the President. The political history of Manipur has been characterised by constant turbulence. Agitation and hartals for full statehood continued in full swing. Consequently, statehood was granted in 1972. This was seen as a red letter day in the political history of Manipur. Even after attainment of statehood, Manipur still continues to grapple with gross political instability and economic backwardness.

2.5 Field Site: Imphal District

Before the British preoccupation of Manipur, Kangla² was the capital of Manipur. Historical account of Imphal indicates that Imphal capital has grown out of the Kangla, the ancient palace of

² The Royal Chronicle mentions the existence of Kangla as the palace from the first kingdom of Manipur such as Pakhangba who became the king of Manipur in 33 A.D., just after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in 29 or 30 A.D. The Chronicle further records that King Pakhangba used to assume the form of God by the day and by the night he used to be a man. This reasons the culture of snake worship among the Meiteis of Manipur.
the Ningthouja clan of the Meiteis who ultimately established their hegemony over other six clan principalities in the valley of Manipur. From the time of Pakhangba of first century, the Ningthouja kingdom of Imphal had gradually wielded enough political power to merge as the most dominant in Manipur valley. Hence Kangla used to be the most important seat of political, military, economic power but also the centre of social, cultural and religious activities. The Imphal valley due to its legacy continues to be hub bubs of socio, economic, political and educational centre for the people of Manipur.

Imphal district is centrally located in the state of Manipur. It is bounded by Senapati district on the north, on the east by Ukhrul and Thoubal district and on the south by Bishnupur District. The district has 8 sub divisions with administrative set up of various levels such as the Community Development Block, the Zila Parishad, the Gram Panchayats, the pradhan etc. Imphal, the capital city is the hub bubs of major economic, religious and political activities of the people of Manipur since time immemorial. Imphal is divided into two districts: Imphal west and Imphal east. For the purpose of administrative convenience, Imphal east was carved out of Imphal district, with its head quarter at Porompat in 1997. Imphal east district is situated in two separate valleys such as central valley and Jiribam valley. The district occupies a total land area of 709 sq.km with a population of 394,876 persons. It has a sex ratio of 991 females. There are 204 numbers of village with a density of 557 persons per sq.km. Agriculture remains the main occupation of the people of Imphal east district. The main food crops are paddy, potato and vegetables. Among the cash crops are sugar cane, maize, pulse, oil seeds and other vegetables. The total number of workers engaged in agriculture in the district was 22,371 (Economic Survey, Manipur 2006-2007).

When compared with Imphal east, Imphal west is highly developed in terms of trade and commerce with two large important bazaars, Thangal bazaar and Paona bazaar, with large number of stores run by locals and Mayangs³, (North Indian business men) who deal mostly both with

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³ Mayangs are any non Manipuri who come from mainstream India for the purpose of taking up business, or any other occupation. To the local people, the name also suggests outsiders who belong to a different race and culture. Therefore, in most cases of reference, it has become rather derogatory to refer to outsiders as mayangs due to various political reasons.
Map 2.1: Maps of Manipur showing locations of Imphal west and Imphal east

Source: www.mapsofindia.com
imported goods and local products for export. Seen side by side are numerous small shops run both by males and females. However the largest and the famous market within Imphal west is the mother’s market or popularly known as Khwarimband\textsuperscript{4} Bazaar or Sana Keithel (golden market) owned by women only. It is the largest trading centre solely owned by womenfolk only. Hundreds of women traders commute to mother’s market daily by public transport from far and nearby distance for the transaction of mostly home based products of goods. These market places provide a vibrant socio-economic world for these women traders. The mother market is the largest market which stands at the heart of Imphal capital where women traders from long distances assemble for marketing of their products. These traders, after collecting consumable items of articles are then conveyed to satellite markets which again form the centres of market of smaller ones.

The total geographical area of the district is 519 sq.km, of which 465.88 sq.km forms the rural area. The district is well connected to other parts of the state by a network of national, state highways, district roads and inters village roads. Being the state capital, the valley is the heart of not only the city but also the people of Manipur. The district is not only the biggest commercial and industrial centre but also the main locus of political and cultural activities. The density of population of the district is 856 persons per sq.km indicating that the demography of the region is much more developed than the rest of the districts and that of state average, 107 persons per sq.km.

