Chapter II

MEITEI WOMEN IN
TRADITIONAL SOCIAL LIFE
1. **Geographical Location of Manipur**

   Manipur is a state of India, which lies on the extreme northeastern corner of India. It extends between 23.80 N to 25.68 N latitudes and 93.03 E to 94.7 E longitudes. It occupies a total area of 22,327 sq. km and is bounded by Nagaland on the north, Assam on the west and Mizoram on the south. Along the east, it shares a 398 km. long international boundary with Myanmar.¹

   In the past, the present state of Manipur was known by different names by the inhabitants of the neighbouring state. This kingdom was known to the Burmese as ‘Kathi’, to the Assamese, ‘Meklee’, the Shans, called it “Cassay” and the Cacharies, “Monglie”. In the first recorded treaty between the East India Company and Gourshyam (elder brother of King Bhagyachandra) in 1762 AD, the recorded name of the kingdom was Meckley.² But in some Manipuri texts like Ningthourol Saireng, in the early days, this region was known by different names such as ‘Meitei-Leipak’, Poirei-sans-leipak’ and ‘Kang-leipak’.³ The name Manipur, however, was officially used in the early eighteenth century during the reign of Garibniwaz (1709-1748 A.D.) after the declaration of Hinduism as a state religion.⁴

   According to the surface configuration, Manipur can be geographically divided into two regions, namely the valley region and the hilly region. The valley region comprises an area of 1,843 sq. km.

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¹ Manipur-Gateway to the South-East Asia (Government of Manipur, 2003) P 1.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Bhogeshwar O. Sanamahi Laikan (Imphal, 1995), P 50.
It is roughly oval-shaped extending about 60Km from north to south and at least 32km from east to west with an elevation of about 746m to 850m above sea level. It is one-tenth of the total area. It is in this valley area that Meiteis, the majority group of the region, inhabits.\(^5\)

2. **Origin of the Meiteis**

Different scholars have forwarded various kinds of explanation regarding the origin of the Meiteis. Broadly, it may be classified into three schools, namely (I) The theory of the Indo-Aryan origin of the Meitei, (II) The views given by the British writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and (III) New theory propounded by modern writers based on fresh findings archaeological evidences.\(^6\)

**Local Scholars view based on the Indo-Aryan origin of the Meitei:**

This theory was propounded by the Brahmins and supported by the royal patronage and few sections of the Meiteis. This view gained ascendance with the adoption of Hinduism by the ruling family and the people of the valley in the eighteenth century.

According to this theory the people of Manipur are Kshatriyas descended from the great Pandava hero Arjun of the Mahabharata. They maintained that the Meiteis belonged to the valley and have always been a separate race and are Hindus.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Laiba M.T. The geography of Manipur (Public book house Imphal1992), P 84.

\(^6\) Ratan Kumar Kh. Lai Haraoba of Manipur-a socio-Historical perspective(Imphal,2001), P 1.

R.K. Jhalajit, a renowned scholar and a staunch supporter of this theory is of the view that, “Manipur had always been a part of India”. He comments further that it was known to the rest of India from ancient times, from about 300 B.C. up to the present times. Manipur has been in close contact with the rest of the country, although he opined that in the 12th, 13th and the 14th centuries, the cultural link between Manipur and the rest of the country somewhat slackened and from the 15th century onwards, the close cultural ties with the rest of the country again resumed. In support of the theory, he further states that “In Mahabharata, there is reference to Manipur in at least four different places” The first reference to Manipur is in Adi Parva on the occasion of Arjun going from Hiranyavindu to see the eastern region. After reaching Mahendra mountains, he proceeded towards Manipur and married Chitrangada, the Princess of Manipur. The second reference is in Ashwamedha Parva when Arjun, who was guarding the sacrificial horse, fought with Babhruvahana, the king of Manipur. The third reference to Manipur is in the Mahabharata and also in Ashwamedha Parva where Babhruvana along with his mother Chitangada and Ulupi attended the horse sacrifice. The fourth reference is in Mahaprabhasthamika Parva, according to which the five Pandavas and Draupadi left Hastinapur to go to Heaven, “Chitrangada returned to Manipur city”. On the basis of these references, R.K. Jhalajit asserts that, “The Manipur of today is the Manipura of the Mahabharata”.

Another version of the Indo-Aryan descent of Meitei was propounded by a scholar named Atombapu Sharma. According to him,
the Meitei are the descendants of the group of people known as 'Methi' who were Kshatroyas (Vedic Aryans) coming from 'Mithila' (Videha) and further added that the migration of the 'Mithis' took place sometime in the 8th century B.C.  

**British writers views on the origin of the Meiteis:**

Most of the British writers who served as Political Agents in Manipur during nineteenth and early twentieth century argued for a non- Aryan origin of the Meitei.

B.H. Hodgson, the British scholar for instance, in the middle of the 19th century believed that the Meiteis belonged to the Moi section of the great Tai race. His reasons was that the ethronym, Meitei was a combination appellate of the Siamese Tai and Kochin Chines Moy into Moytai (Moitai=Meetei). So he arrived to the conclusion that the Meiteis belonged to the Moi section of the great Tai race.

R.B. Pemberton, another British officer who is regarded as “the pioneer of modern historical researchers in Manipur” rejected the Hindu origin of the Meitei and claimed that the Meitei are the descendents of the great Tartar Colony from China which probably emigrated from north- west borders of China during their conflicts of supremacy, which took place between the different members of the Chinese and Tartar dynasties in the 13th and 14th centuries.

