CHAPTER III
LAND AND ITS PEOPLE
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A. The Land

Manipur, the home of the newborns of the present study, is an isolated hill-girt and geographically distinct unit located on the north-eastern border of India. Lying between $23^0 50'$ and $25^0 30'$ North latitudes and $93^0 10'$ and $94^0 48'$ East longitudes, it is bounded on the west by the Cachar District of Assam, on the east by the Myanmar, on the south partly by Mizoram and Chin hills of Myanmar and on the north by Nagaland.

The total area of the state is 22,327 Sq. Km. and can be divided into two regions i.e. the valley and the hills. A chain of mountain ranges surrounds this Manipur valley, a fertile saucer-shaped valley of about 1,843 sq. km. and located at an altitude of 746 m to 850 m above the mean sea level (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Manipur, 1985).

The state is under the influence of sub-tropical monsoon climate as it is just near the Tropic of Cancer, $23\frac{1}{2}^0$ North latitude. During 1999, its annual rainfall varies from 57.01 cm to 303.17 cm and the temperature falls between $0^0C$ and $39^0C$ (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Manipur-2001). With this climatic condition, Manipur is enriched with various kinds of trees, bamboo, shrubs and grasses giving the landscapes green in most part of season. Moreover, many wild and seasonal vegetables are grown on the hill slopes and on the plain and swampy lands.

A number of rivers and rivulets flow through this valley. The main river is the Imphal river. Small swamps, lakes and numerous streams are also here. Loktak, a well known largest lake in the state is located in Bishnupur District under the Moirang subdivision. Such water resources provides the breeding place of various species of fishes which supplements the protein sources for the people of the state.

The whole state is divided into nine districts- Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, Chandel, Ukhrul, Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur and Thoubal,
of which the last four are in the valley region. The Manipur valley is predominantly inhabited by the Meiteis which forms the largest population in the state with 12 lakhs approximately (census, 2001).

The present study has been conducted among the newborns of the Meitei population of Manipur valley. It is, therefore, felt necessary, to give a brief information about the Meiteis, specially in relation to the present study.

B. The Meiteis

The Meiteis, are also known as Manipuris by the outsiders. Physically, they are Mongoloid types (Brown, 1873) and speaks a sub-language of Tibeto-Burman language family (Grierson, 1904).

The state of Manipur or its people- the Meiteis, is almost synonymous with the dance to the World outside. The colourful and rhythmic Manipur dances, both of traditional (Lai Haraoba dance) and classical (Ras Leela) types, need no introduction (Singh, 1993). Moreover, they are well known for their bravery in the freedom struggle of India and for their colourful handloom and handicraft products.

Majority of them are the followers of Hinduism, while a few of them belonged to traditional religion Sanamahi and Buddhism. There are, seven exogamous clans (Salais) among the Meitei, which are known as Khuman, Luwang, Mangang, Khaba-Nганба, Angom and Sarang-Leisangthem (Chenglei).

Occupation

Due to the geographical position, the main occupation of the Meitei is cultivation. Atleast 70% of the people in Manipur are found in agriculture alone (census, 1991). But today, the occupation of the Meiteis may be broadly divided into two categories – the rural type and the urban type. In urban areas, most of them are government servants; some are found to employ in cottage industries like basketory, goldsmiths, blacksmith, weaving, dyeing, poultry etc. On the other hand, most of the rural people are cultivators, and quite a large section of them are engaged in fishing activities. Besides, a few are found to engage in government services, weaving, pottery, basketory etc. Therefore, there are wide variations in the sources of income between the rural and the urban areas due to the background of different occupations.
Ways of Meitei women's life

Among the Meitei community, the females, married or unmarried are not confined to only the domestic life. They are independent and more industrious. Most of the domestic works are carried out by them. The mothers play important roles for running their families; they take extra responsibilities by bringing up their children and helping their husbands. Moreover, all the marketing works are done by them. Those who do not employ in government services, take up tailoring, embroidery, weaving, knitting works etc. They also cultivate their kitchen gardens with seasonal vegetables for their own consumption and the surplus is sold to the nearby markets or to the local people. Short to say, the Meitei women are hard working, diligent and enterprising. Sanakehithel or Khwairamband Bazar of Manipur may be regarded as the symbol of the Meitei women. It may be the only women market in India. Instead of all these hard work and responsibilities, they are still holding inferior social position and status.

Food habits

Now-a-days, the Meiteis seem to eat every sort of food without regard to the Hindu notions of purity and impurity. They are vegetarians, although now-a-days, there is a trend of taking meats, specially chicken among the younger generations. However, fish is the delicacy for the Meiteis. Rice forms their staple food. Two meals a day seems to be general among the adults and sometimes three among the young children. They usually take fish in the form of dry or fresh. Dry fishes occur in two forms- small smoked fishes which are locally processed and sun-dried fishes which are imported from other states. Seasonal vegetables such as mustard, cabbage, cauliflowers, cucumber, lady's fingers, carrot, gourd, pumpkin, pea, chilli, potato, spinach, cho-cho marrow, tomato, etc. are taken abundantly. Moreover, they are also fond of eggs, milk and its products-cheese, butter, ghee etc. but they take these in small quantities. Seasonal fruits like lemon, amla, orange, guava, pineapple, jamun, peach etc. are taken in large quantities in fresh or in dry forms.

