Chapter III

MEITEI WOMEN IN
TRADITIONAL
ECONOMIC LIFE
Historical compulsions necessitated the women folk of Manipur to come forward and contribute in economic activities by participating in both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors to uplifts the socio-economic life of the society. Two major historical factors were responsible for it. The first was the introduction of lallup system in Manipur by king Loiyamba from 1074 onwards and the second being the Manipur-Burma war which took place in 1819.

The liability towards “lallup” commenced as soon as a boy reached the age of seventeen and was capable and entitled to cultivate one hectare (Pari) of land. This system was considered as some sort of tax in kind extracted by the king from the people. In this way, the male members had to attend the Royal Office for ten days out of forty days. Moreover during war time, it was compulsory for adult male members to accompany the king in the warfare against the attack by the chiefs of the surrounding hill areas and also by the neighbouring countries. As such, during the Manipur-Burma war which took place in 1819 and lasted for seven years, popularly known as Seven Years Devastation (Chahi Taret Khuntakpa) in the History of Manipur, all the adult males had to accompany the king to fight in the battle field.¹

As a result many men got killed and many were taken as prisoners of war by the Burmese forces. Consequently, large number of women became widows. In the absence of their husbands, women had to bear the heavy responsibilities of taking care of their children and at the same time had to look after the financial responsibility of

¹ Dun, E. W. Gazetteer of Manipur, (Delhi 1975), P 26.
their families. They did so by participating in the economic activities of the region both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors.

1. **Women and Agricultural activities**

   Agriculture was the main occupation of the state. All sections of the society, men and women both young and old were involved in this occupation. Agriculture being a family enterprise among the Meiteis, all members of the family including even children below the age of ten contributed their labour.

   Traditional agricultural implements used by the Meiteis were the “Kangpot” or sledge, the “Langol” or plough, the “Ukai Unalba” or smooth harrow, the “Phaointok “ or paddy spoon, the “Humai” or fan used for winnowing the paddy, the “Ukai Samjet” or toothed harrow, the “Chairong” or paddy thrasher of flail, the’“Thangol” or sickle, the “Yot” or spade, the “Thangchao” or large dao and the “Yeina Phak” or threshing mat.²

   The work of the transplantation was solely a women’s work and men are less entertained in such operations. The women generally stand in row or in circle and insert the seedlings into the field as quickly as possible. Weeding is generally done only once, after a month of the transplantation by the woman folk.

   During the course of the agricultural activities the women had to seek the help of other women folk. As such they had to form labour women organizations known as Khutlang organization. In this

² Ibid, PP 42-43.
organization, a team of women work collectively in the agricultural sector. As such it became an institutionalized organization in Meitei traditional society.³

Khutlang, in Meitei, is a multiple synonymous term. It literally means, Khut-hand or helping hand, lang, (langba or langthokpa) to invest something expecting a return. In agricultural sphere, a khutlang generally denotes the woman’s working team where woman of different age groups are pooled to work together in agricultural operations, particularly in transplantation, weeding and reaping. Such team is known as nupi-khutlang. The nupi-khutlang or simply khutlang organization as a seasonal labour team is a built in mechanism in agricultural economy both for coordinating the activities of woman individuals as well as for ensuring a smooth functioning of the organization in production. From another perspective, it is also an example of the well-demarcated sexual division of labour in the Meitei society.⁴

In a khutlang team, each member gets the benefit of the labour of the entire team. Working in. group is done in rotation for each member’s field so that collisions may not occur. In such works of mutual obligations, reciprocal exchange of labours is operated without any payment.⁵

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⁵ Ibid.
The member in a khutlang team varies from time to time depending on the size and nature of the field, and it also has the local variation. Usually, a khutlang team consists of at least six to eight women workers. But its membership goes up to sixteen to twenty. For e.g. in transplanting an area of 1/4 of a hectare eight workers are required, i.e. thirty two workers for a hectare. However, in some area of the valley, the required number of workers to transplant half of the hectare ranges from 20 to 25.\(^6\)

Women work and sing songs together. They sing various types of songs (Eshei), different seasons locally known as Louta Eshei, thaou and Phoukaron. Louta Eshei, is the song sung by the women organization on the eve of ploughing the field when the new season sets in for all the 12 months of the year. It states that in the cold months of Poinu (December, January.), the crops are heaped, on bamboo mats by the women folk, to be thrashed and winnowed. Soon after, the grains are collected to the Royal granaries (keis). Another song sung at the time of harvesting was locally known as Phoukaron.\(^7\)

Manipuris lived on rice and as such every house possessed a pestle, wooden mortar, winnowing fan etc. The task of pounding rice was normally entrusted to the girls of a common house in an agricultural community. Even the royal ladies look an active role in cultivation. The Royal chronicle or Cheitharol Kumbaba mentions incidents where the royal lady participated in the agricultural activities. For instance, during one drought, Tolbi, wife of Chingkhu

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Manihar Singh: A history of Manipuri literature (Delhi, 1996), PP 22-23.
Telheiba, Chief of Moirang Principality, had her nails infected with boils while working at the hard and dry fields.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{a. \textit{Agricultural Rites & Ceremonies:}}