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9 Ibid.
11 Reports on Munnipore Political Agency, 1868-69. ( Manipur State Archives), P 27.
Many other British writers including W. McCulloch, R. Brown and T.C. Hodson on the other hand, contends that the Meiteis are descendents of the surrounding hill tribes. Their contention is based mainly on the then prevalent popular tradition, cultural and linguistic affinities. They are of the view that only a small part of the valley skirting the hills was capable of cultivation and the hill-men bordering it used to descend and cultivate the little land there and returned back to their homes in the hills after reaping their harvests. However, some of them settled down in different parts of the valley. The valley acted as a melting pot with the various tribes coming in contact, struggling for supremacy and finally amalgamating to form a distinct ethnic entity.\textsuperscript{12}

Other scholars like George Gierson and Suniti kumar chatterjee, both reputed linguists, claim that the Meitei are the ‘Kuki-Chin’ section of the Tibeto-Burman family. Grierson concludes that the close connection between Kachin and the kuki-Chin languages, especially Meitei, cannot be doubted, and Meitei must be considered as the link between the two groups.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Archaeological findings:}

As per the new material evidence from archaeological findings some historians and writers have propagated a third theory. A great number of archaeological excavations have been undertaken at various places in both the hills and plains of Manipur. These include the discoveries of caves at Khangkhui (Ukhrul district), Songbu (Chandel

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

district), Tharon (Tamenglong district), Nongpok Keithelmanbi (Senapati district), Mongjam (Imphal district), Wangu (Bishenpur district), Khurai Lamlong, Sekta Kei and Keibung.

Relics from these sites are divided into Stone Age and Metal Age. The Stone Age has been further sub-divided into three groups viz. (1) Palaeolithic (2) Haobinhian and (3) Neolithic.¹⁴

Based on these archaeological excavations O. Kumar, a local pioneer in the field of archaeology in Manipur, concludes that Manipur has wide cultural affinity with stone-age cultures of South-Asia. During the Palaeolithic, the prehistoric man lived in the caves, but during the Pleistocene, when the temperature dropped drastically in the cave sites, they came down towards the lower altitude near the valley. In Manipur prehistoric man of the Haobinhian period used to live both in the caves and open-air sites, while in the Neolithic period man settled down at the valley proper.¹⁵

The emergence of the Meitei nationality was the final outcome of the process of formation of different ethnic tribes and social groups, all of which merged to form the seven major clans of the Meitei society. The various social ethnic groups which were absorbed into the Meitei were Ningthouja, Angom, Luwang, Khaba, Ngaiba, Khuman, Moi-rang, Sarang Leishangthem, Huierm Khunjan, Lera Khongnang, Thanga Kambong, Ulok Ushai, Haokha Lokha, Ningolk Laton,

¹⁵ Ibid.
Phantek Khyom, Chakpa, Haorok Konthou, Manting Marang, Chenglei, Khem etc. All these ethnic tribes and social groups belonging to the Tibeto-Burman, Tai, and other Mongoloid groups were gradually brought under the political suzerainty of leading tribes with their principalities and were then socially grouped into seven clans. These seven clans are: the Ningthouja, the Angom, the Luwang, the Khuman, the Moirang, the Khaba-Ngamba and the Sarang-Leishanthem.

The ancient Chronicles, literary accounts and popular oral traditions like Sakok Lamlen, Ningthou Kangbalon, Panthibi Khongul and others described that ethnic tribes like Khaba, Angom, Luwang, Selloi-langol etc. had existed in the pre-Christian era. It was during the Christian era that these ethnic tribes and clans were socially organised into major seven clans, which were gradually brought under the social confederacy of the Meiteis led by Pakhangba of the Ningthouja Clan and the word Meitei meant only the ethnic groups who were directly brought under the seven clans. Afterwards, myths and legends were created to explain the origins of the seven clans. The version of these mythological accounts differ slightly from one another, yet almost all of them agreed that all the seven clans were descended from a Divine ancestor (Shidaba Mapu) and that all the seven clans originated at the same time.

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16 Ratan Kumar Kh op; cit P 11.
17 Ibid.
18 Hodson T.C. op; cit P 10.
19 Ratan Kumar Kh. op; cit P 12.
3. Physical Appearance of Meitei Woman

Although the general facial features of the Manipuris are of the Mongolian type but some of them have the Aryan type features, too.

Majority of the Meitei women are short in stature, ranging between 5 ft and 6 ft and have fair complexion of a yellowish colour, resembling the women of Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, China and Japan. They have jolly brown narrow eyes which are not large and big like other Indian women and have long silky, black hair and their noses are usually flat though there are few exceptions.\(^{20}\) According to Brown, the then Political Agent, some of them were very good looking and fair and it was not uncommon to meet girls with brownish-black hair, brown eyes, fair complexions, straight noses and rosy checks.\(^{21}\)

The Meitei women at different stages of life from childhood to old age are referred to by different local names. The girl child till the attainment of puberty are known as Macha Nupi (little woman). The Macha Nupi after the attainment of puberty are the Leishabi (Adolescent). After marriage she is referred to as Mou and in her old age, she is known as Hanubi. For all these stages, women have to observe different social norms regarding dress, hair style etc. of the society.


\(^{21}\) Ibid.
4. **Women’s Dress**

The traditional dress of the women was quite different from that worn by the women in other parts of India. The dress consisted of striped cotton or silk loin cloth (known as Phanek) passed round the body under the armpits and over the breast. This loincloth typically measures 1.75 m in length and 1.30 m breadth. It is worn in two styles, reflecting either the married or the unmarried status of the wearer. The first style of wearing the dress is known as Khoidom Shetpa, and the other is known as Phidol Chingkhatpa. The first style is worn by the unmarried girls, and the latter style by the married women.\(^{22}\)

In the first style or the Khoidom Shetpa style, the cloth is worn length wise, with one border around the waist, and in such way that the left breadth end is carried to the right, while the right counterpart, carried to the left, overlaps the inner end (i.e. the left end is now placed on the right side), and its corner end (termed as Phirel) is then tightly tucked in to this upper end of the cloth wrapped around the waist. The lower border of the cloth freely hangs in a circular form around the middle of the legs.

In the second or the Phidon Chingkhatpa, the cloth is worn in the same way as in Khoidom Shetpa Fashion, but in this case above the breasts.\(^ {23}\)

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\(^{22}\) K. Sobita, Traditional Dress of the Meiteis, (Bhubon Publishing House, Imphal), P 42.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
The design of the Phanek may be classified into four categories. These are (i) Pumngou Phanek (ii) Mayek Naibi (iii) Kanap and (iv) Pumthit Phanek.

i. **Pumngou Phanek:**

Though the name suggests that this Phanek should be of complete white colour, yet, in practice, it can be of different plain colours with or without border strips. The border strips are either in plain design, in distinct colour different from the colour of the cloth, or in the popular local design called Moirangphee Chanba. Again, the Pumngou phanek may be of the following types.

a. **Complete White and light pink with no border strips:**

This Phanek of complete white colour are used by Maibis (priestess), only and the Pumngou Phanek of light pink colour are used by the Meitei women on occasion of mortuary ceremonies and while paying obeisance to the gods and goddesses.

b. **Coloured Pumngou Phanek:**

This type of phanek with plain border strips, in colour distinctly different from that of the main body of the cloth is used in day-to-day wear.

