CHAPTER-III

ROLE OF WOMEN IN MANIPURI SOCIETY: FROM ANCIENT PAST TO MODERN SOCIETY
3.0 Introduction

In a human society, the role of women is very important and indispensable one. Socially, Manipuri women are very hard working. From the very beginning in the blood of Manipuri women there is always a quality of leadership, dedication and good administration as well. They played a vital role in economic life of the state. To quote Dun, "they are very industrious. They perform the most of the works of the country except the heaviest and they are consequently the mainstay of the family circle. It would be difficult to find a more industrious women in India than the Manipuri".¹ Mrs. Grimwood also spoke of Manipuri women in her book "My Three Years in Manipur". "The Manipuris do not shut up their women, as in the custom in most parts of India and they are much more enlightened and intelligent in consequence."² Thus, Manipuri women played a significant role in the productive process of the state and they have become Always subject of administration from the foreigners and sociologists.³
3.1 Place of Women in the Society

‘Women’ were the progenitor of the Meitei society. In “Panthoibi Khongkhul” Panthoibi played active part in the creation of Meitei society. Manipur was ruled by the seven clans in different principalities upto 15th century. Manipuri is belonged to one or other of these seven clans, although there were some Manipuris who did not all belong to these clans. The seven clans are the Ningthoujas, the Angom, the Khuman, the Moirang, the Luwang, the Sarang-Leishangthem and the Khaba Nanga. The women hold a high and free position in all the clans. Among the Manipuri women in history we cannot forget the contribution of Linthoingambi, the queen of Meidingu Ningthoukhomba (1432-1467), queen Kumudini, the wife of Maharaja Gambhir Singh (1825-1834) and Rani Gaidinglu, the leader of the Zeliangrong.4

Women held a very high social status in Manipur in primitive period. There was equality between men and women - the latter even enjoying higher status than men. Women were the head of the families. The society was matriarchal as was evident from the fact that “the worshiping of Goddesses was started from ancient period in Manipur”. The lowering status of Indian women during the Mughal period did not affect the status of women in Manipur. The position of women in subordinate status has been legitimizied with the coming of Hinduism in Manipur.5

Manipuri women are always reminded of the courage and bravery shown by the women of Manipuri in different historical stages. In both hills and plain, they have been taking major roles in the amelioration of family condition as well as social condition. The historical events of 1904, 1939, Jadonang movement and the present “Khwai Ima Keithel” and “Meira Paibi” movement unfold the significant roles of Manipuri women. Women are still to
strive to free from excessive labour in family maintenance, men’s dominant attitudes, ill-treatment from security persons and deprivation of their rights of political status, economic status, education, social works and decision making. In present day they are facing the complexities of modern life as a result of socialisation, democratisation and modernisation.

The valour, unity and never-say-die attitudes of the Manipuri women have stamped an indelible impression on the minds of many scholars, writers, sociologists, historians etc. Nobody would deny the fact that Manipuri women’s dauntless courage played in the famous ‘Nupilan’.

According to Central Statistical Organisation, the total labour force of India is accounted as 83.90%, the rest 16.10% being the unemployment as percent of labour force of the total unemployment rate of the country women component shares 9.6% and men component 6.5% respectively. As such unemployment rate in the country is higher in case of women than that of men. The rate is again more higher in urban sector than rural sector. While male and female component of unemployment rates in rural sectors of the country are 2.0% and 1.4% respectively, the scenario of urban sectors are 4.5% and 8.2% respectively.

As reported by the source, all the activities performed by individuals can be grouped into three categories –those pertaining to System of National Accounts (SNA), extended SNA and non-SNA. On the average, male spent about 42 hours in SNA activities as compared to only about 19 hours to females. However, situation completely changes in extended SNA activities. Females are found to spend about ten times more in extended activities as compared to males. In non-SNA activities, which pertain to learning, leisure and personal care, male spent about 8 hours more as compared to females.
According to the same source, the employment rate of Manipur is accounted as 87.30%, the unemployment rate as percent of labour force being 12.7%. The unemployment rate is higher among the male component (7.2%) than the female component (5.5%). The rate is higher again in urban sector than the rural sector. The Manipuri women played an important role in the economic life of the state.

