Chapter –1

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Manipur, once an independent Asiatic state, now one of the unit states of the Indian Republic nestle in the north easternmost part of the country, has a long international boundary of about 352 kms. with Myanmar to the East and South east. The state bounded by the Indian states of Nagaland in the North, Mizoram in the south and Assam in the west. Its territory extends from latitudes 23.80°N to 25.68°N and longitude’s 93.03°E to 94.78°E. Manipur occupies a position of strategic importance linking as it does South Asia with South East Asia. The border is quite porous and because of trade agreements signed between the Government of India and that of Myanmar, there is constant movement of people and goods across the border. In the 15th century, the conquest of Kabaw valley resulted in regular contact with the Burmese. Even in the earlier times, when there was no specific boundary between Manipur and Burma, people move freely between these boundaries as there was no obstacle to travel in their pursuit of trade and commercial activities. In the fourth century A.D.

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during the regime of Khui Ningomba, Pengsiba and Naokhamba, Manipuri traders travelled on horseback to upper Burma and China.²

The Manipur valley was a cradle of human civilization and Alfred Lyall rightly describes it as an Oasis of comparative civilization amidst the barbarians. The valley is oval shaped, 790 metres above sea level and surrounded by hills on all sides. The Mountains are divided into western hills comprising the Koubru, Laimaton, Makui Longdi, Kala Naga and Vangai ranges which are southern branches of the great Barail.

While the eastern hills comprising the Sirohi, Mapithel and Yamodo ung ranges are the branches of the Patkai Mountain on the Indo-Burma border. The important mountain peaks are Mount Essau or Tenipu, the Sirohi peak in the east and Koubru peak in the west.

Manipur is also endowed with a large number of rivers and streams, which traverse her mountains and valley. The Loktak Lake is the biggest fresh water lake in Manipur and is now a tourist spot. Even in the hills, on the west bank of the Barak the falls are formed by a group of lakes known

as Zeilad. These lakes, rivers, streams and mountain peaks are interwoven in the life, culture and traditions of the people. The Barak, the longest and largest river, starting from a point of the northern hills flows into the western and southern hills, then to Cachar and the Surma Valley of Bangladesh. The Irang and the Makru of the Tamenglong area flow into the great Barak. The Imphal or Manipur River (Minno of Ptolemy) traverses the valley of Manipur, starting from the hills of the north valley flows into the Chin Hills and on the Chindwin in Burma. The Imphal, the Iril, the Thoubal, the Nambul Rivers which run across the valley provide the ecological environment for the Meitei civilization. These rivers and the fertile banks provide livelihood to the people who live in their watershed area.

The climate of Manipur is most enjoyable throughout the year. There are two seasons separated by two short transitions. From November to February is the period of winter season. The summer season commences in April and ends in September. The summer season is also the period of rains.

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The month of October is the period of transition between summer and winter, so also is the month of March, between winter and summer. The temperature in the central plain seldom touches freezing point, nor at any time of the year is extremely hot. In hill areas, it is much cooler due to the effect of altitude. The rain commences in April and continues up to September. The period from June to September accounts for a little over half of the annual rainfall. There is little rain in December and January. The rainfall in the state is high in quantity and is well distributed over both time and space.4

Manipur is also rich in her natural vegetation. Topography, climate and soils of Manipur have provided favourable ecological conditions for luxuriant growth of plant communities. But the forests of Manipur are mostly of mixed type and so timber value is comparatively low. The forest areas of Manipur are confined mainly to its hill areas. The major parts of the central basin are used for human settlement and agriculture. The total area covered by forest is 17,418 sq. km., which is 78.01% of the total geographical area of Manipur. The important areas under forests are the north eastern and south eastern corners along the Manipur-Myanmar border, Barak basin etc. The northern and southern hills are very important

for firewood species. The Oak tree is the only tree, which has commercial value, is grown on the hills overlooking the plains. Muli bamboo, timber trees, agar, canes and chalmoogra grow in the western forest and the forest of Myanmar border yield teak. (Tectona grandis) Teak is calcicole, Toona, Khasi pine and Oaks are grown in the forest of Ukhrul.