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24 Ibid.
ii. *Mayek Naibi Phanek:*

It is of stripped design. The strips are set horizontally throughout the body of the cloth and is hemmed in by broad border in black, on the top side as well at the bottom of the fabric. The pattern of strips is one of regular repetition of the set of two or three, predominantly three colours of matching combination.

Traditionally, the Mayek Naibi Phanek is of only seven distinct colour schemes which were recognized by society and which correspond to the seven clans of the Meitei society.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clan</th>
<th>Colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ningthouja</td>
<td>Thambal Machu (lotus colour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luwang</td>
<td>Higok (Deep Blue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khuman</td>
<td>Kumjingbi (black colour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moirang clan</td>
<td>Hangam Mapal (Yellow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khaba Nganba</td>
<td>Ashangba (Green)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angom clan</td>
<td>Langhou Phanek (White &amp; black)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarang Leishangthem</td>
<td>Loiring Phanek (White and light pink)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a mark of their respective clan identities, women of the seven clans used to wear their respective types of the Mayek Naibi Phanek.

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25 Ibid.
According to the cultural history of the Meitei people the borders of the Mayek Naibi Phanek were left unembroidered, resembling the loin cloths traditionally worn by women of tribes like the Kabui and many of the old Kuki tribes, such as the Kom, the Purum etc. but the Meiteis Mayek Naibi came to be differentiated from others when they began decorating the borders of their Mayek Naibi Phanek with embroidery works since the day of Yanglon Keiphaba (969-984 AD).²⁶

**Shirting for female wearers:**

Traditionally women mode of shirting was divided into 2 types namely Khaon and Khaochan Phurit. The women wore strips contrasting of narrow width scarfs with horizontal strips throughout the body of the cloth which was called Khaon and women used this kind of scarf for dressing their body in the style known as Khaon Phurit Setpa made of cotton and silk. They wore Khaons in pairs, and in such manner that these were hung down from the shoulders, criss-crossing at the chest and at the back. The two ends were fastened to each other, one on the right and the other on the left side at the waist.²⁷

Married Meitei women in the past did not wear blouses even on public occasions. The mode of wearing the Phanek above the breast (Phidol Chingkhatpa) did not necessitate the

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²⁶ Ibid.
²⁷ Interview with Wahengbam Ibenhal Devi, aged 80 and L. Taruni, aged 83 on 12th Jan '03.at 10.30a.m. Imphal.
wearing of blouse. They used to wear the Phanek with a fine Chadder, covering up to the knees over the loin garment.

Later on cut and hand-sewn shirts (Home made shirts/blouses) made of sheets of cloth were introduced. In the beginning, these types of shirts usually known as Resham Phurit were monopolized by the women of the royal family. The most popular among this type of shirt was the one made from imported stuff of fine velvet. The usual colours used for this type of shirt were deep green, black, violet and purple red. The shirts were decked with sequins of bright golden/white brass and glass pieces at the border of the sleeves, on both sides of opening, and around the collar and at the bottom. Commoners used to wear this kind of shirt without any decoration of artistic works.\(^{28}\)

Another type of shirt for the Royal ladies with particular embroidery artistic design on it was the Wanphak Phurit The border design on this type of shirt resembled the Khoi Akoibi pattern as in the Mayek Naibi Phanek. Only the Royal ladies had the privilege of wearing this type of shirt as also some commoners who had received this particular shirt as a kind of reward for outstanding merit.\(^{29}\)

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\(^{28}\) Ibid.
\(^{29}\) Ibid.
5. **Hair Style**

In traditional society, it was a custom to keep the women's hair styled in three different ways, according to age. For a young, up to the age of ten, the front part of the head was shaved, the back part from above the level of the ears round the head was allowed to grow loose behind. For the unmarried girls (Leishabi) the hair behind, from about the middle of each ear round, was allowed to grow long and was combed back and tied in a knot or left loose. In the front, the hair was combed forward and cut equally to reach over the forehead an inch or so above the eyebrow. In front of and over each ear was a lock of hair about two inches broad and reaching down to the angle of the jaw. For Married woman (Mou) the hair was allowed to grow long and was combed back and tied in the knot behind.\(^{30}\)

**Ornaments:**

The ornaments worn by Meitei women in traditional society were earrings, necklets and bracelets. Ankle ornaments and rings on toes were never worn by Meitei women, Nose ornaments was limited to a small piece of gold worn in side of each nostril. There were restrictions imposed on the use of ornaments made of gold in traditional Meitei society. The only gold ornaments which were worn without restrictions were earrings. These can be worn by any one. As regards other ornaments made of gold, permission to wear them had to be obtained from the king. Gold-embroidered cloths were also forbidden for the commoner. Ornaments of other metals other than gold were allowed to be worn freely by one and all.\(^{31}\)

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\(^{30}\) Ibid.

6. **Meitei Women and Social Norms**

Meitei society is a male oriented society and its social structure ensured the superior status and authority of the male members in the family as well as in the society. The status of Piba\(^{32}\) was enjoyed only by the eldest son of the Yumnak (lineage).

a. **Birth Ceremony:**

In the traditional society, there was a belief that pregnant Meitei women should eat earth from the hillside (Chenabak) to get the five primary elements of the child in the womb.\(^{33}\)

Preliminary birth ceremony known as “Kokthok Chamthokpa” used to be performed in the 5\(^{th}\), 7\(^{th}\), 9\(^{th}\) or 10\(^{th}\) month of pregnancy. The pregnant woman was made to sit down and her husband was made to take a burning splinter of pinewood, holding it above and behind the head of his wife, moving it gradually forward till the shadow of her head fell in her lap. He then extinguished the fire. This was done to retain in the woman all her power and virtue. A Maiba was then called and an earthen pot of water was placed exactly in the center of the house, with offering of pan, beetle nut and fruits on a leaf, called heiruk. The Maiba then used to bless the offerings and

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\(^{32}\) The institution of Piba or the hereditary head by primogeniture of the Sagei (Family or clan) was introduced by NAOPHANGABA. The Piba settled disputes among the sagei and could expel anyone from it for bad conduct. Pibas belonged to the Ningthousena Loisang and the Piba of the house worshiped the Sanamahi or household god. For further studies see Meitei (Manipur) beliefs & customs), op: cit P 86.

water, and the women used to take the water outside the house and washed her face and hands in it.\textsuperscript{34}

On the eve of labour hour, two midwives used to attend the lady and the woman used to kneel down supported by one midwife (Mayok maibi) and other maibi used to cut the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife. This was followed by child’s bath. If the baby happened to be a girl, the placenta put in an earthen pot used to be buried to the northern or the left side of the house which is still in practice.

