CHAPTER - III
SOCIO ECONOMIC ROLE OF WOMEN IN MANIPUR
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From the smallest responsibility of home to the biggest issues of the State, women always have to play important role in the process of development. Women have taken various responsibilities like upbringing of the children who are the assets of a nation, taking care and serve the in-laws help and service to their husbands etc. They also share the ups and downs of life with their husbands without any grudge. In most cases women extend such selfless services without asking anything in return.

The contribution of women in building up a great nation always remain as an indispensable part of the society. But in most cases her services are taken for granted. Women are still considered as insignificant in a male dominated society. After Independence, the Constitution of India has granted equal rights to both men and women in India. But it takes long time for women of India to enjoy the equal rights. The implementation of laws granting rights to women are inversely related being slow, lopsided and haphazard that socially, economically and politically women are kept far behind men.1

Social Role of Manipuri Women:

Since earlier times Manipur had a male dominated patriarchal society. The patriarchal system is clearly reflected in the law of succession,

law of inheritance, the importance given to male children etc. Inspite of having patriarchal society, Manipuri women had played active social role in the Pre-British and British period. And after the merger of Manipur in India, the Constitution has granted equal rights to both men and women in matters of inheritance, adoption of child, restriction on polygamy, equality of marital status, political rights etc. Thus several changes have taken place in the Manipuri society towards the upliftment of the status of women. However, in spite of these changes, the trend of male-domination seems to continue even today.

Women carries the burden for the maintenance of their families, and work both at home and outside. They have to look after their children, serve their husband, cook food for the family, clean the utensils, fetch water as well as make the house clean and tidy. They also go outside to work in the fields during the period of planting and harvesting, fishing, collection of firewood for their kitchen etc.

An attempt is made to study and analyse the social role of Manipuri women in the family, the locality and the society at large.

In the family: The social role of women in the family may be studied as a daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and as a mother.

As a daughter: She gives all the possible help to her mother in the household chores. She helps in sweeping, cooking, washing, cleaning

the utensils, carrying water, making the home neat and tidy. She also takes care of younger siblings thereby adding more help to her mother. Sometimes she runs as an errand either for her mother or other elder members of the family. She always remain gentle and obedient. While moulding her mentality, views of life, character formation etc., she is greatly influenced by the treatment meted out to her by the parents, particularly mother, close relatives, the atmosphere of the surroundings etc.

In a poor state like Manipur, the parents find it difficult to give proper attention in shaping the future of their daughters. Moreover, the social customs/traditional norms and cultural behaviour have denied the daughters the right of being the true property of parents. On the other hand sons are regarded to be precious to the parents. On this basis sons are always given priority by the parents in giving education.

However with modernization and spread of education a change is visible in the treatment of the daughters by the parents as well as by the society. In the beginning education for the girls was neglected. However, gradually education for girls was given proper consideration. The result is the increasing number of girls in educational institutions. In the present context, most of the families seem to believe in compulsory education for girls. Thus proper improvement can be visible in this matter. The following table shows the number of
educational institutions exclusively for females and number of female students in Manipur.

Table - I^3

Number of Educational Institutions for girls in Manipur

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>JB/UJB/Primary school</th>
<th>Middle/Jr.High/Sr. basic school</th>
<th>High/Higher Sec. school</th>
<th>Colleges for general edu.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991-92</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-02(P)^4</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table - II^5

Number of female students in different Institutions in Manipur

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>JB/UJB/Primary school</th>
<th>Middle/Jr.High/Sr. basic school</th>
<th>High/Higher Sec. school</th>
<th>Colleges for general edu.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991-92</td>
<td>96,779</td>
<td>50,241</td>
<td>78,139</td>
<td>8,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>79,865</td>
<td>50,120</td>
<td>90,332</td>
<td>18,678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>93,795</td>
<td>60,637</td>
<td>1,04,554</td>
<td>21,407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>1,01,524</td>
<td>68,674</td>
<td>1,11,121</td>
<td>9,677</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I and II shows the number of educational Institutions for females and the number of female students.

4. Provisional.
With the spread of education, the daughters are able to obtain more attention from the parents. They also started to enjoy the facilities earlier given to the sons. The girls are exposed to outside social and educational realities by mixing with friends, to express their views, opinions freely thereby paving the way for improving their personalities and build up their career.

As a Daughter in Law: The daughter-in-laws in families have to take care and serve their in-laws and other older members of the family. She serves and takes care of her in-laws by preparing food, giving hot water for bath, serving the everyday meal, washing and cleaning the utensils after the meal, washing the clothes of the in-laws, husbands etc. She is expected to live under the control of her in-laws and should not do anything which goes against the wishes of the in-laws. In return, the in-laws have to treat her as their own daughter, although there are sometimes instances of tussle between the mother-in-laws and the daughter-in-laws.

