CHAPTER-V

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ROLE OF WOMEN IN MANIPUR
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The social, economic activities and the role of Manipuri women in the society may be studied by adopting various approaches and methodologies. Though, small in size, the complexity in the society calls upon the women to perform multifarious duties and responsibilities depending on the situation and nature of the issues developed from time to time.

Regarding the position and the status of women in the society, opportunities of social activities, character and the extent of work done, Usha Rao, observed, ‘Status of women in any society is determined by the interplay of various socio-economic factors. Some of those may be objective in nature like education, employment, income, etc. as subjective depending on the social values prevailing in the society.’ According to Marya, ‘Social roles and role expectation which are experienced by men and women in concrete social situation as binding norms depend on the culture of the society’. Further she observed that ‘any assessment on the status of women has to start from the social framework, social structure, cultural norms and value system influence social expectation regarding the behaviour of both men and women and determined a women’s role and her position in society to a great extent.’

The position and status of Manipuri women when compared with the women of other states in India is comparatively high. In this regard, S.K. Bhuyan observes, 'Manipuri women have been enjoying a freedom which their sisters in India failed to attain. They were not confined to the four walls of their domestic life, they go out freely for purposes of petty trades mainly in the scale of products of their own hands. They weave fine durable textures where colours are assembled in the most attractive manner. At the same time Manipuri women have shown their gallantry valour in desperate and critical situations'.

Mrs. Grimwood also expressed her view, 'The Manipuri do not shut up their women as is the custom in the most parts of India and they are much more enlightened and intelligent in consequence'.

Social role of women in Manipur

The social role of Manipuri women in the family and outside the family has its roots in history. Manipur had a monarchical form of Government. All the male adults had to serve the King in the palace for 10 days out of 40 days. This system was known as 'Lallup system'. Moreover, male members very often accompanied the King in the warfare against the neighbouring chieftains and rulers. As a result, women had to bear the social responsibilities. Manipuri women have inherited this social responsibilities even today in different forms and in a changed situation.

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After the coming of Hinduism in Manipur in the 15th and 16th century, there was a change position and status of women. Great impact of Hinduism such as considering their husband as lord, the subordinate position of women in and outside the family had penetrated into the social structure of Manipur. There were many do's and don'ts in the social norms and behaviour according to Hinduism. Thus, women started to occupy a subordinate position in the social hierarchy.

**Women in the family and Locality**

Individuals as members of families form a society. They interact with each other in their day-to-day dealings with one another, by the process there are developments in minds i.e. mental development takes place. So, a developing society is characterised by a network of innumerable minds. Society is not a mind but a network of innumerable minds, sometimes in conflict, and sometimes co-operating. Particular communities as societies may achieve a measure of unity but the longer they are in scale, the lower appears to be the mental level of the group taken as a whole. The social relationship between the members of the different families were mainly conducted through women. In Manipuri society, all the domestic works in the family are performed by the women. Younger women upto the age of 35-40 are always engaged in domestic work irrespective of their class and status. School and College going girls do a lot of domestic work before going to classes. Of course, a small percentage of this class belonging to Urban well-to-do families are free from the domestic responsibilities like cooking, fetching water, kitchen
gardening, cleaning the house, child rearing etc. Even the working women have to bear the responsibilities as well and they have to discharge their duty at their work place also.

In the family, women are the main educator of social norms, laws etc. to their own children and younger members of the family. In a joint family, women have to adjust with each and every member of the family who are living together. She has to take care of the old-aged in-laws. It is their duty to take the responsibilities for the maintenance of the family too. Very often, they are emotionally and psychologically disturbed due to differences in opinion and ideas and responsibilities in the family management. In addition to their household responsibilities and upbringing of children, it has become almost compulsory for every adult to participate in the social functions of their localities. Womenfolk took active part for the development of their localities like organising Nisha Bandh for the removal of alcoholism from their localities and ‘Meira Paibi’ against the atrocities of the arm personnel, acting as Human Rights protector keeping night vigil camps in the localities. It is the women who played main role when there is any social and religious functions such as wedding, Swasti Pujah (Birth ceremony), Sradha (Death ceremony) etc.

**Women and Society**

In the process of social development, many factors are to be taken into account. Factors like customary laws, religion, culture, morality, education, mental development, economic etc. contributed to the growth of
the society. As women constituted half of the population of the society, the role and the activities of women cannot be ignored and neglected in the process of the development of the society.

The history of the Manipur has proved that Manipuri women can take important roles in any conflicting situation e.g. 'Nupilan' (Women Agitation) 1904 and 1939 where women fought against British Colonial rulers. Women continue to participate in all the important events by forming various organisations such as Meira Paibi, All Manipur Women Social, Reforms and Development Samaj, Naga Women Union. These organisations are being formed to protect women’s rights, to protect from social evils and to uplift the socio-economic status. In Manipuri Society, after the coming of Hinduism, we find incidents of women burning themselves on the pyre of their husbands as the sign of Sati system, e.g. during the reign of king GaribNiwas (1709-1748) when his son Sanahal Murarilal died, his two wives burnt themselves on the pyre of their husband. But this system was not accepted by the society and no more continued in Manipuri society.