The mother was not allowed to breast feed immediately after the delivery of the baby until three days had passed, as the milk was considered unholy until then.\textsuperscript{35}

A woman during child birth was regarded as impure. No one, not even the children of the family, were allowed to touch her till the purification ceremony of the house, locally known as “YUM SENGBA” (literary meaning YUM=House, Sengba=Purify) is performed. The whole clan (Sagei) was considered unclean for 12 days ad no religious rituals were allowed to be performed during these 12 days. On the 12\textsuperscript{th} day, the mother had to take head bath and the Brahmins used to purify the house, by sprinkling sacred water. The whole clan had to be purified. The family had to wash their clothes, clean the house and buy new earthen cooking pots. Only then, the

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
family was considered pure. During these 12th days, the woman was allowed to eat only ngamu (a kind of fish), rice and salt.\footnote{Irabor N. op: cit P 47.}

The birth ceremony, called Ipanthaba observed by the Meitei was very similar to most of the Tais with some local variation. Almost all the practices of the Tai like cutting and burial of umbilical cord, lying before fire for five days (Maning Kumba), the winnowing basket ritual (Moirang item of Ipan-thaba), were all prevalent among the Meiteis. At the same time, there were also Hindu influences in their birth rituals.\footnote{W. Tolchousana, Meiteigi Lairik Mathang( Imphal), P 6.}

The ritual on the ninth month of pregnancy (Ushin-Shinthokpa) and the incantation ritual (Anam-athourol) on the tenth month etc were considered as Hindu influence. Besides, the ceremony of introducing the child to the world on the sixth day after birth or SWAST-PUJAH is also very much similar to the Hindu practice.\footnote{Ibid P 8.}

b. \textit{Naming of the girl child:}

To the Meiteis, name was much more than a mere mark used to identify the individual. Names were given or selected on the basis of certain reasons or circumstances.

Naming or the ‘Koloi Minglen’ of a person was considered as an important ceremony. The name or the ‘Koloi Minglen’ of a person was believed to accompany the person to his or her grave. The name is
offered to the deities in the form of prayers so that the deity would help in avoiding untimely death of the new born.

Timely naming, it was believed, helped in removing the evil eye, thereby assuring the longevity of one's life. According to the Meitei belief, naming was to be done on the sixth day after the birth of a child or later. The first five days were considered unworthy as the child was believed to be in the reign of god. The name was selected by the parents along with the pundits of the community or the villages.

Regarding naming of female child it was customary not to give awkward names denoting snakes, birds, small plants, small rivers etc. Like the Chinese, among the Meiteis, too, name of flowers was commonly given to the girls in the traditional society. Names like Leibaklei (a kind of small flower), Ingellei (a kind of flower which grows in the hills), Thaballei (Moonlit flower), Kundamlei( a herb with white or red flower), Kaboklei (White flower) etc. were popularly given to girl child. However, with the influence of Hinduism, rivers name like Ganga, Yamuna Saraswati etc. names came to be given to the girl child.39

Generally, Meitei ladies were not named after those women who were associated with extra ordinary happenings such as Thambal (the 1st lady who married a Muslim), Thoibi (of the epic of Moirang), Pemcha (the 1st lady to commit suicide by the hanging) 40. Sometimes,

39 Ibid.
40 Kriti; op: cit
the desire of the parents for a male child led the parents to giving such male names as Chaoba to the girl-child.

c. **Socialization of the girl child:**

Socialization of the girl child into the expected social norms begins at an early age. In the traditional society when the girl child attained the age of seven or eight, they were told by their parents to stay away from the boys. The girls child was not allowed to eat together with their brothers or play together with the boys. Parents often used to give strict advice to the girl child not to mix with the boys either in playground or in any social gatherings. There was also a traditional saying, “Nupamacha ga, Nupimachaga Sanaba Hounadé”, meaning it does not look nice to play or to mix up with boys.\(^{41}\)

From the age of nine, the little women (Macha-nupi) used to help their mothers in their household work like cleaning utensils, washing clothes, pounding rice and tending babies. The little women (Macha nupi) used to walk along the village path to fetch drinking water. A ten year old macha nupi was expected not only to attend to the household chores but also help out in the rice field as well.\(^{42}\)

After puberty, a girl child was generally referred to as Leishabi until her marriage. A Leishabi had to follow strict rules during her menstrual period. Females were regarded as impure and were segregated from male numbers during menstruation period. They were

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\(^{41}\) Irabot N; op: cit P 49.

\(^{42}\) The role of Kunjamal and Khamnu in the great epic of Khamba and Thoibi clearly depicts the lifestyle of traditional girl child.
not allowed to touch anything or to cook. During this period they were considered to be ‘Impure’ (Mangba) and were asked to step out from the kitchen locally known as “CHAKHUM THOKPA”.

After the completion of five days of menstruation, they were supposed to wash all the clothes which they used or touched during their period. They also had to take head bath (known as KOKLUJABA) after five days. Then only, they were regarded as pure and were allowed to come in contact with things and human being without the fear of making them impure. They could also now enter the kitchen and cook meals for the family. 43

As a daughter and younger sister, a Leishabi was supposed to obey the authority of the father and elder brothers. Older women, especially mothers, used to scrutinize the conduct of their daughter. The mother even used resort to beating up her daughter to show disapproval and as a means to bring her on track.

When Leishabis were married, they were called as the Mou (married women). Once married, their whole lifestyle used to get changed. As a Mou, a woman had to follow certain code of conduct within her family. Parents often used to instruct their daughter before their marriage to show sense of avoidance and respect towards the father-in-law and elder brother-in-law. Daughters, once married were not bound by any ritual obligation for ancestor worship and other rites to their parental home.