As a wife: A woman is considered half of her husband both in body and mind. She is also a friend, a guide and a well wisher to her husband. She acts as a partner and share the ups and downs of life with the husband without any complain, and even possess the ability to sacrifice her life and happiness for the sake of her husband.

Traditionally, Meitei women are spiritual and believed in physical and spiritual chastity. This belief still lingers in the mind of most women of the present day. A woman devotes her time and energy in
serving the husband, takes care of his food, clothings, rear his children and looks after almost everything in the household management as a daily routine. According to traditional Meitei belief, a good woman is the one who dines only after the husband has taken food, who keeps no secrets to her husband, faithful, who carry out the husband’s wishes as her own wish and so on.

In the present, due to modernization, most of the women have become educated. Many of them are working in both the governmental and non-governmental services thereby supporting the husbands in shouldering the financial responsibilities of the families. But such responsibility in no way reduces her activities as a wife. She still has to carry out her duties of being a wife because the number of husbands who give a helping hand in the household chores are still very few.

As a mother: The greatest contribution which a woman could give to a society or a nation is by being a mother. A mother is gifted with the power to give birth to children, to rear and protect them against any odds. Since its conception in the mother’s womb, the child becomes the indispensable part of the mother. And it is the mother who moulds the mentality, behaviour, character and other qualities of the child.

In Manipur, mothers are always placed in high esteem. Since early period of history, the meiteis worshipped Leimarel Shidabi, the mother
of Sanamahi, the most important God of the Meiteis. She was regarded as the universal mother and represented by a big earthen pot with water.⁶

This practice is still continuing among some section of the Meiteis. Mothers are always given respect in the families and her decisions are honoured in the family.

With the change of time, the activities of a mother in Manipur are not confined only in giving birth, rearing and providing food and clothing to the children etc. She needs to elaborate her views, a closer look into the needs of the present trend which will help in making a bright future for her children. Here comes the question of being a good mother. To become a good mother, first, the girls are to be given proper attention, proper diet, education and guidance to learn social, moral and spiritual values. Such girls, when grows up, and becomes a mother, could surely contribute a lot in the growth of the family as well as the society. Secondly, the husband on his part needs to be financially sound and treat his wife with respect and extend a helping hand in the upbringing of the children equally. Thirdly, a good mother do not differentiate the sons and daughters. Sons and daughters are treated equally.

Since 1980s, Manipur is undergoing armed conflict situation. The common people are in between the insurgents and the security personnel under the Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958. The undesirable

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changes and the atmosphere of the present day can hamper the healthy growth of the body and mind of young children. In the changes, various social abuses like drug addiction, loose morality and lust for evil temptations etc. also emerged strongly in the society of Manipur.

Girls are found to mix up freely with boys and some of them become drug addicts and infected with AIDS. Such girls cannot easily become good and ideal mothers. Thus special care and attention are to be given to young girls. Moreover they should be encouraged to share and express their doubts and fears to their mothers without hesitations and seek their advices.

Besides busy schedule at home, a mother has also to take extra care and attention of her children in a competitive atmosphere. From early morning in addition to household chores, she has to look after the studies of the children, prepare food, tiffin for their small children to be taken to the School, keeping school uniforms, shoes and socks, skirts, pants, shirts and ties etc. neat and tidy. After completing all these, the women both educated and un-educated are engaged in their activities outside home either in Government, semi government, non-governmental organisations or small trade and business etc. After a day's hazardous work, they are engaged again in household works, helping the children in their studies. In fact most women do not have time for themselves. Here co-operation and help of the husband becomes an utmost necessity. But majority of them are able to perform such busy routine work without complain.
In the locality: Women always take an important part in the activities of the locality to which they belong. In birth, death, marriage and other important ceremonies relating to the locality the active participation of women is clearly visible. There are no social taboos which forbid women from attending the social gathering.

The activities of women in the locality is also centred on issues arising out of disputes between the members of the families, quarrels between husband and wife, between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, moral degradation of young boys and girls, problems created by drug addicts, drunkards etc. They as a group exercise effective control over such issues. Their decisions are always respected by the locality. These women may be called peace promoters introducing changes for the healthy growth of the society. Moreover cases of atrocities on women, oppression of innocent people by security forces are also given attention by the womenfolk. This resulted in the birth of Nisha Bandh movement in the middle of 1970s and Meira Paibi movement since 1980s.