3.2 Participation in Social and Professional Activities

3.2.1 Cultural Activities

Women and culture in the general context are inseparably and mutually involved with each other. ‘Culture’ must be viewed in a broad perspective. In its most comprehensive sense culture refers to diverse creative activities of a people to literature, the visual and performing arts, various forms of participative, self-expression, social habits and customs. The culture heightens the skill both of an individual and society in its totality in all walks of life.

Like other societies, the womenfolk of Manipur from time immemorial, has been sharing their male counterparts in the preservation of cultural heritage in day-today life on different occasions. A few of such occasions are presented below:¹⁰

3.2.2 Performing Arts

The ‘performing arts’ includes classical dance, folk dance, religious dances, classical and religious songs, folk songs, stage acting etc. The Meitei women are used to preserve the traditional form of these items by regular performances of (i) classical dance (like ‘Ras Leela’); (ii) Folk dance (like ‘Thabal Chongba’); (iii) religious dance (like ‘Lai Haraoba’, ‘Khamba Thoibi Jagoi’, ‘Leima Jagoi’, ‘Maibi Jagoi’); (iv) classical religious song (like ‘Sankirtana’, ‘Natasankirtana’ etc.); (v) folk songs (like ‘Khongjom Parba’,
'Khunung Eeshei', etc.); (vi) stage acting (like 'Drama', 'Shumang Leela', etc.) and of many other items.\textsuperscript{11}

3.2.2.1 Dance Profession

In the field of dance, Manipuri women right from the time of Maharaja Bheigyachandra (18th century) contributed to the cultural development of the state. Princess Vimbabati, popularly known as “Shija Laioibi” played the role of Rashewori (Radha) in the first ever ‘Ras Leela’ at Langthabal. In this dance profession many Manipuri women were awarded by the Manipur State Kala Akademi, Manipur.\textsuperscript{12}

3.2.2.2 Classical Music

There are different kinds of music i.e., Nat, Bashak (Khubak Eeshei), Khunung Eeshei, Moirangshai, etc. In this profession there are several women recipients of Manipur State Kala Award.\textsuperscript{13}

3.2.2.3 Drama, Film and Song

In earlier days Manipuri society looked down upon those who practice in drama, film and song etc. Now with a change in the attitude and outlook of the individuals in the society women can actively participate in these fields with free mind. There are several popular female artists in the field of drama, film and modern songs in Manipur.\textsuperscript{14}

3.2.2.4 Fine Arts

From the early part of the 20th century, Manipuri women started to contribute in the field of fine arts.

3.2.3 Attire Culture

The Meitei women preserved the traditional Meitei pattern in formal and informal clothing system which is quite different from the Indian as well as the western style (clothing of young girls are however exceptions).\textsuperscript{15}
3.2.3.1 Informal Attire

It consists of cotton or silk with passed around the body and blouse or a jacket and a sheet of cloth or Inaphi (chaddar). They use another type of clothing which is known as “Pungou Phanek”. It is of a simple variety made of cotton, wool or polyester. Women usually wear this type for day-to-day work *i.e.*, going to the market, to attend functions at the locality and other functions of minor importance.

3.2.3.2 Formal Attire

a) Phanek Mayeknaiba or Mapannaiba in different colours is usually worn at occasional functions like marriage, Ipan thaba (Swasti Pujah), feast, festivals and other important social functions. It is of striped nature of different colours and designs.

b) Mayanglang Phanek of pinkish colour and white Innaphi (chaddar) are mainly used at the time of mourning, Sardha ceremony, different kinds of religious functions, etc.\(^ {17}\)

The Meitei women and her ‘Phanek’ were symbols of the continuity in Meitei sartorial tradition and they could maintain their identity in dress.\(^ {18}\)

The modern educated working- women adopted wearing of the sheet in a saree manner. Manipuri tribal women also wear clothes like Phanek. The colour and stripes differs from tribe to tribe. Most of the common tribal women do not wear the sheet around the body. Modern educated tribal girls prefer western dress like pant and shirt than their original one.\(^ {19}\)

3.2.3.3 Dance Costume

The costume of “Ras Leela” dance is very highly attractive. Krishna wore beautiful gold colour “Pheijon” (Dhoti). The dresses of the female participants are highly embroidered red shirts and bright green velvet jackets or
blouse. Their faces covered with fine transparent white veils and heavily adorned with gold and silver jewellery, the dancers glide and float in soft, gentle, pleasing, flowery movements. They are using “Chandan” (a white paste) at their forehead, nose and throat with fine lines.  