Since agriculture is the mainstay of the people of Manipur, agricultural rites with special reference to rice production, harvest, rainfall and drought form an essential part in the day to day life of the people. Some common popular rites and ceremonies are (a) Phaoibi Khurumba which means worship of rice goddess. The earliest text described Phaoibi as the principle deity of agriculture. The epic lore of Moirang Principality (Moirang Sayons) mentions Phaoibi as one of the first incarnations who considered Moirang as her home. It is recorded that she fell in love with Moirang Akongjamba, the mortal hero, who was connected with the scheduled castes. Her cult was popular among all clans and houses of every agricultural community of Manipur from the kings down to the individual houses.\textsuperscript{9}

As per the codes of Meiteis, ploughing was to commence in the month of around January. It was observed as sacred day by the cultivators. During the regime of the Maharajas, it was customary for the Raja to offer fruits and vegetables to agricultural Goddess Phoibi at four corners of a specially prepared piece of land. However, the ploughing, sowing of paddy seeds, harvesting, gathering paddy in a granary and worshipping of the deity in the granary, was observed by the people only on sacred days according to pre-Vaishnavite Meitei Calendar.

\textsuperscript{8} Cheitharol Kumbaba: op cit P11.
\textsuperscript{9} Kirti M. op cit P 224.
Since women were also considered an important symbol of reproduction, the inauguration ceremony of the new cultivable land used to be performed by the queens. Certain instances are found in the Royal Chronicle or Cheitharol Kumbaba, to that effect. In 1524 A.D., it is mentioned that queen Taipombi inaugurated a new agricultural field.\textsuperscript{10}

*Harvesting Rite:*

Origin of a grand harvesting rite is traced to the old records Puyas of rite where it is stated that the women Maiba had to invoke women Goddess Phaoibi to increase the rice yield.

People of pre-Vaishnavite times believed that the offering of a black hen and rice beer could activate the function of agricultural Goddess phoibi to bring good fortune. In contrast, in the case of Hinduised Manipur, the elaborate ritual for paddy plant and rice harvest was not considered necessary.

With the advent of Hinduism, the sacrifice of black hen and rice beer has been abandoned instead rice mixed with flower on a banana lea was to be thrown in four directions by the owner of the paddy as offerings to the God.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Cheitharol Kumbaba P 37.
\textsuperscript{11} Kirti M: op: cit P 225.
Rain and Flood Rituals:

Since early times, the rural folk of Manipur have been controlling natural forces by praying for rain fall, stopping and taming of the floods. Such type of prayers assumed peculiar importance among the primitive people of the valley. There were various songs called Nonglao Ishei associated with the invocation of rain sung by women folk in times of drought (Ikang Thokpa). The saying goes like:

"O rain, Pour down
Submerge the peak of the Langjing Hill
Float down old man and old woman
Float down maidens of Patsoi
Let the youths of Unam pick them up."12

Rain fall ceremony:

The Manipuris observe the rain fall rites known as Nong Kouthaba meaning calling down the rain. When continuous drought visited Manipur the maiba or the pious women called rain doctor had to pray for rainfall. This was considered very important event for an agricultural and pastoral community like Manipur. The rain fall ceremony used to be performed on the Nongmaiching hill and on the bank of the river Iril which has a course in the east of Imphal before it pins the river Imphal at Lilong. Various kinds of rainfall ceremony were performed. One such type of rainfall ceremony which used to be performed was that the women-folk used to gather at midnight in a field, discard clothes and through their paddy pounders, pestle or

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12 Ibid.
winnowing fan in a nearby pool or river and used to make their way home by by-ways. This rite also included Nonglao Ishei a performance of a ritual at Nongjukhong, place towards the south-east of Langjing Hill\textsuperscript{13} used to take place.

\textit{Flood Control Rites:}

When flood used to hit Manipur on account of heavy rainfall or the change of the course of the rivers or leading to bad drainage, the court pandits and the priests used to perform rites of such ruling deities as Pakhangba (King of gods) and Wangbrel (presiding deity of water).

Even though there is no documented records folklore has it that during the reign of Gambhir Singh, Thambanu, the daughter of a widow was buried alive to appease the water deity to stop rainfall. The place where she was believed to have been buried for construction of embankment is still known as Wanggoi. A banyan tree (Khongngabatta tree on the bank of the river is still growing to this day as a symbol of the gratitude of the people to a lady for having accepted voluntary self-sacrifice to appease the gods and the people.\textsuperscript{14}

2. \textbf{Women and Weaving Activities}

Weaving was an age old industry in Manipur. Next to agriculture, weaving was the most important economic activity. The weaving industry of Manipur was almost entirely run by women.

\textsuperscript{13} Jitendra M: - Famines of the valley of Manipur as Recording in the Cheitharol Kumbaba (16\textsuperscript{th} to 18\textsuperscript{th} A.C.) in North East India History, (Delhi, 1994), P 45.