Since the early period of history Manipuri women were found to be active, energetic and never remained as silent spectators if any sort of injustice is done by the political authority. The womenfolk as a collective force always checked the political authority from exercising authoritative power.

There were women’s movements in Manipur which brought far reaching consequences in the society. The first was Women’s Movement, 1904 and the Second was Women’s Movement, 1939. The Nisha Bandh Movement
since 1975 and the Meira Paibi movement since 1980 are also significant
to take into account regarding women's force in the society.

**Women's Movement 1904**: Although women as a group always took
effective role on any issue of common interest, the first form of organized
movement emerged only in 1904. It was very much related with the
changing socio-political scenario of Manipur after the Anglo Manipuri
War of 1891, Manipur was a princely state having two political authorities,
the British Political Agent and the Maharaja. The British followed
repressive measures. The measures were exhibited in the selection of a
minor boy of hardly 5 years of age as the ruler of Manipur and the
reintroduction of the old Lallup system. The people were compelled to
pay a sum of lakhs of rupees as levy to the British Government.\(^7\)
Moreover, weapons belonging to the local people were also collected.
The new administrative system introduced by the colonial authority had
caused a widespread dissatisfaction among the people of Manipur.\(^8\) The
result was the growing discontent of the people which burst out in an
indirect way as women's movement.

On 6th of July, 1904, the Khwairamband Bazar with its 28 sheds
of 300 market women was burnt to the ground.\(^9\) In the same month

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7. Dr. Jamini Devi, "Women's Movement in Manipur- Past and Present' Government of
   Manipur, (Directorate of Information and Public Relations), Manipur Today, 26th January,
the bungalows of Assistant Political Agent Mr. Dunlop and Captain Nattal were destroyed by fire. In August, 1904, again the same incident took place for the second time. A reward of Rs. 500 was announced to be given to the person who could give clue to the cause of fire. Mr. Maxwell, the Superintendent of the State of Manipur issued an order in September, 1904. Six persons were arrested and ordered to be banished from Manipur. It was at this juncture that the women of Imphal area spontaneously started a movement against the order of the British authority.

The demonstration continued for several days. Some prominent leaders of the movement were (1) Smt. Irengbam Ongbi Sanajaobi Devi of Nagamapal, (2) Smt. Leisangthem Kwathabi Devi of Nagamapal, (3) Smt. Irungbam Ningol Leimapokpam Ongbi Dhabali Devi of Wangkhei Ningthem Pukhri Mapal and (4) Smt. Laishram Ningol Juboti Devi of Nagamapal etc.  

Finally the British authorities were forced to withdraw their order. The movement instilled a new vigour and spirit in the mind of the women of Manipur and paved the way for further active participation of women in major issues of common interest.

Nisha Bandh:

The merger of Manipur into the Indian Union had brought drastic changes in the socio-economic life of the people. The Manipuris who were labourious and hard-working by nature lost their work culture. The people began to depend entirely upon the in-flow of all sorts of goods and articles from outside which flooded the markets in Manipur. Moreover the lifting of Inner Line permit was followed by the influx of migrants. The influx of migrants had in turn affected the economy of the State. With the change a large share of trade and business remained concentrated in the hands of non-Manipuri businessmen including the labour force. The result was that the people of Manipur lost their own source of income. The menfolk particularly became lethargic, low spirited and lazy with no proper work culture and sources of income. Consequently they formed groups of worthless and lazy people who gather at different places and wasted time by gambling, drinking liquor etc. This had resulted in the moral degradation of the people. In addition, the giving of license to sell liquor freely in the market to boost the economy of the State in 1975 by the government had paved the way for the deterioration in the social atmosphere of the state.

Manipur women were deeply affected by the emerging social scenario disturbing peaceful atmosphere both at home and outside. The degree of domestic violence in the form of beating wives by the drunkard husbands etc. was increasing day by day. The anti-social habits of the
drunkards like shouting, singing, criticising others etc. also affected the peaceful social atmosphere of the locality. Women felt alarmed at the growing situation. To check and to control it, women came out of their houses and remained awake the whole night looking for the drunkards disturbing the peaceful atmosphere of the locality. These women came to be known as Nisha bandh women.

On 21st April, 1976, women held a meeting at Naoriya Pakhanglakpa Kendra to launch a drive against liquor consumption in Manipur. This was followed by the formation of “All Manipur Women Social reformation & Development Samaj”, an Association which began a vigorous drive against “Nisha”. The Association even observed a Manipur Bandh on 4th April, 1980.