Tea is the most common beverage. Other stimulants like coffee, tobacco and betal-nut are also taken by many of them. Other special food of the Meiteis are fermented tender bamboo shoots (Soibum), fermented small fishes (Ngari), fermented
soyabean (Hawaichar) and various kinds of mushrooms which are highly proteinous. At an average, the Manipur Meiteis seem to take a wide variety of food items with compare to other communities indicating consumption of various items of nutritive sources.

Marriage pattern

The Meiteis are exogamous as regards to the clans or salais into which they are divided, but are endogamous as regards to the members of other communities. This means that among the Meiteis, clan exogamy is strictly practised and there is no preferential forms of marriages such as cross-cousin or parallel cousin. In exceptional cases, now-a-days, marriages between the Meiteis and other communities such as Muslims, Punjabis, Biharis, Bengalis, Nagas, Kukis etc. are occasionally taken place. There is a belief among the Meiteis that marriages between the close kins may produce physically handicap and mentally retarded children. Other beliefs attach to such marriages are still birth, inability to conceive, miscarriages etc.

The Meitei are polygamous; but it is uncommon. The marriage of sisters to one husband (sororate) is permitted by providing that the elder sisters’ marriage is prior to that of the younger. This case is mostly related to the death of the elder sister or inability to give birth to a child. Widow remarriage is permitted, but not with their deceased husband’s brothers. However, there is no ceremony for this remarriage.

Among the Meitei society, elopement is the most prevalent form of marriage. Now-a-days, marriage by engagement have been preferred. A trend has now observed that they have more freedom of selecting their mates over a large number of communities with the advancement of transport, communication and speedy urbanization processes.

Pregnancy and beliefs

During pregnancy, a Meitei woman has to observe certain restrictions by avoiding various habits on working and eating as a cultural tradition. Right from the conception of the child, the parents start worshipping and praying to god and goddesses for the safety and smooth delivery of the child and they are not allowed to do any harmful activities such as quarrelling, fighting, stealing, cheating and killing any animal (Bhagyachandra, L. 1991). Although, not widely practiced, some may
even avoid doing the works of cutting, striking nails and stitching etc. The belief is that if they do any of these refrain activities, their child shall be born with joined fingers or toes and or cleft lips.

During the first trimester, a pregnant women will refrain from eating all kinds of food which are very hot, very sour and very bitter to taste. Some vegetables such as peruk (Centelia asiatica), nongmangkha (Adhatoda vasica) and laphu namara (a kind of banana plant) and some fruits specially papaya and pineapple are restricted to eat. The beliefs are that taking of such food items lead to miscarriages and eating excess pineapple affects the eye of the newborn. Such food restrictions continued up to the birth of the child.

By the five months of pregnancy, the pregnant women would perform a prayer to Sanamahi, the household lord and also to Lord, Nityainanda, the God of Hindus by performing a ritual known as “Panjamitra”. Such ritual should be done once at least or three times at the maximum. It is fixed normally on a good day and as per convenience of the parents. In this ritual, one plate of local made salt (Meitei thum); a small mirror, a garland of white flowers, honey, banana, sugar, fresh milk, curd, money (Rs. 1/ Rs.5/ Rs.10) and clothes for the god, are the basic items to be offered. Besides this, some people offer kshir.

During the third trimester, the pregnant women avoid carrying heavy loads, heavy eating and also to work hard. There is a cultural norm among the Meitei society that anything that the pregnant mother feels prefer to eat except the above forbidden food items, are given at any cost by the family members or relatives or the neighbours by inviting her at a lunch or a dinner.

**Delivery and restrictions (taboo)**

A delivery mother has to observe certain restrictions on their dietary habit and physical movements. They are allowed to take only rice and smoked lata fish with local make salt (Meitei thum) for about 5 days. On the sixth day, she begins to take simple boiled curry prepared from a variety of vegetable known yendem (Alocasia indiaca) and dried fish with pinch of salt to taste. However, she takes as hentak (a local product) prepared by pounding small fishes with a variety of vegetable called hungu (Colocasia isculenta) in a mortar. Ngari - a kind of fermented fish is avoided
during this period. A delivery mother is also expected not to touch anybody up to the eleventh day after the delivery. If a person happens to have a physical contact with her intentionally or accidentally he/she has to take a bath to purify himself/herself. On the eleventh day, both the mother and the infant undergo ‘Yumsengba’ a purification rite and it is performed by a Brahmin priest. For this, both the mother and the child have to take a bath. All the cloths used by the mother and the child should be washed properly. All the rooms of the house should also be cleaned and washed. Then a Brahmin will ritually purify the mother and the child by sprinkling water with tulsi leaves. She is now allowed to have physical interaction with everybody. However, she should prepare her food separately up to 40 days after delivery. After the completion of 40 days, she can join the common kitchen of the family to the exclusion of being a cook for the members of the family. She is also prevented from performing ritual and religious ceremonies for three months. After 3 months, no restriction is imposed on her and she can lead a normal life (Devi, Kh. V. 1993)

The material and methods of the present study is given in the next chapter.