3.2.7.4 Group Costume

The dress of the ‘Maibi’ is quite different from others. The ‘Phanek’ and ‘Innaphi’ (Chaddar) are all white and an additional waist wrapper (i.e. also in white) is worn on top of the ‘Phanek’. The long sleeved white blouse is worn and flowers are usually placed in the hair and behind the ears. Thus, the Meitei women played an attire role in culture of Manipur.

3.2.4 Religious Activities

3.2.4.1 Ceremonies

Religion has been the basis of the social thought and life, and the guiding principle of our civilization. In Manipur, women and religion are two inseparable things. Women took active part in the performances of religious rites, rituals and ceremonies from early times. The worshipping of family god ‘Sanamahi’ is usually done by the eldest female member of the family. Every Meitei clan worship their ancestral god and goddess at least once in every year.

3.2.4.2 Lai Haraoba

It is a most comprehensive form of dance popularly known as “Lai Haraoba”, literally means the festivity of Gods, which performed once a year. The whole story of the creation of universe including the day-today activities is represented in this dance. This well known festival is performed generally between the spring and rainy season, before the temples of “U manglai” (sylvan gods and goddesses). Some of the clans perform “Lai Haraoba” for longer duration of time i.e., one week or two weeks. In these important religious
festivals, the main duties and role are performed by the 'Maabis' (i.e., women who are expert in the religious rites and rituals). Without "Maabis" no Lai Haraoba can be performed.\textsuperscript{23}

3.2.4.3 Wedding

Most of the religious/social rituals are performed by the women in Manipuri society with their male counterparts. For example, in the weeding ceremony the Vara (groom), Nupigee mapa (bride's father) and the Brahmin priest are the principal participants in the ritual. The rest of the traditional custom and ritual follows in marked by the prominence of female participation. An ideal woman (one who has never been widowed or divorced and has a first born living male child) headed the weeding procession from the groom's home to bride's residence with gifts specially for the bride. First of all the bride's mother received the bridegroom and his party by prostrating himself before her. It is known as "Maya Okpa", when the bride arrives at her in-laws' home, her mother-in-law embraces her first.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, the Meitei women kept the traditional form of weeding culture alive.

3.2.4.4 Sharddha Ceremony

The women's participation in Sharddha ceremony is not negligible. The rituals are performed by the women as per meitei tradition with their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{25}

3.2.4.5 Domestic Culture

The women preserve and practice the traditional domestic Meitei culture in day-today worshipping, cooking pattern, caring family members and in other household works, which in many ways differ from other communities and are unique itself. In Manipuri society, a woman cannot shirk the traditional responsibilities of a housewife and mother, even if she is the sole or one of the earning members of the family. She has to attend to her household duties
before going to work and after coming back from workplace. Women are unpaid labourers at home.26, 27

3.2.5 Traditional Health Care

A section of women called 'midwife' practice the traditional delivery cases. Generally they are known as 'Maibi'. On the sixth day of child's birth, they performed another custom called "Ipan Thaba" which is related to the health of the child.28

3.2.6 Social and Political Movements

Manipuri women took an active role in safe guarding the social laws, customs of the society and as well as in many social movements of the state. The role of women in the social movements in Manipur can be traced back to the Pre-British period when Manipur was under Monarchical system. When the politics and activities of the Monarch affected the social norms, structures etc. of the society, women in organised forms represented before the Monarch and expressed their viewpoints. In most of these cases the Monarch very often changed the policies as demanded by the womenfolk in order to promote the welfare of the society. But women social movement emerged in a more organised manner with a creative ideology from the early part of the 20th century i.e., British Rule (1891-1947) in Manipur. One was in 1904 which was popularly known as the first Nupilan ('Nupi' means 'women' and 'Ian' means 'agitation' or 'movement'). The second was the Nupilan of 1939 which was spearheaded by the women of Manipur.29