In course of time, the drive against Nisha was spread far and wide in Manipur. Women remained awake at night in groups, caught the menfolk coming on the street in a drunken like manner and checked whether they consumed liquor or not. If found correct, the drunkards were fined, warned and sometimes handed over to the police. The drive was also directed against the liquor vendors. The owners of liquor vendors were warned, sometimes fined and handed over to the police. The liquor bottles were destroyed and the plastic packets containing liquor were set ablaze in the presence of the public. If the owners of the liquor vendors did not pay heed to such warnings, they were given punishment such as social boycott etc.

Emergence of Meira Paibis:

The emergence of Meira Paibis or women torch bearers can be regarded as a great landmark in the social history of Manipur. Since 1980’s the Nisha bandh women directed their attention not only to prohibition of liquor but also to the oppression of innocent people by the security forces empowered by the Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958. Along with it the problem of drug abuse and drug trafficking also emerged with strong force.

The situation prevailing in Manipur since 1980’s compelled the womenfolk of Manipur to be more vigorous in their activities. In the name of counter-insurgency operations under the Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958, the security forces carried out intolerable atrocities upon the innocent people of Manipur. Many youths of Manipur suspected to be insurgents were brutally tortured, many became crippled for the rest of their lives, some lost their lives in fake encounters and many who were abducted by the security forces are still missing. Such atrocities are always accompanied by rape and molestation of young girls as well as women by the Security forces.

The tragic incident which took place at Patsoi Langjing on 26th April, 1980 will always be remembered by the Manipuris. As an aftermath of close encounter with the insurgents, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel inflicted terrible atrocities on innocent souls. In the combing
operation after the encounter, the CRPF personnel shot dead a woman named Bino and Thokchom Laikham, a boy of only 10 years of age.¹³

Two more persons also lost their lives. Naorem Indrajit and Angou, a driver of Imphal Municipal Board were shot dead in the CRPF firing. On the next day, Maisnam Ongbi Thambalsana, a woman vendor of Khwairamband Bazar was also shot dead by the CRPF.

After such brutal killings, the women of Manipur spontaneously launched a movement against the concerned authorities. The movement led by women spread like wildfire everywhere in Manipur. Protest rallies and demonstrations were staged by the womenfolk. So in order to suppress the movement, the Government of Manipur imposed curfew in Imphal from 28th April, 1980 till 6th May, 1980 and the Khwairamband Bazar remain closed for 11 days. Such repressive measures on the part of the Government failed to subside the movement. When the Khwairamband Bazar reopened, the women specially the women vendors of the Keithel launched a fresh agitation against the excesses of the security forces.

The failure of the Government to pay any heed to the voices and grievances of women, infused new spirit to the agitators. On 28th May, 1980, Nameirakpam Ningol, Sinam Ongbi Pyari of Yumnam Khunou, died due to a fall from a vehicle when the security forces had taken the

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agitated women to Pangei, about 7 kms. from Imphal. This incident had clearly proved that the atrocities and terrorism inflicted by the security forces did not spare even women. After this incident, the Meira Paibi Movement gained momentum to an amazing degree. Thus 28th May has been observed as “Meira Paibi Day’ every year in Manipur.\textsuperscript{14} Thus the Meira Paibi Movement is an ongoing movement against the atrocities of the security forces both Central and State. In the year 2004, the women of Manipur protested against the gruesome murder of Thangjam Monorama after brutal torture and rape by the security forces. Twelve elderly Imas of Manipur made a unique protest by making themselves naked at the Western gate of the Assam Rifles, Kangla, Imphal.

The Meira Paibi Movement, on the other hand have taken up the task of checking drugs, alcohol and illicit drug trafficking. Heroin or No. 4 is easily available in Manipur as it borders Myanmar, one of the area covered by the Golden Triangle.\textsuperscript{15} So many promising youths have become its victims. Another acute problem emerging out of the drug addiction is the spread of HIV and AIDS among the youths. The main cause of AIDS in Manipur is the sharing of syringes in injecting drugs. It is then spread from infected husband to wife and then from mother to the child. Thus the number of HIV infected persons has increased at a higher degree in Manipur.

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\textsuperscript{15} Golden Triangle - The World’s largest poppy growing area covering parts of Burma, Thailand and Laos.
The number of HIV cases detected in Manipur in January 2004 is 12,300, the number of AIDS cases is 2,909 and the number of deaths is 411.\textsuperscript{16} Manipur ranks third highest as regards to the total number of HIV positive cases in India, next to Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Therefore, AIDS has emerged as a serious health menace in Manipur. Seeing the gravity of the situation the Meira Paibis try to create public awareness by organizing meetings, rallies, seminars and conferences. They even participate in the rehabilitation programmes of AIDS victims.