The practice of polygamy was very common in early period. It was mainly practiced by those persons belonging to the higher social and political hierarchy. Another reason for the practice of polygamy is that the number of women outnumbered the number of men as a result of frequent war with Burma (Myanmar) and their neighbouring areas. Many Manipuri men were taken as war-prisoners by the Burmese and other forces,
specially during the 'Chahi Taret Khuntakpa 'Seven Years Devastation 1819-1826). The then social and political situation encouraged the practice of polygamy. And in order to increase the male population, all the menfolks are allowed socially to have more than one wife. At present, the ratio between men and women is more or less equally balanced. It has been felt that the emergence of the system of polygamy create an atmosphere of social conflicts and social disharmony. The system and practice of polygamy lower down the position and status of women. In Meitei society, it is believed that the concept of dowry has its source in 'Leisemlon Ariba Puya'which mentioned the giving of 'Aoonpot' as early as 15,000 B.C. Aoonpot is the form of gift given by the parents to their daughters at the time of marriages. The literal meaning of dowry is the free gift or, presentation only of essential things necessary for livelihood. In the strict sense of the term, this is unlike the dowry system prevailed in other parts of India. The gifts and presentations are given in the sense as understood in other parts of India. In the name of Aoonpot, the daughter is given only certain minimum things such as cot, almirah, utensils etc. necessary for her in the house of her husband. But in course of time with the impact of Hinduism's dowry system, the people of Manipur especially the Meitei's are now on a competitive race of giving costly items as dowry at the time of marriage of their daughters. The beautiful part of the dowry system in Manipur is that there is no demand from the side of the bridegroom party. There is no compulsion of giving dowry also.

6 *Seven Years Devastation* is a period during which Manipur was under the political control of Burmese for seven years.
In Manipuri society, especially the Meiteis, do not differentiate their children as sons and daughters irrespective of their individual and social status. Parents always adopt equal attitude and behaviour towards their sons and daughters. There is no girlchild infanticide. But preference is given to boys.

**Women and Social Rights**

In every society, women are governed by social norms, beliefs, practices etc. handed down from generation to generation. Men and women are always treated differently prescribing gender rules in and outside the family system. With the dawn of democratic ideas and democratic form of government, especially after the Second World War, women had started to assert their rights. The declaration of human rights by the United Nations in 1948 has added another dimension by granting equal rights to both men and women. But, in many parts of India, the social reality is somewhat different. Majority of the women especially in rural areas, still remains traditional and continues to enjoy subordinate and inferior position in the patriarchal society.

**Religion**

Every society has its own culture, tradition, religion, customs and norms. Generally, these social norms and practices are based on religion. Manipuri women, mainly in the valley, are governed by the norms and practices prescribed by both Meiteism, the old religion of the Meiteis and Hinduism. The same can be said in the case of women in the hill areas of
Manipur. Women in the hills are governed by their indigenous social norms as well as the norms prescribed by Christianism.

In Manipuri society (Meitei), there is no restriction for the participation of womenfolk in the religious ceremonies. Women perform pujah, learn Mantras, go to pilgrimage etc. This fact is amply illustrated in the Lai Haraoba festival where women perform dance and songs. Lai Haraoba means ‘Pleasing the God’. The essence of the festival is to please the Lais (Gods) in order to gain their favour. In this regard, E. Nilakanta expressed his view that ‘Lai Haraoba’ mirrors the entire culture of Manipuri people. It reveals its strengths and weakness, the beliefs and superstitions and perhaps also charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people at their intensest.8 In this Lai-Haraoba, the leading role is played by a group of women called ‘Maibis’ (Priestess). Worship of the deities and family Gods and rituals are performed by females who lead a life of austerity. Such females are called Maibis. The Maibis are either men or women living a life dedicated to the practice of some extra-ordinary spiritual discipline according to the old traditions. They belong to a special cult, entry into which is decided by certain uncommon development in the individuals mode of thinking and action. There is a local convention which guides whether a person has attained the requisite mental aptitude for entry into the cult of Maibis. Members of this cult, in their appearance before the deities or for any religious rituals, are to dress themselves like woman whether they are men or women. They are

known as Maibis. The term Maibi is feminine. The Maibis require intensive training under able Gurus. They are believed to have a vision of Gods and Goddesses whom they serve and are to communicate their messages to the people. The manner and the occasion of such communications are of two kinds. One is the communication before a mass gathering like the Lai-Haraoba and predicting the future of the society in general and of the individuals. The participation of the Maibis is considered very important. Without them the Lai-Haraoba festival cannot be organised. The participation of the Maibis is a must in the Lai-Haraoba. The Lai-Haraoba festival also were instrumental for the promotion of sports and culture. The ritual dances are followed in variably by sports and athletic events in which most of the able bodied young new and women participate.