43 Sircar Manjushree, Feminism in a traditional Society, (Shakti Books, New Delhi 1984), P 93.
d. **Marriage customs:**

To become husband and wife was known as Yum-panba. The proper ritual which solemnized the tie was known as Luhongba. The word was abridged from “Nu-hongba” (Nu=Testicle, Hongba=cheap or plenty i.e. free availability of testicle). The ritual which accepted a person as husband or wife may be broadly divided into three types viz. (1) Luhongba, (2) Keina Katpa and (3) Loukhatpa. and there were different means of becoming husband and wife viz. (1) arrangement by the parents or relatives (Haina-Singna-dune-Luhongba) (2) Choosing by themselves and making an eloping (chenba) and (3) to marry forcibly (chingba). The marriage used to be solemnized by one of the above three rituals. Viz. Luhongba or Keinyakatpa or Loukhatpa according to their convenience and as the circumstances demand. This system is still in practice.

*Preparation for Marriage:*

There were four processes to be observed before actual marriage took place. They were (i) Nupi Haiba (go between), (ii) Yathangthaba, (iii) Waroipot puba and (iv) Heijing Kharai Puba.

i. **Nupi Haiba:**

In the traditional Meitei society in the preparation for marriage, certain procedures were followed. An emissary led by some friends or relatives of the boys family were sent along with presentation like cloth, flower, fruits, pan etc. to the girl’s

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44 Ibid
45 N. Khelchandra, Cholta Thangwai Pakhangba and Hongpal Ponbi Luwaoba, (Imphal) P 16.
family. Generally, it was done by an expert woman, who used to report to the elders of the family (family of the expected bride) for the marriage tie. But in some cases, the mother herself used to act as an emissary.

ii.  

_Yathangthaba:_

If the parents of the girl agreed to give the hands of their daughter, the girl's father used to express his desire in the form of a declaration. This process was known as Yathang Thaba literally meaning giving formal order for the marriage.46

iii.  

_Waoirpot Puba:_

The third step in the preparation of marriage was Waroipot Puba. When the final decision for the marriage was made, a presentation used to be given to the bride's family which comprises of cloths, fruits, pan etc. Those articles were to be offered to the ancestral deities and had to be taken together by both the parties. For the royal and well-to-do families, the ceremony used to be performed on a large scale.

iv.  

_Heiching Kharai Puba (Heijapot):_

The last process in the preparation of marriage was the Heiching Kharai Puba. In this process, a second presentation was to be made to the bride's family on an auspicious day from the groom's side. The local elders went with trays (Lukmais) full of Kabok (puffed rice), fruits, pan and other things in a

46 L. Ibungohal, _Introduction to Manipur_, (Imphal) P 94.
procession to the brides family. Carrying of certain local fruits like Heikru and Heining were considered compulsory. In case of non-availability of these fruits, their stems or leaves replaced them. These fruits were then offered to their ancestral gods, viz. ancestor of the clan and sub-clan, Sanamahi, local and guardian gods. Then the fruits were distributed to all those who were present for the occasion.\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{Luhongba:}

Following all these procedures, date of the marriage used to be fixed on an auspicious day. The marriage used to be performed at the residence of the bride. The main purpose of the ceremony was to solemnize the tie by observing ritual in the form of by the kindling of fire (Mei-latpa) or installation of water pot(\textit{iratphulatpa}). In the marriage ceremony of the Meiteis, the blessing of the ancestral spirits was sought by informing the spirits of ancestors about the inclusion of a new member to the Clan (Sagei) and by offering fruits, pan, sweets, etc. to them. Along with it, Omen was also sought through Ngamu thaba).\textsuperscript{48} On the concluding ceremony which was to be observed on the 6\textsuperscript{th} day of the marriage a grand feast used to be offered to all relatives and friends.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} A Kind of fish(Ophiocephalus harcourtbutlei). By releasing the fish in the water it was believed that the fish would carry off the ill-luck of that person.
Keinya Katpa:

Another simple form of betrothal ceremony performed by some sections of people was the Keinya Katpa, a very common form of solemnizing a tie specially in the rural areas and among poor people. The procedure was very simple, short and less expensive. For this, first of all two garlands were offered to Household God (Lainingthou Sanamahi) and then the couple put these on the necks of one another in front of their parents and elders present. Then they bow their heads before the ancestral gods and household god Sanamahi and members present on the occasion. The ceremony used to conclude with the offering of a meal to the new couple by the family of the bride.49

Loukhatpa:

Another simple form of betrothal was Loukhatpa. A couple might become husband and wife without performing either Luhongba or Keina-Katpa but by the ritual of Loukhatpa. This ceremony was applicable only to those who became husband and wife by elopement or by kidnapping against the wishes of the parents. For same days, the couple used to be excommunicated. But later on a formal recognition used to be given to them by the ritual of Loukhatpa. The process for performing the ceremony was the same as the Keinya Katpa but with the omission of garlanding part.50

50 Ibid.
Marriage Rules:

There were certain proscriptive marriage rules to be observed in the traditional Meitei society. Those marriage rules were Yek-thoknaba or Pu-tinnaba, Sairuk tinnaba, Pentinnaba and Mungnaba.

Yek-Thoknaba:

The Meitei were exogamous people. Marriage within the clan(yek) was strictly prohibited. Such restriction was known as Yek-Thoknaba i.e. having consanguineous kinship. It was believed that, each and every clan (Yek/Salai) had a common ancestor or Pu (the great great grand-father). So Yek-Thoknaba was also known as Pu-Tinnaba. These rules were specially based on blood relationship. The present rule of Yek-thoknaba based on consanguineous kinship, got strengthened with the advent of Hinduism in Manipur in the 18th century. Before the introduction of the present system Meitei community was composed of seven ‘Salais’ (clans) and during the Salai period there were traces of endogamous marriage system.\(^{51}\) For instance Khaba Shok Chromba alias Leirenhan the father-in-law of Panthoibi married a woman (Manute-ngacha) from his own clan (Khaba).\(^{52}\)

\(^{51}\) J.C. Higgings op: cit P 67.
\(^{52}\) M. Chandra Singh, "Panthoibi Khongal", P 70.
With the advent of Hinduism, these clans (salais) came to be identified with the Hindu ‘Gotras’.53