It is to be noted that HIV transmission is increasing at an alarming rate. At present the root cause of its spread is through sexual transmission. There are also many infected persons who for some reason or the other do not come to the Hospitals for treatment. Such persons are not recorded. If such un-official victims are included the number of infected persons would have been twice the number of officially recorded positive persons. Therefore the need of the hour is to put all the possible efforts to check the transmission through social rehabilitation programme, motivational counselling and organising awareness programmes. Here the Meira Paibees in Manipur need to extend their efforts towards this direction.

\textbf{Manipur Chanura Leishem Marup (MACHA LEIMA) :}

MACHA LEIMA is a pioneering women’s Organisation in Manipur. It was established in 1969.

MACHA LEIMA has been engaging itself in the upliftment of the status of women in Manipur through various awareness programmes. Its activities are establishment of microcredit networks, campaigns against the exploitation of women, legal awareness workshops, publication of a quarterly journal for women in Manipur etc.

MACHA LEIMA has also been organizing a series of workshop of Meira Paibi in every nook and corner of Manipur. The activity of the organisation reached outside Manipur also. For e.g. group meetings with Meira Paibis were held at Lakhipur, Binakandi and Palarbond of Cachar (Assam) on 4th August, 2003, at Jharakhul, Jharibond and Tulo of Cachar on 5th August, 2003. It is to be remembered that the Human Rights Alert (HRA) assisted the MACHA LEIMA in most of the human rights workshops.

The social role of Manipuri women in the family, locality and the state has been analysed. In the family she is a daughter, daughter-in-law, a wife and a mother. Through different roles, woman always serve and look after the need of other members of the family. The most important role is the mother’s role. With the change of time a mother needs to elaborate her views so that her children can have a bright future. Now a days, the parents have started giving importance to the education of daughters. This is a sure sign of improving the status of women.

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In the locality and important issues of the state, women always take active part. Socio religious rites related to birth, death and marriage shows active participation of women. Moreover in the important issues of the state also, women never remain spectators. The Women’s Movement of 1904, Nisha Bandh Movement and Meira Paibi Movement are proof to it. Through these activities women work to bring better changes in Manipuri society. Other women’s organisations have also contributed in making the process successful.

**Contribution of Women in Cultural Field:**

Another important aspect of Manipuri women in social life is their contribution in the field of culture. Manipur has a rich tradition of art and culture and the women form the very backbone of such rich cultural tradition. Here the contribution of women in dance, drama, music, literature etc. can be studied briefly.

The most popular Manipuri classical dance is the Ras Leela. This classical dance depicts the Leelas of Lord Krishna with the Gopis or milk maids of Brindavan. This dance form is essentially lyrical and has extremely graceful movements. There is also a form of music performed by groups of women known as Nupi Pala which means women’s team of singers. The four types of classical dance namely Maha Ras, Vasanta Ras, Kunja Ras and Gopa Ras shows the active performance of women.

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One can notice the large participation of women in different forms of music. Manipuri women also contribute greatly in Shumang Lila. Women participate not only as artists but also as directors. Many women groups also participate in the All Manipur Shumang Lila festival organised by the State Kala Akademi, Imphal every year. In the 34th All Manipur Shumang Lila Festival 2005-2006, many women’s Shumang Lila teams competed with each other. There are also many renowned women in literary field. Their writings have enriched the Manipuri literature and have won Sahitya Academy Awards. The names of noted women writers are M.K. Binodini, Khaidem Pramodini and Thoibi Devi.

With the establishment of Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy in 1954 and Manipur State Kala Academy in 1972, the race of Manipuri culture has increased greatly. There is a long list of women who won awards both in the state and national level. Some of the Academy Award Winners in Music are Smt. Thouranishabi Devi, Y. Gambhini Devi, K. Thambalmarik Devi, Nameirakpam Ongbi Ibeni Devi, Th. Khomdonbi Devi, etc. In dance among the Academy Award Winners, the names of I. Ibenmhal Devi, Smt. Rajani Maibi, Smt. Nganbi Devi, Smt. L. Shyama Devi, Smt. Tondon Devi, L. Leirentombi Devi, L. Bino Devi can be mentioned. In the National level, the Sangeet Natak Academy Award winners are Smt.