\textsuperscript{14} Kirti M.: op: cit P 234.
a. **Evolution of Weaving Art:**

The Meitei cultural tradition of the art of weaving was based on a mythical foundation. According to the manuscript on mythology called Leinunglon, the supreme goddess of the Meitei traditional Pantheonn, Leimarol was said to have had introduced the work of weaving as a necessary item of work in the whole course of creation of the social universe.\(^\text{15}\)

Meitei considered the art of weaving as part of the cosmic process of creation, and the art was serious practiced in every household in the sense of execution of work entrusted by Leimarel (Goddess) for the prosperity of the family. It was believed that Leishambi (the goddess of creation), taught the primeval ancestress the art of weaving.\(^\text{16}\)

It was also believed that the goddess Panthoibi was the first primeval celestial ancestress of the Meitei and it was she who introduced the art of weaving by imitating the pattern of weaving of a spider when it weaves its cob web. The Leinunglon manuscript mentions that the first cloth made by goddess Panthoibi was of material obtained from the soft membrane of wood and bamboo.\(^\text{17}\)

The technique of weaving introduced for the first time by goddess Panthoibi came to be known as loin loom (Khwang Iyong). Traditionally, the Mayek Naibi Phanek were weaved on that type of

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\(^{15}\) Mutua Bahadur : Traditional Textiles of Manipur, Mutua Museum, (Imphal, 1997), P 10.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
loom and another type of loom was introduced by Laishna, the chief queen of Nongda Leiren Pakhangba.\textsuperscript{18}

Cotton and Silk were mainly used as Raw material in Weaving. According to the accounts given in Laseng Meihourol\textsuperscript{19}, Ima Leimarel (another name of goddess Leishembi) cotton yarn was produced by pulling out fibres from the cotton ball and by rolling the fibres on the thigh with the palm on her right-hand while her left hand pulled the cotton ball away, thereby twisting the cotton fibre strands into twisted yarn.

It was stated in the same source that Tamitnu one of the seen primeval celestial ancentresses of the Meitei, planted the first cotton plant on Wednesday and thus introduced cotton plantation. For this Tamitnu is known as goddess of cotton.\textsuperscript{20} To commemorate the production of cotton for manufacturing cloth, the office of Sinkhombi was instituted, and maintained throughout the history of the people, to look after the craft of weaving.\textsuperscript{21}

Traditionally, the yarn was produced by twisting the fibres between the fore fingers and the thumb came to be known as Sambung Kaibi Mahum Lang. On the Moitang Lang another yarn was produced by rolling the fibres on the thigh came to be known as Pheibak Lang.

\textsuperscript{19} Manuscript dealing with the introduction of cotton.
\textsuperscript{20} J.C. Higgins, op: cit P 131.
when the Moitang Lang and Pheibak Lang was combined together it formed another type of yarn known as Kantha Kishi lang.

b. **Rites and Ritual associated with Weaving:**

In the olden days, myths and legends were the backbone of religion and social culture. All rites and customs of the people originated from the beliefs in myth and legend. In Manipur, the entire process of making textile for use by the ruler was accompanied with certain rules of conduct on the part of artisans especially in the making of Ningthouphi (royal apparel). This royal Apparel or Ningthouphi was made in the pattern of the skin or slough of Pakhangba, the mythical serpent – god. It was also regarded as the highest award given by the ruler to person who performed extraordinary services to the ruler and the society, particularly in the battle-field. And receiving an award like Ningthouphi was considered a privilege in the society, it was a much coveted object.\(^{22}\)

The Royal apparel (Ningthophi) was woven with intricate designs. It used to spend at least 360 days to weave such a cloth. Designs of this royal cloth Ningthouphi had to be adopted from the exact replica of a set of original design. Astrologers used to select the auspicious day and the hour to start weaving. On that day, puja used to be performed by the priest. The weaver and the tools that were to be used in weaving were sanctified by using the leaf of a sacred tree “Taierl” revered by the Meitei fumigated with the smoke produced by

\(^{22}\) N. Khelchandra Singh:- Ningthouphee Saba in Rites, 37\(^{th}\) issues of the 12\(^{th}\) year, (Imphal, 1970,) P 13.
burning dried leaves of Khoiju and a local medicinal and magical-religious leaf known as Leikham.\textsuperscript{23}

The weaver of the Royal Apparel generally used to be the chief of the weavers in the state. He had to strictly follow the rules of conduct of the weaver. If he violated any of the rules, it was believed that he would get punishment from the Goddess of creation in the form of suffering from ailments like leprosy, blindness, deformity of limbs\textsuperscript{24} etc. Although Leisembi, the goddess of creation taught the art of weaving and Panthoibi introduced the technique of weaving, women were not allowed to weave the Royal Apparel as the weaving of the royal dress used to take at least one complete year and women during the monthly cycle of menstruation were considered unclean. Moreover, the weaver of the Royal Apparel (Ningthouphi) was supposed to live in a separate hut and was not allowed to associate himself with women.\textsuperscript{25}

Every woman from the lowest to the highest family were taught weaving from their childhood. Young girls were initiated the art of weaving at an early age. In fact, weaving was the essential qualifications of every Manipur women. Besides practicing other economic activities, almost every house wife of Manipur was also capable of weaving all the clothes needed by the family. It was more of a need-based occupation and almost every woman used to receive a loom on her marriage as her dowry. Even the royal ladies were also