Older women always take main role in the social ceremony known as Eepan Thaba ceremony. The ceremony is performed in the morning of the sixth day after the birth of a child. There is strictness in the social customary laws that this particular rite should be performed by Maibi (midwife) in another sense or, older women who knows the rituals. The father have to perform the rites on the basis of the instruction given by the Brahmin in the evening, only in case of the Hindu family. The Maibis including the younger ones took major roles in all religious ceremonies performed from the birth of a child to the ceremony performed after the death of a person. It may be noted that there were changes after the coming

9 Eepan Thaba is the birth ritual of the Meiteis.
of Hindu Vaisnavism in Manipur. The priests started to take major role in
the performance of the religious ceremonies. These changes had affected
the position of the Maibis. But, the changes could not eliminate the
importance of Maibis from the Manipuri society especially the Meitei
society. In course of time, both the Hindu priests and traditional Maibis
were engaged in the observance and performance of religious ceremonies
depending on the type of the ceremony and ritual to be observed and
performed. Manipuri Women especially Meitei woman participated
actively in the Hindu oriented festivals like Yaoshang (Dol Jatra or Holi),
Rathjatra, Durga Pujah, Jhulan etc. Though these are Hindu festivals,
they are normally observed in a traditional way of the Manipuris in the
society. It is the result of the social process of integration and
assimilation of the two cultures i.e. Meiteism and Hinduism over a long
period of years. In these festivals women and girls performed dances and
other items of cultural activities like singing, dancing etc. /

‘Yaoshang’ is a Manipuri word. The literal meaning of ‘Yaoshang’
is a small hut for the sheep. It is usually observed for five days and another
one day called ‘Halankar’. After a procession, various Kirtan parties
performed songs and dance dramas on the life of Krishna at the temple
ground of Govindaji. Yaoshang is usually in the month of February-March
every year. It is also called Doljatra, a Sanskrit Word, which coincides
with Holi, observed in other parts of India. The Yaoshang festival is
undoubtedly the biggest festival of the Manipuri Vaishnavas wherein the
old customs have been integrated with the new myth and Vaishnavite faith.
During this festival the most exciting part is Thabal Chongba which means dancing in the moonlight, wherein the boys and girls perform group dance hand in hand, to the rhythm of Dholak\textsuperscript{10} music, replaced now by the irresistible band music. There are slight changes in the form of the observance and celebration of the festival from time to time. These changes are found especially in the form of worship, the playing of the music instruments, lighting system, the dresses worn by men, women and children. Both young and old women organised themselves into groups and went from one place to another as Holi Pala, singing songs relating to Lord Krishna and Radha. They usually sang songs concerning the love affairs of Lord Krishna and his beloved Radha with demonstrations and colours. Women in large members fully participated in Doljatra festival every year.

\textit{Rath Yatra} or the Car Procession is a major festival of the Manipuri Vaishnavas of the valley. On this day, the idols of Lord Jagannath with his brother and sister are taken in a Rath and moved around the locality. It is a counterpart of the famous Rath Yatra of Puri, Orissa.

The Manipuris especially the Meiteis have added an artistic dimension to it with a lot of songs and dance throughout the entire period of nine days which usually falls in the month of June/July every year. Thousands of persons of all ages and sexes right from the children to the aged persons above 80 in their white dresses participated in the push and pull of the chariot from gate to gate of their localities. Women from every

\textsuperscript{10} Dholak is a musical instrument. The \textit{Thabal Chongba} is performed by the beating of this instrument with rhymes of different forms.
house offered fruits, flowers etc. to the Lord Jagannath. The chariots are led by a group of persons who are experts in singing and in playing musical instruments. During the period of the festival a religious cultural programme called Khubak Ishei (Tala Rasaka) which literally means ‘Clapping music’ accompanied by songs is presented by groups of Nata Kirtan singers, mostly female groups, in the afternoon and late at night. This is performed in most of the Mandaps\(^\text{11}\) depicting Krishna’s departure from Vrindavan to Mathura in His mission to kill Kansa in the rath of Akrura, followed by tragic lamentation of the gopis at the separation.\(^\text{12}\) The festival ends with Nityai Pada depicting the glories of Nityananda in which groups of young women, girls and small children would dance ‘Chali’\(^\text{13}\) while singing the padas.

‘Jhulan’ is also another equally important festival. This is the celebration of the occasion of Sri Krishna’s play with His Consort Radha in water. It usually falls in the month of Srawan (July/August). The significance of this festival is its cultural impact on the society. Most of the temples have their own elaborate arrangements for this festival which mainly consists of making a well decorated Jhula on which the image of Radha and Krishna are placed. The music parties, i.e. pala group either professional or non-professionals sing the theme of Shri Krishna’s ‘Jhulan Leela’ played at Vrindavan.\(^\text{14}\) Women especially of middle-aged women

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\(^{11}\) Every locality in the valley of Manipur has one or two Mandaps. *Mandap* is a form of community hall where all religious ceremonies/festivals of the locality are organised.