19. A Leela or play shown in the Shumang or courtyard traditionally.
Thouranisabi Devi (Dance), Smt. L. Tombi Devi (Dance), Y. Gambhini Devi (Nata), H. Sabitri Devi (Theatre), A. Nganbi Devi (Dance), L. Thambalngoubi Devi (Dance), Smt. S. Tondon Devi (Dance), Km. Ranjana Devi (Nata), Smt. Madhabi Devi (Dance), Smt. Chanu Shija (Dance) etc. In the field of literature the Sahitya Academy National Award winners are M.K. Binodini Devi, N. Sunita Devi and T. Thoibi Devi (Translation). Thus there is no doubt that its rich culture has represented Manipur in the National arena and earned world fame specially by dance and music.

**Economic Role:**

In Manipur, women are engaged in various activities both at home and outside from early morning till late in the evening. In addition to the household chores, women always supports the financial set up of their families. The Lallup system and frequent conflicts of Manipur with its neighbours enhanced the economic activity of women. After the seven years Devastation (1819 to 1826) Manipur had only 2000 inhabitants, the miserable remnants of a thriving population of at least 400,000 possibly 6000,000 that existed before the invasion by the Burmese. Due to the prevailing conditions, women had to shoulder the responsibilities of the family. In order to support their families women went for fishing, sold the vegetables from their kitchen gardens, weave clothes to be sold in the markets and then involved themselves in different trades. James Johnston in his book ‘Manipur and Naga Hills’ praised the

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women as famous weavers. It will not be wrong to say that women provided all sorts of clothings in Manipur.

One can find women vendors dealing in various trade items in Khwairamband market. Women in large number from different directions of Manipur come to sell their wares in this market. Women are the great traders walking miles in the morning and buy things in the more distant bazars to sell again in the capital in the evening.24 Many outsiders have praised the Manipuri women as hardworking and industrious. The commodities sold by women included rice, vegetables, fish, fruits, betel nut and leaves, pots, sweets made of puffed rice mixed with sugarcane called kabok, clothes and so on. The market keeps open all day, however is very busy specially in the evening. In the evening women carry baskets of goods to sell in the great bazar “Sana Keithel” i.e. Golden Bazar.25

It was a pretty sight in the evenings to see all the women hurrying along with their wares on their heads, and their little babies slung on their backs.26 Thus the life cycle of almost every home in Manipur depended on the Keithel run by womenfolk only.

Besides being a nerve centre of economic activities, the market also became a place for the interaction of women, thereby making the womenfolk fully aware of the changing trends and issues in Manipur.

Women always participated in the movements fighting against any injustice committed by the rulers.

An important event was the outbreak of women in December, 1939 known as the Second Nupi Lan. There had previously been a similar outbreak in 1904 when the Political Agent issued order for the rebuilding by forced labour of the Asstt. Political Agent's bungalow which had been burnt down by inhabitants of Imphal. The Second Nupi Lan took place as a result of economic hardship. It was carried on by the market women who had the high degree of consciousness about the economic hardship from the hands of feudal and colonial authority.²⁷

The outbreak had its immediate cause in a rise in the price of rice. Marchants from outside Manipur had set up mills after buying all the paddy they could get, and exported it. This practice was followed after a poor harvest. The poor people were affected seriously by the export of rice. Demonstrations were held and the women demanded the cessation of rice exports and the closing of all rice mills.²⁸

The market women who were conscious of the situation gathered around the Darbar Office on 12th December, 1939 demanding the immediate stoppage of the export of rice. The Darbar President T.A. Sharpe told the women that the order for ban could not be issued without the approval of the Maharaja, who was away at Navadeep on pilgrimage. The women forced Mr. Sharpe to get the sanction of the Maharaja by

sending a telegram. The delaying attitude of Sharpe made the women more aggressive and they started throwing stones. Then the Sepoys pushed back the women with their rifles. Many women were wounded and were left unattended. Women leaders were sent to jail. On the next day, a telegram came from the Maharaja sanctioning the ban on rice export. Thus the women came out successful in their fight against the economic exploitation by the British rule.

The Khwairamband Market still continues to be a centre of economic activities of women. The number of women vendors keep on increasing. We can see women vendors dealing with rice, vegetables, dry fish, fresh fishes, fruits, banana leaf, mats, betel leaf and nuts, pots, agrabati, clothes for ritual and casual wear, jewellery, mosquito nets, readymade garments etc. Even many young widows whose husbands died due to HIV or AIDS and other intoxicants come out of their homes and became vendors in the Khwairamband Market, Imphal. Some of these women also indulged in selling cinema tickets in black, and other various immoral activities. We also can see a number of women working in the quarries for little income. Most of the women cannot give proper attention to morality and education for their children as they live from hand to mouth and are outside their homes most of the day. All these shows that inspite of the great involvement in the economic activities, the economic condition of majority of the women is still far from satisfactory.