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} K. Sobita, op: cit P 62.
proficient in weaving. Instances can be cited from Moirang Kangleiran’s khamba and Thoibi, where Thoibi the princess of Moirang was known for her weaving skill. It turned one of the important reasons’ for her father turning against her lover as Khamba who was offered the silk cloth weaved by her beloved Thoibi the princess.26

As the labour in weaving was insufficient to meet the requirements of the people, women who were efficient in weaving were considered precious items and they were captured after war and employed in the profession of weaving. In Ningthourel Lambuba, mention is made of Thwanthaba where he in one of his campaign against the Tara Khun Captured women who were weavers.27

The handloom industry in the traditional society was monopolized by women. This was due to the reason that the male members of Manipur were always engaged in warfare. So, women had to take full the responsibility of providing clothes to the family members.

c. Embroidery:

Next to weaving, embroidery was an important craft among the women. It was a supplement to pattern making in weaving. Weaving could produce only simple cross pattern, and rounded patterns could not be produced on loom weaving. So, in order to obtain this rounded patterns women had to take recourse to embroidery with the help of needle.

27 Ibid.
It is believed that the needle was introduced from Burma.\textsuperscript{28} With the introduction of the new tool and silk, the textile craft in Manipur made an aesthetic stride. Tools and material required for embroidery were very few and simple. These comprised of a needle, coloured cotton or silk yarn different colours.

The introduction of Embroidery pattern on the border of the Striped Phanek of the Meitei women was traced to the times of Yanglou Keiphaba (969-984 AD).

\textit{Embroidery pattern:}

There are three distinct types of embroidery pattern as used by artisans in Manipur. One such pattern is the rounded or the circular pattern. This pattern is seen today on the borders of the phanek.

The second pattern depicts natural objects like the cock, horse, elephant, sun, moon, etc. on the borders of the Phanek.

The third type is known as the Sha Nga (animal and fish) design. In appearance slightly stylised but its motifs are recognizable as natural forms.\textsuperscript{29} Different patterns of embroidery were used

\textsuperscript{28} J.C. Higgins, op: cit P 131.
\textsuperscript{29} O. Bhogeshwar, (ed) Ningthourol Lambuba, (Imphal 1967), P 196.
Embroidery Works:

The Meiteis began decorating the borders of their Mayek Naibi Phanek with embroidery works reportedly since the days of Yanglou Keiphaba (969-984 A.D.). The cultural history of the people registers two main patterns of embroidery work on the border of a Mayek Naibi Phanek; namely the Khoijao and the Hijamayek.

Khoijao Lonbi Mapan Naibi:

This pattern is a uniform series of semi-circular figures in which the lead is concentric inwardly. The figures are alternately arranged; the head faces upward in one unit, followed by downward facing in the next unit, and so on. Each of these units of figure is called a Khoi (meaning bee or hook). Again, it is specified as the Khoijao (meaning a big bee or a big hook). The series of concentric figures is flanked by two narrow lines of embroidery works observed to be uniformly broken stretch of lines. Most of the Mayek Naibi Phaneks collected from the temples of the Umang Lais are found embroidered on the border with this design.\(^\text{30}\)

Khoi Akoibi Mapan Naibi:

This pattern is composed of a uniform series of circular frames, but traditionally oval, design each in-between every unit of two such frames locally called Tenga. The insides of the circular frame is decked with a rectangular figure of four slightly crescent lines that conjoin the outer circular line at two

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\(^{30}\) K. Sobita, op: cit P 43.
sets of opposite points, one vertically and the other horizontally. The space available in between a crescent line inside and the corresponding outer circular line, is decorated with two tendril like figures, at regular intervals from the inner line towards the outer one. This pattern is circular and so termed as Khoi Akhoibi.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Hija Mayek:}

Traditionally it was stated that this pattern was conceived from the pattern observed on the cross-section of timber – which is represented in embroidery works. This pattern at the border of a Mayek Naibi Phanek is flanked by two strips, one at the top and other at the bottom. The top strip has a design of flowering-creeper all along with a set of two leaves on two sides of the stem, locally known as Khognang. In between two units of flower and the bottom strip are a regular series of Parrot figures placed alternatively upside down, and with a figure of the Yansin leaf motif within each unit of the Parrot figure.\textsuperscript{32}

This design was first introduced by a person of the Hijam family of the Luwang clan. Hence, it was named as Hija Mayek (i.e. the Hijam pattern). It was earlier the favorite pattern of embroidery work on the border of the Mayek Naibi Phanek adopted by the women of this clan. Later on, women of other clan also came to use this pattern. Until recently, its use

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
was rather restricted. The royal women used it only during the mourning phase. This Mayek Naibi Phanek had originally a colour scheme of only two strips in its body. Widows used to put on the Mayek Naibi Phanek with the Hija Mayek pattern at its borders. This phanek is also known as the Lukhra Phanek, i.e. 'Phanek of the wodows'.