Though the state’s economy is predominantly agrarian, the percentage of the peasant communities’ labour force in agriculture is however low, 11.31%. The district is highly advanced in terms of small scale industries such as handloom, handicrafts, cottage and other small scale industries that constitute the bulk of the industrial unit and the growth of such industrial units also remain highest in the district when compared to the rest of the districts. Around 61% of the total workforce of the district is in non-agricultural sector. Imphal west is the most developed region in terms of trade and commerce, transport and communication facility, administrative set

\textsuperscript{4} The market was established by King Khagemba in 16th century. The market not only occupies a pivotal position of trade but also symbolic as the seat of women’s power in economic domain. Ima market continues to draw admiration and fascination for many outsiders who visit Manipur.
up and other basic amenities. The district also has high female labour force such as 40.51% as against the 48.91% of males. The womenfolk are the indispensable social category in fulfilling the state economy in the region.

Of the total population 4,44,382 persons, 55.51% forms the urban population. Among the social groups, the Meities form the largest population groups, 74% (approx), followed by the Scheduled Tribes, 4.8%, Scheduled Castes, 3.8% respectively. There also other communities such as the Meite Pangals (Muslims), Nepalis, Jains, Sikhs, Bengalis. In the district, males consist of 2,21,781 as against that of females having 2,22,601 and hence the sex ratio of the district is favourable for females which is as high as 1004 (Census of India, 2001). Literacy wise, of all the districts, Imphal west has the literacy rate, 75.4 percent of which 85.5 percent are males as against the 65.3 percent of females. The district also has the highest female literacy rate such as 72.24% as against the state average of 68.87% and 59.60 of female literacy.

The Imphal valley is thus a mosaic of various ethnic groups, comprising of the Meiteis, the tribes and the Scheduled castes, who are the original inhabitants of the valley, while the Pangals, the Nepalis, the Begalis, the Jains and the Sikhs are the immigrants. The languages spoken in the district are the Meiteilon, the kuki, the Naga and the Indo-Aryan. Though tribal dialects are used among tribes, Meiteilon is the lingua franca in the valley and the state (Singha: 1988).

2.6 Education in Imphal District

Prior to the British occupation of Manipur in 1891, Manipur remained an independent princely state. The works of various scholars in those days before the British occupation of Manipur indicate the existence of an indigenous system of education and various books on the disciplines of history, religion, medicine, dunce, drama and the philosophy of life and death written in Meitei Mayek (Meitei Script) (Zamini: 1987) were inscribed in copper plates and coins. The indigenous system of education at that time was, by and large, methodological and scientific by stressing on all round development of the individuals (Ibid: 1987). Meiteilon (Manipuri language) and the Meitei Mayek was important in spreading such form of education. However, importance of the script declined after the emergence of Hinduism.
In the absence of any established system of modern education, every house of the Pandit (Guru) was regarded as school. There was no school building. The Kangla, the sacred royal coronation Hall, located at the right bank of the Imphal river was described as the University of Manipur. The King was responsible for funding the cost of education for all. The indigenous schools were the main agencies for the spread of mass education. However, such a form of education system was fast decaying by the beginning of the 19th century when Manipur became under the control of British Government.

Going by the historical development in education, Imphal district has been the hubbubs of learning and the growth of educational institutions. The region was the central place where the growth and inception of the formal education system began during the British occupation of Manipur. Captain Gordon was the first British who organised a primary educational center at Imphal in early 19th century. Nuthal was another British official who opened a school at Imphal with English as the medium of instruction in 1872, but the school remained dysfunctional due to lack of local support for they did not appreciate the English language.