Phanek Mapan Naiba Vendor, Khwairamband Market, Imphal, Manipur

Vegetable Vendor, Khwairamband Market, Imphal, Manipur
On the other hand women of Manipur have also felt the impact of modernisation. The literacy rate of women keeps on increasing. According to the census 2001, the literacy rate for females in Manipur is about 60 percent. Consequently a large number of women are found to be employed in Governmental, semi-governmental, autonomous establishments. They financially support their families and contribute in the economic maintenance of the families and the state at large.

**Women in Handloom and handicraft industries:**

There is a saying that every women in Manipur is a born weaver. It is said that Goddess Panthoibi drew her inspiration for weaving from a spider making cobwebs. Weaving began as a house-hold craft to provide the requirements of the family and almost every house-hold owned a loom. But now this craft is able to create a unique place of its own in the markets both in the state and outside. Thus in the Indian catalogue of Handloom, Manipur stands out both for beauty and utility.\(^{30}\)

Handloom sector provides the maximum number of employment after agriculture and remains an important source of income specially for the women of the state. Handloom production includes clothes made of silk, cotton, woolen etc. and Silk products of Manipur are famous for its brightness and softness. The women are also skilled in embroidery and needlework. There is growing demand for the main handloom products

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such as bed sheets, pillow covers, cushion covers, towels, curtains, fine chaddars with intricate designs, woolen shawls and lungies etc. Recently there is a trend for the production of fashion garments with intricate designs. In the Khwairamband Market, Imphal, exquisite handloom products are displayed for sale by women. Thus the handloom industry is the largest cottage industry in Manipur with the finished items often being exported.  

Among the varieties of handloom products, Wangkhei Phee, Rani phee have earned fame as a unique product for its fine texture, impressive colours, intricate designs with beautiful patterns of flowers, fruit, birds like swan etc. Rani phee is a fine, silken thin cloth with intricate designs produced in the loom. This fine textile product had been called so after the name of Smt. Chungkham Rani Devi of Wangkhei Lourembam Leikai, Imphal. It is said that she was the first to boil the silken thread so that the colour should not go and then weave such type of phee with different patterns, colours and designs. She was the first to weave such type of phee, it generally came to be known as Rani phee. Her products are highly demanded in the markets both inside and outside Manipur. She participated in the Textile Melas held in Manipur and outside and

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31. Government of Manipur, (Directorate of Tourism), Imphal, Manipur, Dance, Landscapes, Polo, P.3
32. Wangkhei phee is a garment of fine texture popularly made at Wangkhei in Imphal.
33. Phee or garment of fine texture named after Ch. Rani Devi.
have been conferred awards in recognition of her excellence in handloom products. She was conferred State Award for Artistic Textile in the year 1979-80. She also provided employment to female weavers by engaging a large number of them with looms. Thus employment facilities had been provided to weavers, workers engaged in washing of cloths, ironing etc. Handloom products include sarees, chuni, salwar kameez, silk pheijom (dhoti) and even kurta paijma etc. As majority of women in Manipur are engaged in weaving, the rate of raw material consumption and production goes higher. As per the provisional report of the National Handloom census, 1995-96, Manipur has 3.40 lakh weavers and 2.77 lakh looms producing 86.41 lakh meters of handloom fabrics and consuming 10.06 lakh kg. of yearn per month.

According to detail statement of production as per National and Power looms census 1996-97 the total number of weavers in Manipur has been recorded as 3,39,632 and the number of looms as 2,76,755. Further, it has been recorded that production per weaver (sq.mtr.) is 6,58,76,206 and production per loom (sq.mtr.) is 2,46,251.35 Again on the basis of census report on Handloom, 1996-97, the total number of weavers in the state is 3,39,632, number of looms is 2,76,755 and production in meter amounted to 8640813.36

Women in Handicraft Industries:

Handicraft industry in Manipur started originally as a traditional part time activity in the rural areas with no proper demand. However in the recent years, this industry has flourished and the market demand for its products has grown significantly. Many people in the valley and the hills practiced kauna (water reed) weaving craft. The major Kauna production centres in Manipur are Konjeng Leikai, Mayang Imphal Bengun in Imphal West District, Kongba Nandeibam Leikai and Khongman in Imphal East District, Moirang and Keinou in Bishnupur District, Khangabok, Shikhong, Chairen (East) and Phubala in Thoubal District.  