Another type of embroidery works that can be seen in the Kanap Phanek (coronation dress of the Chief queen of Manipur). The common pattern is that of women figures of the peacock; either the full or only the head portion or other parts of the bird are women on the Phanek. The crawling posture of the snake is also depicted in plain shade or multicolour shades.

d. **Applique Works (Leeba):**

The other popular mode of decoration is the appliqué work locally known as Leeba. It is an ornamental work of cutout material by stretching it onto the surface of another material. It is represented in the embroidery work. It was introduced during the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.). This design gives fine blending of the two fabrics in harmonious combination, more prominent than the needle works. Applique also gives vigorous and eye-dazzling effect as compared to works by plain needle embroidery. During ceremonial occasions, the ruling chiefs used to wear either pale yellow on fire white fabric, white on white, dark blue on pale blue dress.

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
These were some fabrics decorated with applique works which are used as the end face of round pillows (Monmai), as decoration on the front face of curtains (Kangkhane Sanjap) and as decorative strip on turbans. When required, the appliqué works were made in bright and contrast colours and therefore, were dazzling to behold. These were seen on the borders of the Ras costume (Ningkham). The dress with such technique and design were used mostly in socio-religious functions.36

3. Women and Sericulture

Sericulture was known to the Manipuris since long. Khui Tompok, the son of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, was credited with the introduction of sericulture for the first time.37

Mythologically, it was believed that Nongmanei Ahongbi, the queen of Khui Tompok, gave birth to a daughter who did not survive long. The royal couple were shocked at the premature death of their daughter. After some time they found to their surprise mulberry worms appearing on the grave of their deceased daughter and they believed the worms to be the incarnation of their daughter and accordingly the king entrusted some of their attendants to look after the worms. It was found that the worms lived on the leaves of a plant which the Meitei called Kege. The families to whom the king entrusted the work took care for the worms by supplying the leaves of kege plant. And they came to notice the production of cocoons

35 Mutua Bahadur, op: cit P 21.
36 K. Sobita, P 43.
produced by those worms from where they invented the art of making the shining silk thread.

Based on this belief of the origin of silk worm from the graveyard of the royal daughter who was usually addressed as Leima, this worm was named Leima til literally meaning the worm born out of the royal daughter or the families born out of the royal daughter. The families who took up the task of rearing the silk worms came to be locally known as Leima Pokpam.\(^3^8\)

It is said that after the silk thread was invented, it was used in weaving luxurious cloth for the royal families only. They and their descendents monopolised the dress made of silk. Silk cloths were also produced for offering to the deities.

Written documents like the Chengleirol records that the introduction of dress made of silk was used for the important festival like the annual boat race, during the reign of Meidingu Naophongba (428-518 A.D.), Hiyanglei Kumsaba etc. During the reign of Naotingkhong, (8\(^{th}\) Century A.D.) the coronation dress like wearing of red Dhoti (Phingang Pheijom) made of silk was used.\(^3^9\)

However, following the invasion of Manipur by an Shan (Chinese) Prince, Ko-le-feng sometime in the 8\(^{th}\) Century A.D. The production of silk yarn increased as a result of close contact with the

\(^{3^8}\) W. Jyotimoy:- Socio-Economic study of Manipur (1467-1891 A.D.)
\(^{3^9}\) K. Sobita, op: cit, P 16.
Shans. It was believed that the flows silk which the Meitei used in embroidering was an influence from the Shans. The Meitei word for floss silk is Kabrang, which is derived from two words ‘Kabo’ and ‘lang’ (Kabo means Shans to the Meitei and lang means thread) indicated that the Shans were exporting the floss silk thread to Manipur and the silk thread was available in Manipur. As a result people decorated clothes with embroidery works made of floss silk. The use of these clothes became very popular during the time of Meidingu Khagemba (1597-1625 A.D.).

a. Indigenous method of Silk Reeling:

Meitei women used an indigenous method of ruling threads from mulberry silk cocoon by using bamboo tong (chegap), Split bamboo (Yakabi), Twisting implement (Tamang) and smooth bamboo (Utong) etc. As the work of reeling (Chingba) is done with the help of bamboo implements (Khere-bamboo in archaic Manipur language), the process is known as Khere-Chingba in Manipuri.

For getting silk yarn, first of all the silk cocoon are cleaned by taking out the outer layer, then they are put inside a jar and boiled for some time to leach out the wax contained in the cocoon. While keeping inside the pot, the women pick up the silk by using the bamboo tong. The threads so picked up are collected to a round reed that rotates with the help of pointed iron rod called Tarot. The collected yarn or Tawot are then transferred to the twisting implement.

