CHAPTER-VII
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There are different views and interpretations regarding the position and role of Manipuri women from time to time. The role and activities of women in Manipur changed from one historical stage to another according to given situations and circumstances. One has to examine the evolution of the family structure to understand the position of women in early times.

Available records and documents in Manipur show that there was matriarchal or matrilineal society in ancient Manipur. In a matriarchal society, the influences from the mother’s side, specially the maternal uncle was more than the father. This may be one reason why the descent had been traced always through the mother. But with the emergence of the institution of marriage and permanent settlement the father shared with the caring of the children and started to exercise his authority. Thus husband’s right to perform the duties of the headship was established socially and ritually. Thus the patriarchal system started and the father became the sole head of the family. The emergence and establishment of a patriarchal society means, men started dominating the women and women were slowly given a position of subordinate status.

An attempt has been made to study the position and the role of women in India during the different stages of her history. From Indus Civilization till the Vedic period women enjoyed a high position. But from
later Vedic till Muslim period the position of women was found to be deteriorated.

When the Britishers came to India with the introduction of Western education the old social system had undergone change and a new era came into existence. Women from urban families started receiving education. Social reformers both men and women tried to uplift the womanhood of India by abolishing the social evils like Sati system, child marriage system, and allowing the widow for remarriage etc. The birth of Indian National Congress in 1885 furnished a political platform for women to assert their rights and due place in the society.

After Indian independence on 15 August 1947 and with the enforcement of the Constitution of India on 26 January, 1950, women are also given equal rights, freedom and opportunities with an equal status with men. The Union Government as well as the State Government enacted laws and framed policies so as to empower women in social, cultural, economic and political matters. Article 39(a) of the Directive Principles of State Policy provides right to adequate means of livelihood for both sex equally; Article 39(d) provides equal pay for equal work for both men and women. But in practical or reality majority of women in India could not enjoy the benefits of the articles of the Constitution due to traditional social beliefs, orthodoxy, superstitions, ignorance and irrational beliefs in Indian society.

Till the fifth Five Year Plan of the Indian Constitution, the involvement of women into development process was not considered. It was in the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) that a separate chapter on
Women and Development was included in the plan document. Women started joining in the decision-making process and carried out the responsibilities successfully. Sorojini Naidu was the first woman Governor and Indira Gandhi was the only woman Prime Minister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was the first woman Ambassador etc. In all Parliamentary and Assembly elections since 1952 women participated as voters and candidates. But the number of elected women is not very encouraging. Majority of the women are confined in the house-hold work and only a few elite women who have the political background have participated in the decision-making process.

In this research work, Manipuri women have been studied in different dimensions taking into account the women depicted in the mythology and legend of Manipur. In Manipuri society we find the practice of worshipping of Goddess since early period. It indirectly shows that women were held in high position with due regard and honour. Different roles and activities of different women have been examined for an understanding of the social and cultural matters relating to women.

In mythology of Manipur, there are women like Panthoibi and Phouoibi whose character and activities e.g. going to lake for fishing, to the field for plantation and harvesting reflects the independent and active nature of women. Women were found to be actively involved in family economy. On the other hand Imoinu’s principle like worshipping of one’s husband as Lord indicates the inferior position of women. According to Imoinu’s principle women are to be engaged with all the domestic works
for a prosperous and peaceful family. The role of Leimarel Shidaba shows the loving and caring nature of a mother for the innocent and young child. It also reflects the required quality of a mother for maintaining her love and affection among her children. A mother always wants her children to enjoy the same rights, power and facilities. The role of Nongthangleima shows the importance of women in the creation of the Universe. It also can be interpreted that women’s participation in the creation can not be ignored. Without women, there can not be human beings in the world.

In the legend of Manipur Khamnu stands as a symbol of love and sacrifice. She sacrificed her youthful days for bringing up her brother Khamba. The image and character shown by Khamnu depict the involvement of women in the process of production and contribution to the family economy. The nature of women, being polite, patience, determination etc. is also reflected in the character of Khamnu. Women like Thoibi’s firm stand for her lover Khamba against the wishes of her father, the Yubraj of Moirang depicts that she tried to assert her individual rights. Her activities had shown that women is also human being possessing her own thought and desires. When her father had given her in marriage to Nongban, a courtier of Moirang Thoibi refused to accept Nongban as she was already given to Khamba by the king, the elder brother of her father. Therefore she tried to show that women can not be given like commodities from one person to another.