However, in the course of time when the English missionaries were permitted to enter into Manipur, for the first time with the consent of King Chandra Kirti, the political Agent of Manipur, James Johnstone, was the first who opened a Middle English School in Imphal in 1885. Among the missionaries, it was William Pettigrew who opened a school in Imphal in 1894. His educational activities were extremely large and satisfied the British officials and the people at large. Gradually, primary schools were established in other districts of Manipur. The actual expansion of schools in the state, however, began after India’s independence especially during the period of 1949-50.

While examining the school expansion and management wise of schools for primary and elementary stages in Manipur, it is observed that a significant number of these schools particularly the upper primary is managed by the private bodies. The trend further indicates that despite the takeover of schools by government, the number of schools run by private bodies continues to be high. In the state educational institutions run by the private individuals and voluntary agencies thus continue to play an important role for the schooling
of children. Significantly, Imphal district continues to be in pivotal position in terms of school expansion established by various private bodies. The district has the largest number of mission schools, madrasas and schools run by local private individuals.

Of late, the development paradigm of the state has invited full of criticism. It is observed the state economy does not reflect in several respects general development pattern of the country. The state has been chronically gripped in the throes of multiple crises such as political and economic corruption causing the breakdown of several state institutions while armed powerful insurgent groups allegedly drawing legitimacy from inefficient, corrupt politicians and non performing officials engage in free swing of extortions. In the process, social life of the masses of civilians including various sections of civil society sector is helplessly under virtual siege.

The chaotic and pathological social, political and economic crisis is deeply drawn into the present education system in the state. And the crisis has apparently become the greatest challenge to education. The current deepening crisis in education has caused tremendous anxiety, worry, restlessness and frustrations among the general public, anticipating the future of Manipuri society at great stake. Engagement of the local intelligentsia and pilot studies in school education reveal the increasing impoverishment of government schools in terms of quality schooling for children. These studies highlight that many government schools are crippled and operate without basic conveniences such as toilet, latrine and drinking water facility; leave alone implementing education schemes and facilities, a provision meant to attract children to schooling. To cite a case, according to the report of the Situational Analysis of Children in Government Schools conducted by the Institute of Social Work and Research with funding from the Manipur Alliance for Child Rights, it was found that students studying in Government schools in Imphal East district have been facing a lot of inconveniences due to absence of toilets or unserviceable conditions even if some schools have the such facilities. Further the study found that only 2 out of 50 schools had toilet facility. The great discomfort and inconvenience remains and no zonal education officer have paid heed to the complaints lodged by the Head teachers of these schools. The study further reports, 32 schools, out of 50 schools do not have safe drinking water facility.
These fact findings are more than telling the truths of the present chaos in education system in the state. The widespread failure of government schools has caused restlessness, anxiety and tension among concerned local intelligentsia, students and ordinary parents. These tensions and anxieties are often released through workshops, seminars and media by highlighting well thought opinions and views with a clear vision, often prompting the state and the society on the prerequisite of imparting education to the masses when all efforts to bring about a qualitative change in the general standard of the people falls flat. The failure can be seen as more of a deeper symptom where the common masses, the poor and the poorest are systematically excluded from the affairs of the state and governance. On the contrary, mass awareness and its participation in the affairs of the state is the hallmark of progress and the key to achieve education for all.

In startling contrast, as the local intelligentsia, academicians and concerned citizens voice out, the present education scenario where an insignificant number of students are highly privileged to be educated from elite private schools runs parallel to the Darwinian law of natural selection, of "Survival of the Fittest", suggesting that it is only natural laws that recognize 'the fittest' unlike human laws that have compassion and magnanimity. Several concerns are also raised on the constant trapping of educational institutions by insurgents and sporadic violent movements. Academic environment in the schools has also been often disturbed by incidents such as murders, kidnapping and extortion demands that have been made on school teachers. These voices and concerns are commonly shared by all sections of society including the most ordinary parents who have reached the vintage point of frustration over an education system which has completely failed in cradling and nurturing the children and youths and preparing them to face the challenges and daring situations of life. The development is indeed a tragic for a society such as Manipur where a humanistic and liberative education system has deep social roots among its people since time immemorial.
CHAPTER 3

CHOOSING SCHOOLS FOR CHILDREN: SEEING THROUGH PARENTS' EYES