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40 Jyotimoy, op: cit, P 90.
41 Ch. Manihar, Naethingkhon Phambal Kaba, (Imphal 1983), P 16.
42 Mutua Bahadur, op: cit, P 25.
called Tamang to form hank and the silk reel is used as a raw materials in weaving. In Kabang Phanek also known as Phige Phanek made of mulberry, a variety of silk is used. This phanek is used as a formal wear by the Meitei women.\(^{43}\)

\textbf{b. Rites performed during Silk Reeling:}

It was believed that the cocoon of the larva and the caterpillar that feed on the leaves of the Silleima tree and the cocoon of other worms are used for producing silk yarn. This Silleima tree is identified as the Goddess Silleima or the Goddess of craft. Even the worms which feed on the Silleima tree were named after the name of the Goddess of crafts. As such, the hanging of Silleima Cocoon on the Tareng (apparatus for twisting yarn) was customarily practiced by the Meitei weavers in order to get the blessing of the deity presiding over the art of weaving.\(^{44}\)

\section*{4. Women and Dyeing}

It is still difficult to say about the exact date of the introduction of the art of dyeing in Manipur. However, it is believed that the traditional dyes were produced and developed under Loiyumba’s patronage. The task of dyeing were distributed to different families, according to the manuscript Loiyumba Shilyen. The distribution was as follows in next page\(^{45}\):

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\(^{43}\) Sobita K., op: cit, P 16.


\(^{45}\) Loiyumba Shilyen, P 32.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lineage</th>
<th>Colour of Yarn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akangcham</td>
<td>Light pink (Leirol Khoi Paklei)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chingkhwam pam</td>
<td>Not identified (Chengsang Muyum lei)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yiroibam</td>
<td>Saffron, dark flame red (Ureirom Makong Meiri).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khulmanthempam</td>
<td>Light blue (Higok Nanou Lei)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yipusangbam</td>
<td>Chingya Napu Lei, Taoching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heitroi</td>
<td>Grey, Yellow, Green, deep Maroon (Lei)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washiyampam</td>
<td>Greenish red shade produced by mining green and red threads (Wana Katang Namba Sanglen Yaichu Lei)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A unique feature of the Manipuri society was the assigning of specific colours to specific clan group (Salai).

a. **Colour and its significance:**

   **Red (Anganba):** Red is the colour of blood, signifying courage and bravery. It also signifies fecundity, prosperity and good luck.

   **Green (Ashangba):** Green as the colour of the surrounding vegetation signifies growth, peace and calm feelings.

   **Yellow (Napu/Hangampan):** Yellow is deemed to be the colour associated with the coming of the spring season and as such is used in the spring of one’s life in the society. It signifies the innocence and the freshness of youth.

   **White (Angouba):** White indicates purity, devotion, sacredness etc. In Manipur, dress used in the temples, and in rituals and ceremonies are all in white colour.
Black (Amuba): For the Manipuris, black is considered to be the colour symbolizing evil associated with bloodshed and death. Black was chosen as the colour of the turban for officers of the top-guard, the executioners and also of the soldiers. It also signifies cruelty and stubbornness.

Blue (Higok): In the earlier days, people in Manipur were not using pure blue colour but they were using grey blue or blue black. These colours were then assigned to the seven clan group.₄⁶

b. Colours with reference to Pana⁴⁷ and Salai⁴⁸:

Apart from the related significance of the different colour schemes, there is yet another way in which colour significance is interpreted in relation to different clans of the Meitei. The clan distribution of colours in the traditional Meitei society are given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Clan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Ningthouja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Luwang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Khuman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Angom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow with red Strips</td>
<td>Moirang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Khaba Nganba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Sarang Leishangthem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

₄⁷ These were the four boroughs/territorial units into which the Meitei population was divided in the historical times. Each of these units is called Pana.
₄⁸ These are the seven clans of the Meitei. The salai is the word of ‘clan’.
The Pana (four territorial units into which the Meitei population were divided) distribution of colours in the traditional Meitei society were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Pana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Laipham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Khabam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Ahallup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Naharup</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c. *Methods of Dyeing:*

After weaving, dyeing was done. Generally speaking, when the cloth or fabric was to be of uniform colour, dyeing was done after weaving. In case, the cloth was to be made with stripes of different colours, then dyeing was done in the yarn stage to get the appropriate colour. Since the early days, the Meitei women had sound knowledge relating to dying by using vegetable dye. Some of the important colours prepared indigenously were blue, black, reddish black,\(^{49}\) etc.

The main dyeing plant was the Kum\(^{50}\) (Strobilanthes Sp. Family Flaccidifolious) for all of the said colours. For preparing these colours, first of all the fresh leaves of the plant were cut into pieces and were soaked in water in two or three jars with tight lids. The jars were put in the sun for around two weeks. When the leaves were about to decompose, the Calcium Carbonate (Kum Sunu), prepared by

\(^{49}\) Jyotinoy, op: cit, P 91.

\(^{50}\) According to a local scholar Kirti, Kum is a kind of vegetable dye which is obtained from a plant called Kum. By a process of neutralizing it with outer shell ashes and the like colour is dyed to it. In Kirti Singh, Religious Development of Manipur in the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) Centuries, (Imphal, 1980), P 110.
burning Oyster shell) was added and the liquid was churned till a thoroughly mixture was achieved with the help of a multi-pronged fork (Kumsu Chei) functioning as the centrifuge rolled between the palms. The froth produced on the surface was collected in small pot with the help of feathers.