Thambalnu sacrificed her life for the cause of the promotion of public welfare. The role and character of women in the mythology and
legend of Manipur has influenced the present day women of Manipur. The Manipuri women in the past history and present day society of Manipur seem to possess the assertive and independent qualities. Like Panthoibi, Thoibi, Khamnu, Women used to go out freely and work and contribute to the family income and indirectly state economy. The same can be said in the case of educated working women. These educated women have to attend their different work places or, department during the working hour. And besides working at their workplaces, they have to perform all the household duties. Very few of them keep helpers at home. On the other hand uneducated and educated unemployed women are found to be engaged in different trades and professions as vendors, labourers, running embroidery and weaving centres etc. Thus the women are active and economically independent and participated in the socio-economic activities of the state. In fact they are guided by the traditional norms and beliefs prescribed by Imoinu. These women are following the traditional norms and practices in the family as well discharging their respective duties, responsibilities at their workplaces Therefore it may be concluded that Manipuri women are caught in the threshold of traditionalism and modernity.

In the history of Manipur we have studied the prominent women from monarchical period till the introduction of the democratic government after independence. The role of these women in the political history of Manipur is also quite remarkable.
Yaoreiba Chanu who administered and taken care of the state affairs after the death of her husband King Naokhamba, was just, impartial, and truthful. Her judgment on the selection of her younger son Naophanaba to be the successor of his father was just and impartial. On the other hand she was testing the capabilities of her sons. It shows that women of royal families were given the right to run administration and participated in the decision-making process concerning the political affairs of the state. Women, particularly the princesses played a very important role in maintaining good relationship with neighbouring countries or principalities. Through their wise and intelligent skills, the king of Manipur were able to exercise their political control over the neighbouring rulers. Chingkheithanbi, daughter of King Thawanthaba of Meitei principality and queen of Adon Punshiba of Khuman principality proved her importance in maintaining relations between the kings of the two neighbouring principalities. She saved the life of King Thawanthaba, her father from the hands of her husband and thus saved from the enmity which would develop between the two principalities.

The heroic roles played by Linthoingambi, Tanjakhombi and Kuranganayani proved that women of royal families were endowed with courageous qualities and enjoyed more or less equal status with men. They took vital role in the administration of the state. People accepted them as their leaders.

Kumudini and Gomti represented another political characters trying to assert their political will, power and rights. With their strong
determination and strong political will they could make their sons, kings of Manipur.

Gaidinliu represented another women who had strongly asserted the political rights of her people against the British authority. She led a movement representing the political aspirations and desires of the people. She tried to unite her people and develop their traditional religion. Some other women like Smt. Rajani, Smt. R.K. Sanatombi, Smt. Shabi, Smt. Sanajaobi etc. led the Second Nupilan,1939. These women leaders were mostly market women belonging to lower strata of the social hierarchy. These women were courageous and bold enough to fight against the British authority and were able to achieve their demand successfully. It indirectly shows that the political consciousness of the common women of higher level.

The courageous qualities of women in the history of Manipur and their activities inspired many women in the present day society. Generally Manipuri women seem to possess those qualities. As a result women came forward and led the social and popular movements in Manipur. Since ancient period, women in groups came out and agitated against the concerned authorities if their policies and programmes affect the interest of the people. Women always worked for the common interest and for the welfare of the people.

The women’s agitation, 1904 was against the malpractice administration of the British authority. They strongly agitated against the order issued by the British authority to rebuild the bungalows of Captain
Nattal and Dulop which was burnt down by some Manipuris of Imphal Valley.

Again in 1939 women rose against the British authority, demanding the stoppage of the export of rice from Manipur. They also demanded for the stoppage of working of rice mills. The women felt that the export of rice was the main cause of the scarcity of rice in Manipur. Therefore when women vendors of Khwairamband bazaar could not get the rice they spontaneously organized for movement against the concerned authorities.

In 1975 women came forward as Nisha Bandis to control the drinking and selling of liquors in the society. In every locality of Manipur women caught the drunkards and sellers of liquor and punished them. Thus to some extent they were able to promote peace in the family as well as in the locality.