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Salais</th>
<th>Gotras</th>
<th>Surnames</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Angom</td>
<td>Goutam</td>
<td>74</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Ningthouja</td>
<td>Shadilly</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Luwang</td>
<td>Kashyap</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Khuman</td>
<td>Madhugallya</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Moirang</td>
<td>Atreya-Angiras</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Kha-nganba</td>
<td>Bharadwaj</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Sarang-Leisamtheng</td>
<td>Vashishtha</td>
<td>50</td>
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_Shairuk-Tinnaba:_

Like the system of Yek-thoknaba, the patrilineal consanguineal kinship was extended in the inter clan content too. Amongst the royal families, the restriction was operated by the rule of Sairuk-Achouba and the prohibition was forever. But in the case of common people it was guided by the rule of Sairuk Macha and the restriction was for a limited period of only upto two generation. There were only four groups of Sairuk-Achouba and a number of Sairuk-Macha.54

_Pen-Tinnaba:_

Along with the patrilineal form of kinship relation, Meitei also followed the rule of matrilineal consanguineal kinship. Such kinship relation, traced from the matrilineal side,

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was known as pen-tinnaba. Pen-Tinnaba is of two forms (1) Leinung-Pentinnaba and (2) New Pantinnaba or Pi-tinnaba.\textsuperscript{55}

Meiteis were strict observers of exogamous clan marriage. There were special penalties for breaching this rule. Cheitharol Kumbaba or the Royal Chronicles is replete with such instances where strong punishments were meted out on those who engaged in endogamous clan marriage. For instance, in the Royal chronicle, there is mention of an incident where a Tourangbam boy who belonged to the Khuman salai clan married a girl of Ayekpam Yumnak who belonged to the Luwang clan. As a punishment for this act they were both were sent to exile in Houjang.\textsuperscript{56} Intermarriage between the Khuman and Luwang were strictly prohibited as they were considered as belonging to the same parent.

\textit{Mixed Marriage:}

Mixed marriage was prevalent in traditional Meitei society but with certain taboo associated with it. For instance

(i) Marriage between a Brahmin man and Meitei woman:- Had its implication for their children, as the son of that particular Brahmin was not allowed to cook for the Maharaja or men of high rank. But he was allowed to be a purohit.

(ii) Marriage between Brahmin man and Loi woman:- In such a case although their son was considered a Brahmin

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Cheitharol Kumbaba P 378.
but he was not received well as such in Brahmin or Meitei society and was not allowed to work as a purohit.

(iii) Meitei man and Brahmin woman:- In such a case the woman was considered a loi or an out caste. Royal Chronicle (Cheitharol Kumbaba) mentions of an incident where a Salam boy married a Brahmin girl and both were sent to exile in Houjang, a place for the outcaste.  

Polygamy:

Polygamy was practiced in Manipur since early days. The ruler of the Moirang clan (Thangjing) had two wives. Another progenitor of the Khuman clan (Wangbarel) had seven wives. It was a custom among the Meitei king to take the wife of the king whom he vanquished in the war, as a mark of their triumph. Also, as a sort of political strategy, weak rulers as chiefs used to offer their daughter to the powerful king. In this way, powerful kings had many wives or queens.

The Meitei (Ningthouja) kings generally had three wives and they were classified as Chief Queen(Leimaren), Personal Favour,Vavati (Apanbi), Influential, Parivati, (Leima khubi). Later on, by order of Maharaja NAOTHINGKHON, the Maharaja was empowered to have five wives. They were (1) Maharani, (2) Apanbi Ahal (3) Leima Khubi ahal (4) Apanbi Naha (5) Leimakhubi Naha.  

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57 Ibid.
58 J.C. Higgins op: cit P 67.
With the adoption of Hinduism in the 18th century, polygamy was further strengthened in Manipur society specially in royal families. Garibniwaj had ten queens and Bhagyachandra had ninety four. Thus each and every king after Garibniwaj had more than four wives as ordered by the earlier kings. Even the nobles and well-to-do families adopted polygamous form of marriage.

Another system of polygamy that was practiced by the royal family was the system of ‘Sana-mityentaba’. Under this system if the king saw a beautiful girl by chance or on any occasion, the king reserved her and nobody was allowed to encroach on the king’s privilege of reserving any girl. These Reserved girls were ridiculed by ancient poets and have been proverbially said to be wasted flowers.59

If the women whom the king favoured, developed illicit relation with other male, then as a kind of punishment, the ladies were publicly disgraced by shaving or painting their heads with a mixture of turmeric and lime and was dragged in the market area. As per the ancient codes, the male found guilty of such crimes was put into a sack (Ngabongkhao) and then thrown into the river of Moirang Chaokhong. To warn the public against such punishment, a song like:

59 Kirti M; op: cit P 45.
“On the Wharf (ghat)
Of Moirang Chaokhong
Nameirakpa⁶⁰ is dead
Come and shed tears for him.”

A kind of punishment known as Khungoinaba (punishment in public audience) where a woman was stripped completely naked, with only a small bit of cloth tied round the waist, her head shaved off, the bare head and face painted with lime, ink and turmeric colours, and broom sticks were tied on her back. She was then taken through the general streets and bazaars with beating of drums and proclamation of her crime.

However, on the other hand, a man could pawn off or sell their wives to meet their needs and a man could put away their wife for no fault on her part. Also it was considered a sin to take the husband’s name by the wife but not vice-versa.⁶¹

*Traditional Marriage Gifts (Aoonpot):*

The concept of Aoonpot was in vogue as early as 1500 B.C. Aoonpot is the marriage gift of the Meiteis. It was the free gift or presentation of only essential things of livelihood given to girls by their parents on their marriage day. The first historical gift in marriage for a poor person, as mentioned in the

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⁶⁰ A certain Nameirapka (a nobleman of the court) was killed for having illegal relations with the ladies of the palace. The sad news of his death was conveyed through the above song and also to warn others from committing the same act.