Today each and everyone can see the beautiful historic Nupilan Memorial complex at the heart of Imphal city, as a mark of feminist movement in Manipur.30
Then comes the movement of “Meira Paibi” (Nishaband) and since the early 1980's this movement directed towards checking of drug abuse and drug trafficking because drug menace has alarmingly been increasing in the state with the smuggling of heroin power to the state through Moreh and Myanmar. In present day society “Meira Paibi” a social pressure group are working very hard for the eradication of social evils of every locality of Manipur valley and other areas of Manipur. They have taken the challenge to prevent any human rights violation perpetrated by various forces in particular and erase the existing evil social system in general.

In the political sphere, women always stood in the fore-front of every movement. The role of women in Manipur politics can be viewed from three angles - (i) political attitudes such as awareness, commitment and behaviour; (ii) participation in the political process as voters and candidates in elections; and (iii) their impact on the political process of the state.

Levels of political awareness of women vary from time to time, class and community to community, from region to region. From the very ancient times, Manipuri women always led non-violent and peaceful movements before menfolk used to take arms. They even corrected the injustice done by the King or by any officials of the state by reporting the matter to the King. They were able to postpone the schedule programme of the king if the royal programme affects the interest of the state. This was evidently proved when Majaraja Chandrakirti Singh postponed the catching of elephant or 'Samutanba' programme upto the end of harvest.

Manipur witnessed two women movements, popularly known as ‘Nupilan’ (nupi - women, lan - war) in her political history. Both these movements took place during the time of British superintendence i.e., the first
in 1904 and the second in 1939. These movements were the glaring example of such participation in politics.  

Due to the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts of Indian Constitution 33 per cent of seats are reserved for women in the Municipal and other local bodies. This has ensured by 1995 that 33% women politicians are at the Panchayats and Municipal councils. This has empowered some women that they can assess the merit of those who govern. This is a quantum leap in the political status in Manipur.  

The very fact that the state has been its first women cabinet minister only in 2002 A.D. is a sad commentary on the status of women of Manipuri in politics, while Manipuri women excelled in various fields like games and sports, won laurels in dance, drama, music at the national level, we are still in the stone age in politics, compared to our counterparts in the rest of the country. It is time for introspection why the women of Manipur are so much lagging behind in politics?  

3.2.7 Commercial Activities  
3.2.7.1 Attitude Towards Economy  

The numbers of women who are participating in all the economic activities are very big. They are not sitting idle in their homes. Women are not confined to the four walls of their houses but can stand on their own two feet and while doing so they cut off the shackles of dependency. It is an accepted fact at the society-wide level and corroborated by statistical facts that women in Manipur performed very important economic roles. But the problem lies in connection with the real appreciation and valuation of the activities.
Traditionally, women have been performing many handloom and handicraft activities besides the household chores. Now, the beauty of scene in Manipur is that women have been both producers and sellers themselves. Since women have been performing their activities subtly and efficiently in due course of time, the official acceptance of the economic importance of women declined.

The social system is closely related to the economic life of the people. A state or a community can have a sound social system only when the economic structure is good. The economic role of Manipuri women is not a new knowledge to all the persons in Manipur. Economically, women were not dependent upon the men; on the contrary, some men were dependent upon their wives.

3.2.7.2 Agriculture

It is a common sight, in rural areas to see women working in paddy fields from early morning. Rice cultivation depends heavily on women labour. Majority of the women in rural areas below sixty years of age engaged in some work or other in paddy fields. And they perform their labour mostly in teams called Khutlang. During the harvesting season, both men and women work together. Women also work as hired labour. Most of them earn money by working extra hours in paddy fields of others.