In 1980 the women again emerged as Meira Paibis to fight against the anti-social activities like drug, alcohol, rape, murder etc. Moreover these women acted as the protector of human rights. They fought for the innocent youths who had become victims in the hands of the armed personnel. All their activities reflect their struggle and fight in order to promote the interest of the people at large. They are not fighting to raise their status and not for equal rights. But they are fighting for public interest. They came forward for the maintenance of the peace and harmony in the society and for the protection of human rights.
Manipuri women are found to play important role in every aspect of the society. Women participated actively in social and economic life of the family, locality and society at large. In cultural and religious field also it is the women who played leading role. In the Lai Haraoba festival the participation of Maibi (Priestess) is a must. Without Maibi the Lai Haraoba festival cannot be performed. All the rites and rituals of the festival are performed by the Maibi. The Maibi usually brings the message of God to the people. Women and girls participated in the religious festivals like Holi, Rathajatra as singers and dancers. In other ceremonies like Ipan Thaba (birth rituals), Chaoomba (giving first food) old women who knows the process of the rituals performed the rites. Thus women played vital role at every stage of life of the individual and of the society.

Women, irrespective of their class and status, also performed all the domestic works in the family and responsible for the maintenance of the family. They also educate the children in matters relating to the social norms, values, customary laws etc. Regarding their social rights, women in ancient society, were considered as commodities. The kings or, able ministers used to give their daughters to any person whom they like. But this practice had undergone changes. Now-a-days girls are given the freedom in choosing their life partners. As a result love marriage is quite popular in Manipuri society. Widows are allowed to remarry according to their choice. But there are some social restrictions on women’s remarriage. No religious rituals, rites of marriage can be performed if the woman is already a married woman whereas there is no restriction on men. There are also other restrictions on women according to the social norms and beliefs.
in the society which puts women in a subordinate position. For example, females were regarded as impure during the menstruation period and childbirth. Even at the time of having meal husband and wife are not allowed to dine together. But nowadays there is slight changes in these customs especially in urban and rural educated families.

The contribution of women in economic life is great. Women are involved and engaged in most of the work in the family and the society. Women used to perform all the household works which is not counted and acknowledged by the society. Besides they are busily engaged with kitchen work, gardening, weaving, embroidery, knitting etc. In Manipur, in every locality there is a market whether big or small. The transaction of selling and buying of essential commodities is solely done by women. Women are also engaged in agricultural works such as plantation or cultivation and harvesting. But women are paid less wages of their work than men. It proved that men and women are not treated equally. Women are engaged in many professions like selling cinema tickets and petrol in black, opening pan shop etc. to maintain their family.

In Manipur Ningols (daughters) are not allowed to inherit their parental property equally with their brothers. They are given this right only when there is no real or adopted son. In some well to do families of course girls are given a share of the property either at the time of the marriage or at a later stage. When the property is not given, the women automatically became inferior to those who possessed the property i.e. men.
In Manipur education for women started in the later part of the 19th century. In 1898-99 for the first time women started receiving education from formal educational institutions. Slowly and steadily the number of educated women had increased after independence. But half of the women population remain illiterate and the literacy rate is also low when compared with men. Economic problem is one of the factors responsible for the low literacy rate. Young girls in Manipur especially in rural areas, mostly after the age of thirteen or fourteen are turned to be dropouts at the high school level. Majority of these girls are engaged in full time weaving or, embroidery to get financial support. Moreover some illiterate parents or guardians are of the view that giving higher education to girls is a wastage of money. They have to go to another family after marriage. Therefore a serious attention should be given to improve the educational status of women by making the parents aware of the value of higher education. The plans and actions which are made by the Government can be implemented in a successful way if women also contribute in a creative and constructive way.