The next step was to squeeze the coagulated kum in the ash water (infused liquied) of Khusum Pere (acanthacare) or in (dried banana stem) Laphu Chanang. The yarn or cloth was thoroughly wetted and dipped in liquid. It was taken out of the pot and properly wrung. This process was repeated till the desired colour was obtained. The liquid was either boiled or the material was kept in the pot for a day or two to obtain grayish blue colour.\textsuperscript{51}

For obtaining deep black colour, highly plastic clay was mixed in kum infused, or after dyeing in the kum liquid the material was dipped in the clay water and kept for a day or two and then dipped in the liquid infusion of Embelia Myroblam (Heikru), or the infusion was added to the kum black.\textsuperscript{52}

In producing the orange colour, the seeds of Ureirn were used. The ripe fruit of the plant was opened and the seeds were taken out. These were put in a piece of clean cloth. The cloth with the seed was squeezed in water till the colour was extracted. The yarn was then dipped again in the liquid of garcinea anomala (Heibung). This gives orange colour.

\textsuperscript{51} Notes on Dyes and Dying in Manipur, Manipur Secretariat Special file no. 26, 1896.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
When the ash of the banana stem was added to the water in which Ureirom seeds were squeezed cerium red colour was produced in the liquid.\footnote{Ibid.}

Thus, for dyeing, available herbs were used in Manipur and since it involved great care and patience, the dyeing was usually carried out by the women.

5. **Women and Wine Brewing**

The earliest record of consumption of wine (Yu) was mentioned in the 1\textsuperscript{st} century A.D. when Poreiton passing through the Shan villages in the early part of the 1\textsuperscript{st} century A.D. was offered wine and other eatables\footnote{Singh W. Ibohal, op: cit, P 24.} and those women good at brewing wine were often preferred as booty claim from the defeated party. During the reign of King Naotningkhong captured women brewers in one of his campaign at Kambong.\footnote{Ningthourol Lambuba, (Imphal), P 53.}

Consumption of alcohol was in vogue in Manipur even when Hinduism was at it height. Prior to the coming of Hinduism it was consumed at various functions, festivities or on special occasions. The royal chronicle recorded that drinks used to be served at the place after a successful military campaign or during marriage celebrations or while inauguration of new markets.\footnote{Cheitharol Kubaba, P 33, 34.}
Right from the kings, royal ladies, nobles, priest and the common masses used to consume it. It was consumed even during religious functions. There was also a practice of offering drink to both the Hindu and the Meitei traditional deities, like Hanuman, Sanamahi and Pakhangba.\textsuperscript{57}

The wine was known, as Yu which was brewed mainly by women. Some of the known villages that brewed wine were Sekma, Phayeng and Andro.\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{a. Methods of Brewing wine:}

The women used to observe the following process of distillation. The fermenting agent or yeast, known in Manipur as “hamei”, prepared from rice flour and creeper (Yangli), which was found near streams in the hills or surroundings of the Manipur valley. The wood of the creeper with sweat taste, used to be pounded and mixed with two or three seers of rice flour (yam), the mixture was then moisten, and round cakes were made out of the paste. These were laid on rice husks and kept about 10 days to dry and were fit for use.

For the preparation of the wash, the rice was steamed, by placing in an earthen ware jar, with a hole in the bottom which rested on a second earthen ware jar, in which water was to be boiled and the steamed rice was then to be mixed with four or five cakes or powdered yeast. The mixture is locally known as lutup. It then used to be placed in a basket covered with leaves and left in the sun until it used to get

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid P 115, 330.
\textsuperscript{58} The Meitheis, op: cit, P 32.
and smells fermented. After its fermentation, it used to be placed in a jar and filled with water. The wash is locally known as “atingba” which used to be ready for distillation.\(^{59}\)

The wash then used to be placed in a retort, formed of an inverted earthen ware vessel, placed over a second earthen ware vessel. The retort used to be heated over a fire, and the spirit (leiyu) passed through a bamboo tube introduced into a hole on the side of the upper vessel. Later on it used to be condensed in a third earthen ware vessels, which rested in trough of cold water and was covered with a damp cloth. The joints, at the mouths of the two vessels forming the retort and where the bamboo tube leaves the retort and enters the mouth of the condenser, used to be sealed with moist earth. The bamboo tube used to be coated with plantain leaves and bound round with strips of cane.\(^{60}\)

The whole process of distillation occupied six to seven hours and the women often carried out this process twice in a day. This process is still in practice and the wine brewed by Sekmai women is sought after.

6. **Women and Marketing of goods**

Another important role of the women in the economy of the state and family was internal trade and marketing. All the internal trade and exchange of the commodities were managed by women.\(^{61}\)

Men seldom appeared in the market and women were the potent force

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\(^{60}\) Ibid.

\(^{61}\) Brown, op: cit Pg 90, Also see, Johnstone op: cit P 138.
in the internal trade and even the king had to think twice before acting against their wishes. This could be inferred from the instance where the copper coins issued by the king were not allowed for circulation by the women vendors.⁶²

There were markets situated at the convenient spot by the roadside manned by a handful of women. Imphal being the capital possessed the largest and the most important of these markets, to which the name Sana Keithel (Golden Market) was assigned.