Every family in rural areas of Manipur has vegetable gardening in the surrounding campus of their house. In their leisure hours women especially elder of the family looks after the garden by preparing the soil for planting. Planting is also done usually by older women. Responsibility of younger girls is the watering of plants. Older women go to the market to sell the products of their garden in the early morning or evening. Streams of women walk about two or three miles with basket loads of vegetable to the market in order to earn
money and run their families. They buy things and vegetables from distant villages and sell it again in their locality.

3.2.7.3 Trade and Commerce

Manipuri women were very active in internal trade and commerce from the earlier times. Exchange of the production of the state is still managed by them. It is a common sight to see a small market by the roadside of the state. They maintain their families with the income coming from this small trade. Even widowed can earn money to educate her children as well as family by these means alone. Majority of the Manipuri women earned their day-today bread by selling and buying in the market. The famous 'Ima Market' in the capital city of Imphal is one of the bright example. Embroidery, weaving, rice pounding, fishing, helping in house-building, hotel keeping etc. are other economic activities of women.

3.2.7.4 Handloom and Handicrafts

Women of Manipur are very popular and famous for their colourful designs in the handloom products. They always design retaining in basic features of cultural heritage in the Phaneks, Inaphi, table clothes, bed sheets, pillow cover, mosquito net, towels, shawls and other essential items.

Manipuri women are also famous for their attractive colour and designs in handicraft products such as mat, bags, toys, doll, etc.

3.2.7.5 Potteries

In the field of pot making women of Andro, Chairen, and Nongpok Sekmai are very famous and active. They managed in making of potteries by depicting various designs of different sizes. They visited foreign countries in relation to their profession.
3.2.8 Games and Sports

The Meitei (Manipuri) women are also not behind the traditional games of Manipuri like "Thangta" (martial arts); Kang and other ancient as well as modern items. Their performances in national and international level are coming up. The sports women brought laurels to the state. In present day Manipur, many young girls are engaging themselves in the promotion of sports in different events and fields.\textsuperscript{44}

3.2.9 Educational Activities

Education of women is essential for the progress of the society. Education imparted to women in ancient Manipur was informal in character. Girls used to get training from their mothers in weaving, embroidery, and household arts. Education of women in modern style was started with the establishment of a girls' school in Manipur in 1899. American Baptist Missionaries did commendable work in spreading female education in the hill areas of Manipur. The promulgation of free and compulsory education and setting up of national committee for girls, 1959 gave tremendous impact on the progress of women's education in Manipur.\textsuperscript{45}

The educational status of women and their working role as compared with their male counterparts on different issues can be understood from the studies made by statistical Handbook of Manipur, 1992 and 2001; Directorate of Education 'S' and 'U', Department, Manipur 2001-2002; Manipur University, Annual Reports 1980-2002; Directorate of Census operation: Census of India 1991 series 15, Pp. 44-45; Provisional population totals paper 3, 2002; Directorate of Census Operation, Census of India 1971; District Census Handbook; Directorate of Census Operation: Census of India 1981; series 13 and 15, Manipur. Some of such statistical information are shown in the annexure 18-22. These tables have highlighted (i) the increasing rate of girls/ women institutions in Manipur 1950-2001, (ii) educational status of girl
students from 1950-2002. (iii) the trends of women education and employment in the higher level, (iv) district-wise distribution of total workers, main workers and marginal workers in Manipur and (v) distribution of main workers as cultivators, agricultural labour, workers in household industry, etc.

The state committee on the women's education recommended various measures. Government of Manipur implemented many recommendations. Nowadays, female education in Manipur progressed very much. However, there is a gap between the achievement of boys and girls. The percentage of literacy of male is still higher than that of female. According to 1901 census, the female literacy rate was only 6% in Manipur. In 1951, the literacy rate was 2.75%, in 1961 it was increased to 18.75%, again in 1981 the rate was 34.61% but in 1991 it was increased upto 48.65% and again in 2001 it rose upto 59.7% (Annexure-23). Thus, there is a substantial increase in number of educated women in Manipur. The contribution of education to the raise of the status of the women is significant but not to the desired extend. Nowadays, parents started taking keen interest upon their daughters' higher education. As more and more female are educated, their status in the society has improved. They are enlightened and as such they are able to take part in social activities in different capacities such as pilots, journalism, fashion models, artists, lawyers, teachers, doctors, engineers, nurses, media persons and in other field of profession.