The political consciousness among the women in Manipur is comparatively high when compared with other states of India. Since the ancient period women reacted against the authorities if the decision of the state affected the interest of the people. Regarding the participation of women in politics women played significant role in a collective manner. But they were not associated in the decision making process of the state. Women of the royal family were found to be very active in the politics of the state. During the reign of King Pakhangba in 33 A.D. his queens led by
Laisana participated in the administration, being an important member of the decision-making body. Likewise, women like Linthoingambi, Tanjakhombi were active and also run the administration and even fought against the rebellions during the absence of the king. In the present day Manipuri society the male members occupy a prominent position in the families and localities. In the family major decision is taken by the senior male members and women are associated in taking decisions of lesser importance. Women play marginal role in the decision-making process of the family. But in course of time with the dawn of education, educated working women who are economically independent started to participate in the decision-making process of the family. Therefore education greatly help the women to assert their rights and enjoy their economic independence. This enable them to participate actively in the process of decision making both in the family and in the locality. But women hardly joined in the higher political decision-making process of the state. Till today only one women candidate namely Kim Gangte was elected in the Parliamentary elections held since 1952 and only three women candidates namely Hangmila Shaiza, K.Apabi and W. Leima were elected in the State Assembly elections. In the local bodies like Panchayat and Municipality women hardly participated in the decision-making. It was only after the 73rd amendment Act 1992 and 74th Amendment Act, 1993 that women as elected representatives started to participate in the decision-making process in the local political institutions by enjoying 1/3 rd (one by third) reservation of the total number of seats.
Now after examining the social, economic and political aspects we may assume that though women have been contributing a lot in all these aspects, they are lagging far behind in many areas. Inspite of their contribution they are not getting their due share according to their contribution. Their economic contribution in the families and their participation in the decision-making process in the family are hardly recognized. The following may be the factors responsible for women inferiority. Firstly, traditional social norms and beliefs make women inferior to men. For instance considering the husband as Lord implies that the wife is always under the control and supervision of the husband. Secondly, parents always give preference to boys in matters of education, inheritance of properties etc. Thirdly, lack of recognition of women’s contribution in social and economic aspects by the menfolk and the society is another responsible factor for women’s sense of inferiority. Fourthly, lack of recognition of women’s participation in the decision-making process in the family and at higher political decision-making level is another contributing factor for making women inferior. The male members are always led by a feeling of egoism that they should not listen or consider the voice of women in taking decisions. In the Assembly and Parliamentary elections, in most of the constituencies women voters outnumbered the male voters. But women candidates are hardly elected. It shows that even women voters have no faith and confidence in women candidates. There is a saying in Manipuri Society, ‘Nupina Touba Thabaknabu’ (the work done by women is not appreciable). Lastly lack of economic independence make women economically dependent on men.
To raise the general position and status of women and to empower women, World body like United Nations declared and passed covenants and conventions giving equal rights, freedom and opportunities to both men and women. Chapter IV of the Programme Actions adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, September 1994 is concerned with gender equity and empowerment of women. The objectives were a) To achieve equality and equity based on harmonious partnership between men and women and enable women to realize their full potential b) To ensure the enhancement of women’s contributions to sustainable development through their full involvement in policy and decision-making processes at all stages and participation in all aspects of production, employment, income-generating activities, education, health, science and technology, sports, culture and population related activities and other areas, as active decision makers, participants and beneficiaries, c) To ensure that all women, as well as men, are provided with the education necessary for them to meet their basic human needs and exercise their human rights.

For the empowerment and status of women some action plans were made. Countries should act to empower women and should take steps to eliminate inequalities between men and women as soon as possible by:

a) Establishing mechanisms for women’s equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of the political process and public life in each community and society and enabling women to articulate their concerns and needs;
b) Promoting the fulfilment of women’s potential through education, skill development and employment, giving paramount importance to the elimination of poverty, illiteracy and ill health among women;

c) Eliminating all the practices that discriminate against women; assisting women to establish and realize their rights, including those that relate to reproductive and sexual health.

d) Adopting appropriate measures to improve women’s ability to earn income beyond traditional occupation, achieve economic self-reliance, and ensure women’s equal access to the labour market and social security systems.

The United Nations document entitled Platform for Action (P&A) tabled and adopted at the World Conference on women at Beijing, 1995 listed out a dozen dimensions in respect of women development. These twelve areas are required to be redressed through concrete government and NGO actions.

Taking into account the objectives of the United Nations and various programmes taken up by the Government of India, suggestions may be made to improve the social, economic and political condition of women in Manipur.

To give education to women in more effective way and there should be equal treatment in giving education to both boys and girls in the family.
Secondly, to recognize the contribution and participation of women in social and economic aspects of life.

Thirdly, to modify the traditional social norms and beliefs which stands as a hurdle in the process of empowerment of women as a whole.

Fourth, to allow the participation of women in the decision-making process in the family and encourage them to participate outside the family too.