⁶¹ Annual report of the Munnipore Political Agency, 1868-69, (Manipur State Archives), P 31.
Puyaic literature was a bamboo net. For the royal families, the gifts were given in considerably large quantities viz. 100 slaves, 100 elephants, 100 horses and so on in groups of hundred for their daughters. At the end of 3rd century B.C. gift in the form of cloth and articles of marriage rites became a custom. Things which the parents could afford were given as gift to their daughters. Besides, certain articles that were used in performing rites were given by the brides parents to the newly married couple as an aid for establishing a new house.62

The customary practice was that the family of a girl could present a gift to the daughter according to its means. Normally, a Leirum (kind of locally made cloth) was a compulsory gift and the groom’s family reciprocated by presenting bridal gift which consisted of a Phanek (female garment) Inaphi (female chadar), gold ornament and other precious items.

Besides these, in the case of a marriage of a Princess, twenty-five Paris (62.50 acres) of paddy field were to be given as gift which used to be revenue-free estate.

In traditional society, the main occupation of female was weaving and as such wooden handloom tools and appliances essential to weaving like tareng, kaptreng, handloom shuttle,

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Taot, Tamang and other accessories for Khwangphi, were given as gifts to girls by their parents.\textsuperscript{63}

e. \textbf{Divorce:}

In Meitei law, Divorce was known as Khainaba. In ancient Meitei law, there were conditions permitting the husband to commit polygamy and ancient records enumerate the following grounds of divorce.

(i) When the husband dislikes the character of his wife;
(ii) When the wife does not please her husband;
(iii) When any of the co-wives revolted against other wife;
(iv) When either of the spouses becomes insane;
(v) When the wife is issueless, disobedient, immoral outcaste or handicapped and lastly;
(vi) When there was any circumstance compelling the spouses to divorce.\textsuperscript{64}

If the divorce was initiated by the husband he was supposed to give bride’s price to the wife and if initiated by the wife, the wife was supposed to give groom’s price to the divorced husband. In case of divorce, the children usually stayed back with their father.

A daughter after her divorce, had the right to return to her Mapam (Parent’s house) and to live there for her life-time during the divorced period, but she had no claim on residential right to the Ingkhol (residential land) nor had her children any claim on handed property for residential purpose to their maternal uncles.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, P 343.
f. **Remarriage:**

Widow remarriage was prevalent in traditional Meitei society. However, no ceremony was observed for widow remarriage and certain conditions were imposed on widow remarriage. Impositions like prohibition of marriage with their deceased husband’s brother, prohibition of Brahmin widows and breaches of any of these norm resulted in severe punishment. Cheitharol Kumbaba or the Royal chronicle mentions instances where severe punishments were awarded to those involved in breaching of this rule. For instance, one Loitam (his surname) boy married his sister-in-law and for this he was exiled to Ithei (a place for the outcaste). Another incident in the same chronicle mentioned another Wankheimayum (Surname) boy having relations with his sister-in-law. For this, he too was exiled to Sagolmang (another place for the outcast).

Men who married widows or divorced women were not turned out of the society but they lost their status in the society. They were not allowed to be the head (piba) of the clan (sagei). They were not allowed to touch the Maharaja, nor were they allowed to cook for the loisang or leikai. The same applied to men who married a widow or a divorced Rajkumari and a Rajkumar who married a widow or a divorcee was not allowed to ascend the gadi or the royal throne.

g. **Inheritance:**

The laws of inheritance among the Meiteis were very simple and were usually traced through the male line. The headship of the

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65 Cheitharol Kumbaba op: cit P 151.
family belonged to the father. Such family consisted of the father, his wife or wives, his descendents, and adopted son and the aged, dependent parents. The expansion of the family was done along the lines of agnatic kinship, as kinship is counted through males only. The Yek-salai (group of families or kindred) is also traced through male or alone. The male issue was called Piba and the female is called Ningol. The latter was always secondary to the former.\textsuperscript{67}

The distribution of movable property was done through the principle of Chakthung Phitung. It is the giving and taking of all permissible shares for movable properties which were so essential to a separate family. The movables were distributed in accordance with the concept of giving (Sharuk Tamba) shares to all. But immovable properties like “Ingkhol” (Residential land) were divided only among the sons and the daughters had no claim over it.\textsuperscript{68}

At a man’s death, his sons inherited equal shares to the exclusion of all others, and the daughter could not inherit the parental property. No daughter had any right to the property of the father but they had the right of inheritance to the mother’s property. Property of the mother was reserved only for the daughters.

If the male had no sons, his wives inherit the property. But if the wife remarried, then the property used to pass on to the male’s brother or nearest male relatives. If there was an adopted son, the male

\textsuperscript{67} Raghunani S.: op: cit P 343.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
line of the deceased husband of the widow was to be established through the male descendants of the adopted son.\footnote{Ibid.}

A traditional folk song which goes like\footnote{Kirti M, op: cit P 182.},

"This is our rice-field dear,
Inherited from father,
Dig, let us dig,
It is our rice-field dear,
Inherited from grandfather by father,
Dig, let us dig"

depicts the law of inheritance through male line.

\section*{h. Seating arrangement inside the house:}

The traditional Meitei house reflected the familial and social stratification that was found in the culture. The conventions of seating, sleeping and dining arrangement were made according to a person's sex and rank in the family and social hierarchy. The entire plan was based on a rigid structure with a strong emphasis on patrilineal values and preponderance of male status.\footnote{Hodson T.C. op: cit P 25, 26.}

The traditional house of the Meitei usually faced the east and is rectangular in shape with different sections inside it. On the eastern side lies a large porch known as Mangol. It was considered as the most important area of the house, as the social life of the family revolved around it and seating arrangement made on the porch (Mangol) was
according to sex and social position of a person. The southern side of the porch was reserved for the male head of the family where a mat was laid exclusively for him. The northern side (Mangsok) or the left side of the porch was meant for women. Inside the house, the room of the eldest son (Lukhumka) was on the southern or the right side and the room of the daughters (Ningolka) on the northern or the left side.  

Similarly, in any social gathering and public places, separate sitting arrangement for males and females were made, with the southern side reserved for male and the northern side for the females.

i. Women and their Religious Participation:

In the religious matter, women participated equally with the male members of the society. The post of the priestess (Maibi) and its institution (Maibi Loisang) clearly indicated that the women had equal status as that of the male in the religious matters. Every section of the society revered them. People used to go to them for guidance, to get rid of ill-luck and to know their future. These priestesses (Maibis) were assumed to be a medium between god and human beings and played an important role in the traditional Lai-haraoba festival.