Its foundation was laid by King Mungyamba (1562-1597 A.D.). In 1580 AD, it was a close enclosure and consisted of embanked mounds which was allotted to different women traders like cloth weavers in one corner and dried fish in another. It was an open area with no construction or shelter.⁶³

An interesting feature in the traditional market system was the reflection of the hierarchical order of the society in the sitting arrangement made inside the market area. Separate rows were made to be occupied by person selling a particular item, monopolized by particular lineage (Sagei). For instance the selling of Mattar dal (Hawai Kangtak) was monopolized by Angom lineage, puffed rice (Kabok) by Lairikyengbam, (Khetrimayum and Konog), iron implements by Thangjam lineage, jewellery by Tourangbam,

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⁶² Hodson, op: cit P 38.
⁶³ Brown, op: cit PP 90-91.
Kangabam and Keisam lineage.\textsuperscript{64} However, for all these items, women were the sellers.

In traditional society, trade was carried on locally and a striking feature of local trade was the extreme responsiveness of the food supply to the market demand. From the villages, salt, poultry, cotton and home grown vegetable were brought to Imphal market. It acted as the trading centre among various villages. The commodities were brought for sale from small towns like Bishenpur, Oinam, Thoubal and Moirang which acted as local markets.\textsuperscript{65}

In these markets women, especially married women (mou) and older women, always congregated at an early hour. According to the description of R. Brown, the political agent, "Many of them (women) walk in miles in the morning, buy things from distant villages and sell it in the capital market (Sanakeithel) in the evening. In the evening, the women were hurrying along with their wares on their heads and little baby slung on their backs". In the bazaar, the women sat in long row raised on earth without any covering in the rainy season, but with a large umbrella.\textsuperscript{66}

7. **Observation**

To sum up it may be stated that the Meitei women always played a very significant role in the economic life of the traditional Meitei society. This could be partly because the men folk were almost busy both during war and peace time. During war the men folk had to

\textsuperscript{64} Basanta, Socio-economic Change in Manipur, (RKPI, Imphal, 1998), PP 68-69.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Brown, op: cit, P 90.
accompany the King and fight with him and during peace time they had to render service to the king in lieu of the tax.

In the traditional Meitei society, agriculture formed the basic economic base and rice was the main crop cultivated. Women played a very prominent part in the cultivation of this staple food. Over and above being part of the whole process, some farming activities like transplantation of seedlings, weeding, and reaping were mostly done by women during the period of cultivation of rice.

One of the unique features of women and agriculture in the traditional Meitei society was the formation of labour women organization known as “Khutlang”. A Khutlang is a labour team comprising of women of different age group of a particular area formed to help each other during the time of cultivation of rice. This organization helped each member on rotation basis. No payment is exchanged between the members of the group. It was all done on the basis of mutual obligations and reciprocal exchange of labour. This organisation worked in an atmosphere of mutual help, fun and gaiety and with songs.

Women also played a very important role in the ritualistic aspects of agricultural activities. Even queens used to participate and inaugurated new agricultural fields. Also women were indispensable part of many of the agriculture connected rites related to rain, flood and harvesting etc.
Weaving was considered a very important economic activity. In fact, second only to agriculture, weaving was solely practiced by women in the Traditional Meitei Society. Myth has it that the goddess Leimarol introduced weaving in the course of creation of universe. Right from childhoods, every woman, irrespective of the class was taught the art of weaving. Weaving was considered one of the essential qualities of womanhood in the traditional Meitei society. A woman was expected to weave all the clothes required by the family. Weaving was a need-based occupation and looms invariably formed part of a bride’s dowry so that she could look after the clothing needs of her family.

It was also women, who were engaged in the production of raw material of the yarns needed for weaving. Initially women used to be engaged with the cotton yarns only but with the introduction of silk, they started engaging in the production of silk yarns also. In fact, the Royal Chronicle namely, the Cheitharol Kumbaba records the introduction of silk clothes during the reign of Meidingu Naophaba (428 – 518 A.D.). But it was only in the 8th century A.D. that silk really started flourishing when the Meiteis came in contact with the Shans. It was women only which took care of the whole process of silk yarn production starting right from the rearing of silk worms to the final product.

The enhancement and embellishment of the woven clothes was also undertaken by women only. This involved the art of dyeing to produce different hues of clothes and the art and practice of
embroidery. Embroidered patterns as well as colour scheme of clothing had functional and symbolic aspects attached to it.

In the traditional Meitei society, women also practiced the art of wine brewing. Before the advent of Hinduism, consumption of wine was not considered taboo and in fact, it was a very important ingredient in any social and religious ceremonies. Even to this day, wine brewed by Shekmai women is still famous.

Another very important and in some way unique role played by Meitei women in traditional society was that of trading and marketing. Markets which were highly systematized according to the clans selling particular items, were wholly and exclusively run by women. These markets were situated at convenient spots alongside the roads. The biggest of these being the ‘Sana Keithel” at Imphal founded during the reign of King Mungyana (1562-1597A.D.) and it still stands to this day.

Thus, women played major part in the primary economic activities like agriculture, weaving, embroidery, etc. in the traditional Meitei society. Women also played a major role in the trading and marketing of essential commodities in markets exclusively run by women.