\(^{13}\) *Chali* is simple basic form of dance. Most of the grown up Meitei girl knew this basic form of dance.

organised themselves into different groups of Pala and participated in the festival singing the glory of Krishna and Radha.

Thus, Manipuri women especially Meitei women participated actively in every ceremony or festival observed in the society. Unlike other parts of India, there is no restriction for the women to participate in the religious Kirtans or festivals observed in the temples. One very often found women singing in the Shradha ceremony as well as in the wedding ceremonies.

Marriage

Marriage in Meitei law is called Luhongba. This expression combines the words Lu and Hongba. Lu means ‘head’ or ‘bone’ whereas Hongba means ‘to be solemnized’ or ‘to change’. So it may be ‘head or bone changed or solemnized’. Amongst the primitive institutions of the Meiteis, marriage is the most ancient and most developed one. In the marriage ceremony, women are allowed to sing in groups, participating in the process of the marriage ceremony.

Unlike the other societies of India, there is no child marriage system in the Manipuri society. The marriageable age of male was 30 (thirty) years while that of females was 25 (twenty-five) during the reign of Maharaj Chandrakirti (1850-1886).  

16 The status of women in Manipuri(Meitei) Society, Dr. Ch. Jamini, a paper presented in a Seminar, organised by ACEE, Manipur University, 30 March 2000.
Nowadays, of course, two trends regarding the age of marriage are emerging. The first is marriage at a young age of 17 years and 18 years another is late marriage i.e. above 30 years for girls and 40 years for boys. Girls have the right to select their life partners. Widows are allowed to get remarried according to their choices. From ancient times onwards, there is no social restriction regarding widow remarriage in Manipur. However, society looks down upon those who get remarried but appreciates those who struggle hard with their lot without remarriage (if she has children). In Manipuri society, widow or a divorcee is not allowed to enjoy the right of performing the rites, rituals usually observed in the case of socially sanctioned marriage ceremony. Instead, their marriages are recognised by the society through the process of Loukhatpa or Keinya Katpa. But a widower or a divorced husband is allowed to enjoy the right of getting remarried with a young virgin women in a socially sanctioned marriage ceremony. Therefore, there is difference of status enjoyed by men and women in the Manipuri society. Men are placed at a higher social hierarchy in the sense that there is no restriction for them to marry a virgin woman in a socially recognised sanctioned marriage of the highest form.

The manner of using the surname by the woman before and after marriage indicate the nature and style of the social beliefs and practices prevailing in the society. In the case of valley people of Manipur, both men and women used their respective surnames before their names.

17 Keinya Katpa is the traditional form of social recognition of marriage. It is usually performed in cases of the marriage of the widowed/divorced women or those who can not afford.
In the case of the women of the Manipur valley, especially the Meiteis, they put their surnames before their names as it is accustomed among the people. The important thing to note here is that even after their marriage, they retain their surname. The social norms and beliefs in Manipur made adjustment of the two surnames i.e. her own surname and the surname of her husband. For example, before the marriage the surname of ‘A’ is ‘Haobam’ and she marries ‘B’ whose surname is ‘Yumnam’. The full name and surname of ‘A’ is written as ‘Haobam Ningol Yumnam Ongbi ‘A’. This Ningol indicates the surname of her father and ‘Ongbi’ indicates the surname of her husband. Thus, this system kept her identity of her origin and to whom she married too.

**Divorce**

In Manipuri language, divorce means Khainaba. Regarding the Khainaba (divorce), there is no strict customary law in Manipuri society. Both husband and wife can initiate divorce on their own liking. In this respect, the customary law has given equal right to both husband and wife. The husband may ask the wife to return to her parental home, thereby indicating that he want to divorce her. On the other hand, the wife on her own free will, can return to her parents home. Attempts may be made for reconciliation by either of them or by the parents of either husband or wife. The final stage for the confirmation of divorce is known as ‘Wa-Loithoknaba’ (final word given). It is a simple form of social recognition which is agreed and accepted by the parents of both the husband and wife with relatives and elderly local men and women as witnesses. They
verbally inquired the reasons of divorce from the spouses and discussed whether the divorce is proper or not. If the divorce has been confirmed (Wa-Loithoknaba), there is restriction as to re-cohabitation of married life. If the wife dies at her parental home before Wa-Loithoknaba, her divorced husband must perform all rites of her death ceremony as her lawful husband. During the period of her stay at the parental house before Wa-Loithoknaba, she can not remarry another person. She is still regarded as the wife of her husband even though they are separated by living in different houses and places. Mostly, the divorce is initiated from the side of the husband. Some of the main factors for divorce are that the wife is barren, that she could not give birth to a child specially a son, that the husband married another women (second wife) etc.