In traditional society, Meitei women also participated in all religious festivals and rituals along with their husbands. In family rituals and class rituals and in the Lai Harouba festival, the women not only helped the men but also took active part in it. In some aspects, the women in their individual capacity played an important role in the

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72 Sircar Manjushree, op: cit P 46.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid P 104.
rituals. In the Lai Haraoba ritual, almost all the items of the ritual were conducted by the Maibi, Items like Leima Jagoi were exclusively reserved for the women.

With the advent of Hinduism in Manipur in the 18th Century, certain changes took place in the religious life of the Meiteis. In the process of ‘Sanskritization’ all the local gods and goddesses were identified with Hindu gods and goddesses. Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi were equated with Lord Siva and Goddess Uma. In the pre-Hindu period, the Meiteis addressed their traditional gods and goddesses in their own language but with the emergence of Hinduism, Bengali and Sanskrit were used while chanting prayers for God mantras.

Many Hindu festivals were also observed in Manipur. The famous Hindu festival like Holi became popular during the reign of Jai Singh.75 King Gambhir Singh introduced ‘Ratha Jatra’ (car festival) and ‘Gostha Ashtami’.76 He installed the images of ‘Jaganatha’, Bala Ram and Subhadra.77 Chandrakriti Singh introduced the new religious festival of ‘Julon’ in 187478 and the worship of goddess Durga also became popular during his reign.

The process of Sanskritisation’ also touched life circle ceremonies. All religious ceremonies now combined elements of both the theism. As for instance, in the birth ceremony, the first half of the

76 Kabui, op: cit P 59.
77 Ibid.
78 Bahadur, op: cit, P 9.
ceremony was observed on purely traditional practice i.e. Ipan thaba, but the evening programme was based purely on Hindu practice i.e. Swasti Pujah.

One very important impact of Sanskritization was that Brahmins took charge of worshipping of the traditional Meitei gods. All the Brahmins were directed to worship Sanamahi as house hold deity like the Meiteis. Besides, the deity worship, they used to offer a grand feast to the deity once in a year, attended by all members of the clan (Sagei) as in the Sagei Apokpa Khurumba of the traditional faith.  

In the case of females, Hinduism didn’t obstruct them from participating in traditional religious affairs. The famous Manipur Rasa-Dance based on Bhagavata Purana are played by women. The only discernible change which occurred with adoption of Hinduism was that most women became Vegetarian. Earlier, Manipuri women were meat eaters upto 17th Century A.D. Change of food habit brought about by the adoption of Hindu religion greatly affected the lifestyle of Meitei women.

7. Observation

Thus, in conclusion, one observes that in the traditional Manipuri society, Meitei women had to go through different phases of life. The first phase is known as the child and adolescent phase, the second as the married woman phase and the last as old age phase. As a

79 Birachandra Singh, op: cit P 300.
80 Ibid P 295.
girl child, she was referred to as macha nupi, from the attainment of puberty until her marriage, she came to be called a leishabi and after marriage she was addressed as a mou. And, in her old age she was known as hannubi and this mode of address still continues even today. In these phases of life stages, she had to follow a set of prescribed codes or norms regarding her dress and hairstyle. For each of these phases, the kind of dress to be worn, and the manner of wearing it was different. Same goes for the manner of sporting different hairstyles. Leishabis, mous and hannubis were required to wear prescribed hairstyles, which were different and distinct from one another. Dress was further differentiated according to the social hierarchy. For the different phases different pattern of wearing the dress was followed by them. By looking at the a woman’s dress, her manner of wearing it and the hairstyle, one can immediately make out whether she is a girl or a married woman, whether she belonged to a higher or the lower strata of the society or even the clan she belonged to.

Further, common Meitei women in traditional society wore ornaments like earrings, necklets and bracelets. However, only the women belonging to the royal family had the privilege of wearing ornaments made of gold. A commoner, who had a desire of wearing gold ornaments had to seek permission from the King before using ornaments made of gold.

As with other traditional societies, the Meitei society was a male oriented society and its social codes and norms were such as to maintain the superiority of the male and keep the female subservient to the male folk. Right from the very young age, she was made to feel
and accept the subservient nature of her status visa-vis her brothers or other males. As a leishaabi, she was expected to obey the authority of her father and brothers and help her mother in house hold chores. And as a mou she had to unquestioningly follow her husband in all the travails of life and as a hanubi she was to retire from active phase of life and to submit herself to the care of her sons. Further, as a female she could not have any aspiration to become the head of the family and had no right to claim inheritance on the place of residence or inkhol.

Women during her menstruation were considered impure and was prohibited to cook and come in contact with the male members of the family. Also, at the time of childbirth, a woman is considered impure till the purification ceremony which was conducted on the 12th day of the birth. In fact the whole clan was considered impure and was prohibited from performing any religious ceremony during the period of women’s childbirth.

If the child born was a girl the rituals and rites observed at the time of birth ceremony were neglected and expenses on the ceremony were minimized. Whereas, if the child born happened to be a male the ceremony associated with it was celebrated with gay-songs, drama, dance etc, for public entertainment.

Right from birth female occupied the northern or the left side of the house. If the child was a girl the placenta was buried on the left side of the house. Also within the house, female member were required to occupy the northern side of the house and also in all public
and religious gatherings the northern side was meant for the women and the southern side for men. The fact that the dead bodies are also taken out from the left side of the house and the association of the left with the females appears that the stratification system was prevalent in the Meitei traditional society.

Polygamy was widely practiced in the traditional Meitei society but there was no record of polyandry. Widow marriage was not prohibited but anyone marrying a widow had to suffer loss of status. The eldest son if he happened to marry a widow had to forfeit his right to be the head of the family. In case of person belonging to a royal family, he could not claim his right to the throne if he married a widow.

In marriage, Meitei society followed the exogamous form of marriage and there were special penalties for anyone breaching this rule.

But in religious matters only, it appears that women’s participation and position was at par with her male counterparts. The institution of priestess was upheld with great respect and reverence by the members of the society. Women’s participation on religious ceremonies did not wane even after the advent of Hinduism in Manipuri Society. Even presently Manipuri Ras Leela a form of classical dance is still performed exclusively by the women.