It must be noted that majority of the artisans engaged in the productions of Kauna items are women of the state. As women in Manipur are born weavers, they seem to be delighted and face no difficulty in weaving Kauna to make various items of everyday use and fashionable use. With little training or learning from the elders who are already engaged in this craft, every women in Manipur can successfully produce various items thereby contributing in the economy of the family and the state.

Some NGOs and societies have taken the initiative to improve this craft and the artisans in Manipur. Here the activities of the Crafts and

Kauna Products at Akhom Handicrafts, Kongba Nandeibam Leikai, Imphal, Manipur

A Woman artisan making Kauna Basket at Akhom Handicrafts, Kongba Nandeibam Leikai, Imphal, Manipur
Social Development Organisation CSDO, Kongba Bazar, may be referred. It is a non-governmental organisation established in the year 1992.

The CSDO has functioned effectively and engaged a large number of women artisans of various crafts such as Kauna craft, hand embroidery, Cane and bamboo, Jewellery, Woollen shoe, dolls and toys, artistic textiles, dance and costume etc. In Kauna craft alone a large number of women artisans have been engaged, thereby providing means of employment to them. The “Integrated Design and Technology upgradation workshop of Kauna crafts” was conducted under the supervision of Designer Anushree Arora by the Organisation and developed various prototypes, marketable products by the Craftsperson during the workshop which also benefited 50 women artisans.³⁸

According to the latest record, the CSDO has benefited more than 2500 women artisans in different heads like raw material assistance, training, marketing assistance etc.³⁹

Women artisans of Kauna crafts has obtained recognition and were conferred merit awards both in the state and National level. Smt. K.(o) Gambhini Devi of Kongba Nandeibam Leikai was conferred National

Award in Kauna mat in the year 1983. The state Awardees were Smt. Yumnam Ongbi Ibetombi Devi, Kongba Nandeibam Leikai, Phurailatpam Sanahanbi Devi of Nepra Menjor Pukhri Mapal etc. 40

Pottery

Another traditional craft of Manipur is Pottery. It occupies a unique place among the various crafts due to its artistic value. In some villages of Manipur, pottery making forms one of the important occupation and many artisans are still engaged in this craft. One can easily find potteries of various shapes and sizes for various purposes in the markets of Manipur. Most of these potteries are the product of artisans in the villages. Among the villages of Manipur Thongjao Village may be mentioned. This Village is about 58 Km. from Imphal and is well known for the art of pottery making.

In Thongjao a large number of women are engaged in pottery-making throughout the year. They are fairly skilled in hand made pottery, coiled-pottery. The potteries made by women folk of Thongjao have earned recognition not only in Manipur but also outside. One noted woman in pottery making is Smt. Naorem Ongbi Nilamani Devi of Thongjao.

In the year 1982, she got a chance of demonstrating coiled pottery

at Pragati Maidan, Craft Museum, New Delhi. Then she became a figure in this particular craft and well known in different parts of India like Guwahati, Bhopal, Mumbai, Madras, Bangalore, Kerala etc. She also participated in the Surajkund Mela in Haryana.\(^{41}\)

Nilamani Devi earned recognition in coiled pottery even in the foreign countries. She participated in the Mela “Forms of Mother Earth” held at California USA, from 2nd March to 15th April, 1986 and obtained “Certificate of Appreciation”. In the next year, 1987 she participated in the Ethnographical Museum, Sweden”, a craft Exhibition and Demonstration in Sweden” from 30th September to 26th October. She also visited Japan twice in 1988 and 1999 where she gave training to the Japanese the art of coiled pottery. Thus she represented Manipur not only in India but also in the foreign countries through her craft.

Nilamani Devi got the prestigious “National Award for Master Craftsperson” given by the Ministry of Textile, Department of Handicrafts, Government of India in recognition of her achievement in the art of pottery making. With an intention to teach her craft to others, she organized training cum production programmes with the financial aid of the Government of Manipur. Such programmes trained the youths including men and women thereby helping them in finding source of income.

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This chapter presented the socio-economic role of women in Manipur since the British rule till the present day. Socially her role in the family, locality and the state has been analysed. In the family she is a daughter, a wife and a mother. In the locality also she co-ordinates in all the activities. Then the contribution of women in bringing changes for the betterment of Manipur is displayed through the Nupi Lan of 1904 and 1939. Further, the Nisha Bandh and Meira Paibi Movement contribute a great share.

Economically also, the activities of women is proved by the Khwairamband market. Economic responsibility of women is extended in the family as well as in the state. Besides the women government employees, a large number of women are engaged in handloom and handicraft production. Thus the socio economic role of women in Manipur is worth to study.