Women and Social Restrictions

Though Manipuri women play significant roles in the society and enjoy a higher status than her counterparts in other parts of India, there are certain social restrictions defining her social jurisdiction. These social restrictions placed women at an inferior position and recognised women as subordinate to men. We may examine some important social restrictions relating to women. Women are not allowed to eat the things which was offered to family God at the time of Apokpa Khurumba (Worship of family God). Women are not allowed to get remarried through the socially recognised ritual process. There is a saying ‘Nupina Luhongphan anirak phamheide’ which means women can not sit on the wedding seat twice. If a girl or woman climbs a fruit tree, the tree will not bear fruit. Women can
not sit or occupy a sit in the southern portion called ‘Phamen’ of the verandah of the house. The place is reserved for the male members of the family. Women should not put their phaneks (wrapper) in front of the house for drying in the sun because it is inauspicious for men etc. It proved that the social condition of women is in a subordinate position in Manipuri society.

**Economic Role of Women**

From the early history of Manipur, we found that women were not confined within the four walls. They were free to move outside the house. The women were hard working and industrious. Hard working had become almost the personnel habit and qualification of women in Manipur. A Meitei proverb says, ‘A man who does not go to Loishang and a woman who does not go to the market, both are worthless’. Outsiders never go back from Manipur without praising the hard working qualities of the Manipuri women. Captain E.W. Dun wrote thus,’ They are very industrious. Most of the work except the heaviest is performed by them. It would be difficult to find a more industrious women in India than the Manipuris’.

The hard working qualities of the Manipuri women are inherited by the women of Manipur in the present day society in different forms and in different situations. Women are consequently the mainstay of the

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18 Loishang is the concerned department of the administration.
family circle. All domestic works are performed by women irrespective of their class and status. Women in Manipur not only perform the household duties and also contribute a lot in the maintenance of the family and the state economy. In addition to the household work women participate in most of the activities like cultivation, fishing, trade and business, weaving construction of house etc.

The participation and the contribution of women in different areas may be examined under the following heads.

Market

In Manipur especially in the valley, every locality has its own market, may be small or big in size. The market is run by the women. The transaction of selling and buying is solely done by women. The activities of the Manipuri women in the market very often attracted the attention of outsiders. All the buying and selling in public and carrying to and fro of the articles to be sold are done by the women. In addition, they are also engaged in productive work at home like weaving, spinning, kitchen-gardening etc. Manipuri women are famous for their handloom designs with different designs and techniques. The role and activities of the market women may be studied by classifying them into different categories. Taking the Khwairamband bazar, Imphal as a sample, we can examine the market women in their different roles and capacities. There are two categories of women, i.e. women sellers of essential commodities and second, women as buyers of the same. Again the first group may be
divided into two, i.e. direct and indirect. In the Khwairamband market, women who are allotted reserved seats by the Imphal Munucipal Council sell a particular trade. On the other hand, women who are not in the allotted seats but sell their commodities to the women of the first categories i.e. performing direct selling activities. The women who occupied reserved seats sell the articles brought by those who does not occupy seats i.e. indirect. The selling and buying of the commodities or products between the two categories of women is usually done in the early hours of the day, usually from 4.30 to 9 a.m. Sometimes, the trade relations between the two are so close that any third person (party) is not allowed to enter into any trade activity except the two. The second category of women i.e. those who are not in the reserved seats usually belong to the lower income group. Their financial contributions to their families are commendable. Their number is quite large, dealing with different trades like vegetables, fruits, fishes etc. Those who have allotted reserved seats are relatively economically better off than those who come to sell. Those who come to sell the different products are mostly from the rural and hill areas of Manipur, There are also other women whose business is to sell eatable things like meals, tea, pakora etc. to the women vendors and other women coming to the market. There are also some women who give loans to the needy women in the market and earn daily interest and thereby add to their family income.21

In course of time, specially after Indian independence, with the change in economic structure of the state, women are exploring other means to maintain their families. In the meantime, the literacy rate of the females also increased. Educated women take up different services in Government and Semi-Government institutions. But, majority of woman in Manipur are still engaging in small internal trade and commerce. The main occupation of the people of Manipur is agriculture. In the rural and hill areas of Manipur, women participated equally with men in cultivation work and also at the time of harvesting. They used to work on hire basis i.e. Khutlang\textsuperscript{22} on payment of money in exchange of work. We may study the work of women on the basis of data available in the census report from time to time.

According to 1961 census, the workers and non-workers of both sexes were—male—1,83,127. Female—1,25,425; Non-Workers-Male—2,03,931; Female—2,18,186 of 7,80,037, total population.\textsuperscript{23} It shows almost equal work participation of both sexes.

According to 1971 census, the workers and non-workers of both sexes were—Male—2,45,435, Female—1,25,428; Non-Workers—Male—2,96,24, Female—4,06,650 of 10,72,753 total population of Manipur.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} The system of engaging labourers both men and women on the payment of a fixed amount of money for fixed hours or per day is called Khutlang'. This system is very common in the months of June/July (plantation period) and November/December (Harvesting period).