3.3 Feminism and Empowerment of Women

Almost of all constitutions of the world talk of equality between men and women but in actual practice the latter is the sufferer and loser. Empowerment of women has become a very important issue in the 20th and 21st centuries. And this century is the era for women. All eyes are set on women and for the empowerment of women to develop our community or society where one belongs.
Woman as a sister, wife and mother has a very important role to play, she is equally responsible and has duties to perform in making her child, be it a boy or a girl, a perfect one. She is also a teacher of her child.

The ethnic situation is unique in Manipur. Therefore, when we talk about empowerment of women in Manipur, our needs differ from one community to another depending on demands. There are many cases, where the young educated women do not enjoy the right to express their ideas freely and to do according to their wishes. There are also cases of daughters not enjoyed the right to education. Basically in Manipur sons and daughters enjoy more or less equal rights to education. But if the family is not economically sound, the interest of the daughter to get education is of secondary importance. Therefore, it is still a far away thought to take up the needs and demands of women in Manipur.

3.4 Library Profession

Women's participation in the library profession is the recent development like other states of the country. It is because of the fact that there are a very few libraries in the state before 1970. There was also no education centre in the state, which could train, and educate the people for this professional course. The people were also not very aware about the profession. The idea about the library was also not very clear - it was taken before as only record-keeper. There was no status of library workers in the society; slowly the concept has been changed. After 1970, particularly, a number of libraries have been set up associated with different colleges. Meanwhile, the progress of formal education with the establishment of the University and other institutions has also been advanced. The importance of libraries in the areas of education, information and research has slowly been gained.
The value of the library profession has become clear to the women section at the time when the university opened the Library and Information Science course at Post Graduate level in 1984. Since the inception of this centre, the women section has outnumbered its male counterpart in undergoing this course. The next chapter will go into detail about this aspect.

3.5 Observation

The following observations are made from the above studies:

- There is inseparable relationship between women and society.
- Manipuri women are very industrious in the socio-economic development of the state.
- Women held a very high social status in primitive period.
- the womenfolk of Manipur from time immemorial has been sharing in preservation of cultural heritage in day-to-day life on different occasions with their male counterparts.
- Women have always been taking part in religious rites, rituals and ceremonies from early days.
- In Manipuri society, a woman cannot shirk the traditional responsibility of a housewife and mother, even if she is the sole or one of the earning members of the family.
- Women took very significant and active role in safe-guarding the social laws, customs of the society as well as in many social movements. Nobody can forget the events of Nupilal about the bravery and courage of Meitei women in the history of Manipur.
- The social pressure group “Meira Paibi” has been working very hard for the eradication of social evils.
- In the field of games and sports, politics, Manipuri women are not lagging behind. They stood in the forefront in every step.
Thus, women's attachment, involvement and commitment with various professions are very significant in Manipuri society. However, their participation and proximity into the library profession are very new because of unavailability of sufficient number of libraries in the state earlier.

References:


6. BHUBOL (S). International women's day (Do the women of Manipur enjoy their bread and roses?), Matamgi Yakairol, Imphal ; 9 March 2001.


8. WOMEN'S ROLE. Quoted from Matamgi Yakairol (editorial), Imphal, 8 March; 2001.
9. STATISTICS AND PROGRAMME Implementation (Ministry of___), Women and men in India 2000, Central Statistical Organisation, Govt. of India, New Delhi.


13. *Ibid*


34. JAMINI DEVI, The social and political status of women in Manipur during the last 50 years, *Manipur Mail*, Imphal; 17 May 2002.


47. MANIPUR HAS now 23.88 lakh population, quoted from *Matamgi Yakairol*, Imphal; 3 March 2001.


49. JAMINI DEVI (CH). The social and political status of women in Manipur during the last 50 years, *Manipur Mail*, Imphal; 16 May 2002, p.2.