\textsuperscript{23} Statistical Handbook of Manipur, 1961, \textit{The Statistical Bureau Manipur Administration}, SBI Pub.6, Imphal.

\textsuperscript{24} Statistical Handbook of Manipur, 1980, Directorate of Economics, Government of Manipur, Imphal.
Here, the work participation of women has been decreased compared to male participation.

Again, according to 1981 census, we can study the female workers participation according to their area and work status. The work status may be divided as Main workers, Marginal workers, Non-workers. The main workers are those who had worked in any economically productive activity for a major part of the year preceding the period of enumeration i.e. 6 months (183) or more. The Marginal workers are those who had worked at least some time in the year preceding the enumeration but have not worked for the major part of the year. The Non-Workers are persons who have not worked at all in the year preceding the enumeration.

Table-1

Distribution of female population by work status and place of residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Residence</th>
<th>Main Workers</th>
<th>Marginal Workers</th>
<th>Non-workers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>2,00,131</td>
<td>23,372</td>
<td>2,91,659</td>
<td>5,15,162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>41,966</td>
<td>16,897</td>
<td>1,31,922</td>
<td>1,84,785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,42,097</td>
<td>34,269</td>
<td>4,23,581</td>
<td>6,99,947</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India 1981, General Economics & Social Tables Series 13, Manipur.
From Table -1 we may conclude that three-fourth (3/4) of the female population are in rural areas. As a result, it has a greater share as workers and non-workers 43% of them participated in their urban counterpart. Higher percentage of rural women participating in labour force indicates the participation of women in household and agrarian economic activities.

Table-2

Female work participation rates by marital status relates to main workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All marital status</td>
<td>38.85</td>
<td>22.71</td>
<td>34.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried status</td>
<td>19.13</td>
<td>8.03</td>
<td>16.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>67.21</td>
<td>41.69</td>
<td>60.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>47.93</td>
<td>35.96</td>
<td>44.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced/Separated</td>
<td>65.60</td>
<td>54.21</td>
<td>61.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source*: Calculated from the same sources of Table-1

The table shows the higher rate of work participation by women in rural areas than in Urban areas in all categories, married, unmarried, widowed, divorced/Separated women. The classification of work participation rate by marital status reveals that unmarried female has the lowest participation rate of 16.24% and maximum participation rate of
61.63% by divorced/Separated women whereas 60.57% of married women participated in economic activities. This conforms to the notion that in Manipur unmarried women are less likely to be in the labour force than married, widowed and divorced women for whom work participation is often an economic necessity. The higher participation rate in the labour force by divorced and separated women indicates their low economic level in the society. Married women get support in the form of material or financial help from parents, husbands, relatives, etc. Widows get the sympathy and support from their children, parents, relatives and enjoyed the property left behind by the husband. But, the women who are divorced/separated have to face different social problems. For this group of women, self dependence became an absolute necessity for their survival in the society because of social segregation.

Now, we may examine women’s work participation according to their educational status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Residence</th>
<th>Educational Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Illiterate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>57.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>43.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Calculated from the same source of table -1.
The above table shows the work participation in both Urban and Rural areas by literate and illiterate women. The participation of illiterate women is higher than those of literate women in both rural and urban areas. The female participation in rural areas is still higher than in urban areas. The work participation rate of illiterate (54.08%) is higher than the work participation rate of literate (22.34%). It indicates lack of opportunities of job for literate women.

Table -4

According to 1991 census the workers and non-workers of Manipur by sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Main Workers</th>
<th>Marginal Workers</th>
<th>Non-workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4,14,812</td>
<td>9,958</td>
<td>5,13,589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2,99,471</td>
<td>56,669</td>
<td>5,48,646</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to table-4 marginal workers and non-workers of women is higher than men because women are mainly engaged in small internal trade and commerce and household work.

The total population of Manipur according to 1991 census is 18,37,149 and out of it 8,98,790 is female population (both hills and plains). 49.04 of the total female population actively participated in economic activities.
Now, the number of educated women had increased. There are many educated women working in different Government and semi-Government services. Some unemployed women are running weaving co-operative societies by employing young women and girls. They act as a link between the Government Funding Agencies and the women weavers. Some educated women have also started their own business like establishing knitting, embroidery centres etc. by applying modern tools and techniques. In a way these women enjoy economic independence and contribute in the economic maintenance of their families. Besides there are also some women entering into unfair practices like selling cinema tickets and patrol oil in black and maintain their families. There are also women who open pan shops etc. as a means of earning their livelihood.

Thus, in the sphere of family economy as well as in the state economy, the role of women is very significant. Some of the Manipuri women are engaged in Agro-based industry, Vendor movement and trade & commerce. Besides, they are also engaged in domestic and household workers as well. In their leisure time the women are engaged in kitchen-gardening, weaving, embroidery, knitting etc. In earlier times these activities of women are not considered as important economically. In course of time, with the change in economy, these activities are now considered important, taking the economic value into account. In fact, domestic work is a kind of household industry which is under informal sector. The capitalist production is made only by the indirect contribution
of the women in the informal and unorganised sector. In the process, as well as in the mode of population in agricultural economy in the state as a whole women’s activities and contribution is great. In Manipur there is no large scale industries except the small scale industries. In industrial sector only the handloom and handicraft industry is worth mentioning.

**Women and Marup system**

In the present Manipuri society there is the importance of Marup\(^{25}\) formed by a group of persons for promoting their economic interest. It is a typical economic relation among the members of a called ‘Marup’ a kind of co-operative credit and savings organisation. The members of the Marup help each other by contributing a fixed amount of money per month and each member is entitled to receive the total sum in turn (or lottery system) with agreed rate of interest. The Marup is the economic group among the women of Manipur of all classes. e.g. women in government services, professional groups, women vendors, women in the localities, housewives etc.

There are different types of marup organized on the basis of lots, arranged serials, given on occasion like marriages, shradha etc. The purpose of forming marup may be to provide furniture, utensils etc. in case of marriages, financial helps in case of shradha ceremonies etc.

\(^{25}\) The Marup system is very popular among the adult persons of the Manipuri society, especially in the valley of Manipur. The women of the valley are known for their expertness in the management of the Marup.
Women and Economic Rights

Normally in a patriarchal society, women do not enjoy the economic rights. Daughter and sisters are not allowed to inherit their parental properties.

In Manipuri society, daughters and sisters are not strictly prohibited from inheriting parental properties both movable and immovable. The family structure in Manipur is patriarchal form. But the strict social norms and regulations governing the patriarchal families in other societies of India are not strictly observed in Manipur. On the other hand, the question of inheritance of property by women, specially daughters, depend on the financial conditions of the families. If the parents have only one daughter or daughters, she or they, are entitled to inherit her or their parental property.

The properties of the women may be classified and examined under the following categories—

1. Aoonpot (dowry), which is the gift given by the parents at the time of marriage.

2. Anything movable or immovable given by her parents or other relatives after marriage.

3. Property acquired by inheritance.\(^26\)

\(^{26}\) Raghumani, *op. cit.* p 8
The money or property earned by an unmarried women, a widow, a divorcee by her own labour and capacity, then she is the owner of the property. Similarly, when a women receives a gift from her father, mother, brother, husband, or some other relatives, she is the rightful owner of the property. The articles given by the parent at the time of marriage as dowry which is known as Aoonpot, solely belongs to her. She can claim the properties given by the husband at the time of divorce. She has the absolute right over it.

**Inheritance of property**

Regarding the laws of inheritance the Indian Constitution has given equal right to property to both men and women. In addition, the customary laws in Manipur society allows women to enjoy the right to inherit property. Due to the impact of Hinduism, there are some sections in the society, who believed that women should not enjoy the right to inherit property. They are mainly guided by Hindu social norms. Manipuri society is patriarchal in its structure and a male-oriented society. Therefore, inheritance is traced through the male line. Such family consists of the father, his wife, his parents. In the matter of inheritance, the male issue is called “Piba” and female is called “Ningol”.

The latter is always secondary to the former. The property, excluding the self-acquired properties of the daughters (if any), are distributed equally among the sons including the unmarried and divorcee daughter (Ningol). In the absence of any male issue, the daughter is the
sole heir. The widow is the only guardian of the property left by her deceased husband, who was the householder and such rights remain as long as she is the guardian of the surviving children. The widow has the right of remarriage. She is permitted by her in-laws or by her close relatives (in the absence of in-laws) and the locality. After her second marriage, she retains her sole right over the property left by her deceased husband. Her second husband has no right over the property left and acquired by such widow. This is the inheritance law sanctioned by the social customs among the Meiteis of Manipur. But nowadays, at the time of distribution of property, small share is given to the daughter (Ningol) in some families. It all depends on the mutual agreement and understanding among the members of the family i.e. father, mother, son and daughter.

**Wages**

Manipur women are active in economic activities. Their contribution in the family and state economy is great.

The main occupation in Manipur is agriculture. In rural areas, women enjoy equal share with men in cultivation and at the time of harvestings women are found to work on hire basis, such as ‘Khutlang’ on payment of money or in exchange of work. Though men and women work equally, they (women) are not given equal wages as male labourers. Women labourers are paid less wages than the male labourers. Male

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27 The literal meaning of khutlang is give or take or exchange of working cultivation. If one rents out his or her labour, he or she will get the labour of the other in return. This is also done on payment of labour charge.
labourers are paid Rs 80/- per day whereas female labourers are paid only Rs 60/- per day.

Thus, it shows that Manipuri women are given a lower economic position and status in the society though work on an equal basis.

Manipuri women, in other fields like cultural sports etc. played vital role not only in Manipur but also in the whole country i.e. in India. By culture, we mean dance, drama, literature, martial arts, Sankritan, festivals etc. Manipuri is known throughout the world for its rich cultural heritage. In preserving and developing the culture of Manipur, the contribution made by women of Manipur is of great significance.

Regarding sports, Manipuri women are known for their excellent performance not only in India but all over the world. They were found to be very active since the ancient history of Manipur. In traditional game like kang, both men and women participated equally. The participation of women were considered to be compulsory. From the later part of the 20th century till now, women has come up and participated in many events representing the country in the Asian, Commonwealth, Olympic and other international games. Women like Kunjarani, Sanamacha, Tingongleima, Surjalata etc. could win medals achieved in Asian and other games. Kunjarani and Sanamacha were conferred the Arjuna Awards in recognition of their talent and contribution in sports by the Government of India.
Education

Through education, Manipuri women has gone tremendous change in their position and status. There is a great change in their lifestyles and socio-economic condition. They started leaving the old social norms, which affects their position. Therefore education to women is very important to raise the position and status of women in the society. No doubt, many initiatives for women’s education have been taken up in recent times at national, regional and even global levels. For example, Mahila Sameekshya is one, where literacy is taken up as a response to the need felt and articulated by women themselves, rather than as a predetermined programme input. In 1991 Lok Jumbish (movement of people) was launched in Rajasthan where 80 per cent women were illiterate. Also the Sikham Karmi project started in Rajasthan in 1987 on the potential of ordinary people to teach. The programme such as the World bank assisted District Primary Education Project (DPEP) and UNICEF supported Bihar Education Project and some other examples. The condensed courses education and vocational training for adult women started in 1958 and recast in 1975 by the Central Social Welfare Board (CSNB) also provide new vistas of employment through continuing and vocational training for women and girls who are drop-outs. The SAARC and G. 15 level meetings were also devoted to promotion of education in the region. But the disparity in the level of education between male and female is still a worldwide phenomena. Despite intensive efforts to improve literacy levels, it has been low. In India, literacy rate of women
rose 18.3 percent in 1951 census to 54.16 per cent in 2001 census while male literacy rate in 2001 was 75.85 per cent.

The Manipuri women have a distinct place in the socio-cultural, religious and the economic life of the society. However, inspite of this, the door of education was not open to them during the pre-British period. The traditional society assigned women only domestic duties like cooking, weaving, spinning, nursing the family members and looking after their children. Education for some enlightened families was not of formal types. They received their education in their own household as no school for girls existed in Manipur. They got lessons in rudimentary form of reading and writing. But knowledge of reading and writing was not accepted as qualification for a girl in the society. In Manipur, skill in weaving, cooking, husking of paddy was considered greater accomplishment for a girl.

Women started receiving education in 1898-99 only when the Britishers started establishing schools. In 1899 one L.P. school for girls was established at Moirangkhom, Imphal and twelve girls were admitted to the school.\(^{28}\) Now the number of educated women has increased.

Many girls has topped in most educational institutions. The number of working women has also increased. Through education there are changes in the position and status of women. They started leaving the traditional beliefs and thinking. They started coming out in the public

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platform to participate and share their ideas. They started participating in
the decision-making at higher political level like the Parliamentary and
Legislative Assembly and also in the local bodies.

In the family and the locality also those educated working women
started participating in the decision-making and their ideas are taken into
account. But half of the women populations in Manipur remain illiterate.
The following table shows the literacy rate of women compared with men.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Total P.C. of Literacy</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>5,77,635</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>20.77</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>7,80,037</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>45.12</td>
<td>15.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>10,72,753</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>46.40</td>
<td>19.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>14,20,953</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>53.29</td>
<td>29.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>18,37,149</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>71.63</td>
<td>47.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2,388,634</td>
<td>68.87</td>
<td>77.87</td>
<td>59.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Census of India 2001.
The above table shows the sharp increase in the literacy rate of women but it also shows the disparity of literacy rate between the male and female literacy in Manipur. It also highlights that half of the women population still remain illiterate. There are many factors like just after the education of women was introduced, no girl students went to school due to the rumour that as soon as the girls were satisfactorily taught to read, write and speak English, they were to be shipped off to England. Moreover, to be a good housewife, the qualifications that were required for a girl could be acquired from her mother and other elders of the members of the family. So, the guardians felt no necessity of sending their daughters to the schools. Besides the girls were in a great help in the household activities and to that extent it was considered a great loss for the family to send their daughters to the schools. Due to the lack of economic condition, preference of getting education is given to the boys. Therefore, all the prejudices had become a hurdle in the way of fast progress of education of women in the state.

To conclude, in Manipuri society, women played significant role in socio-economic aspects. Compare with other women in other states of India, Manipuri women enjoy better position and status. But in spite of their contribution, they are not given their due share according to their contribution. The real contribution of women in the social and economic matters both in the family and outside the family is to be recognized by the society at large.