Manipur was a sovereign country until she was subdued under the political hegemony of the British from April, 1891. Manipur was merged in the Indian Union in October 1949. With her merger in the Indian Union Manipur became a part “C” state, then an Union Territory and since January 1972, a full-fledged state with a Legislative Assembly of 60 members. At present, the state of Manipur has nine districts, four in the valley i.e. Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur districts and five in the hills, i.e. Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur and Chandel districts.

Regarding the tribals in Manipur, it is not clear how the name ‘Naga’ originated. But the Naga legends, tell of their migration and settlement in Manipur. It is reliably believed that these tribes were in

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5 N.N. Bhattacharyya, Manipur, Land, People and Economy, Rajesh Publication, New Delhi, 2006, p. 25.
occupation of the present habitat in the early centuries of the Christian era, or even before that, Naga tribes of Manipur are Tangkhul, Zemi, Liangmei, Rongmei (Zeliangrong) including Puimei, Mao, Maram, Maring, Anal, Moyon, Monsang, Lamgang, Chothe, Thangal, Koireng, Chiru, who are all Tibeto-burman speakers.

Some Kuki tribes migrated to the Manipuri hills in pre-historic times but greater migration occurred in the eighteenth century. The Kuki-chin tribes are Thadou, Paite, Hmar, Vaiphai, Gangte, Simte, Zou, Baite, Mizo.

The Manipuri language or "Meiteilol" is the official language of the state. Manipur has its own script called Meitei Mayek, which is included in the 8th schedule of the constitution of India.

The Manipuri Muslims profess Islam as their only religion and are all Sunni Mussalmans. They constitute the second largest religious community in the Manipur Valley and third in the state as a whole. The Manipuri Muslims are the most backward section of the state population.

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Being termed as Meitei “Pangal” the Manipuri Muslims (pangals) are included in the list of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) under the Mandal Commission at par with the Meiteis.\(^8\)

According to the 2001 census, the total population of Manipur is 25,69,000 and density of population is 107 per square kilometre. Sex ratio is 978 females per thousand males. There are people of diverse ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious groups. This diversity is very striking in such an isolated state. The people of the state speak Kuki-Chin and Tibeto-Burman group of languages. The population consists predominantly of two groups, namely those living in the central plain and those in the hills. The striking features in the distribution of population are; the Meitei are the most dominant single group, constituting about two-third of the population of the state; they are concentrated in the central plain; in the hill they are conspicuous by their absence; the hill men are mostly scattered in the hills but they are not absent from the central plain. The Muslims inhabit the central plain as well as the plain portion of Jiribam together with the Meiteis; and the urban centre of Imphal has a small proportion of outsiders namely, Punjabis, Marwari, Bengalis, Nepalis etc.\(^9\)

Problems and Importance of the study

1.1 Conceptual and Theoretical Background

Historical study of women of a particular community or a society has a long tradition. To delineate the conceptual and theoretical background of the historical study of Muslim women in Manipur, it becomes necessary to study the status of women within a changing social structure. There are also certain factors that are responsible for changes in social values, ethos, belief, practices etc. Many Muslim scholars, theologians, mystics etc. emphasised the need for a new ijtihad, to meet the changing space in time conditions. They also emphasised that the exegesis of the Quran must be suited to those people for whom it is meant (e.g. Shah Waliullah’s exegesis). This study attempts to analyse the role and status of Muslim women in Manipur with special emphasis on the important role played by women in the economy and how religion occupies an important place in everyday life.

The patriarchal structure of Muslim society in Manipur was more or less modelled on that of the Meitei community. But despite the father / husband being the head of the household, Muslim women were compelled out of necessity to move out of the domestic domain to earn a living. This in turn resulted in close interaction with other communities in the state.
especially the Meitei. Moreover, the first Muslim wives in Manipur in the early years of the Muslim advent were Meiteis and they naturally brought with them Meitei practices, traditions, beliefs and way of life. This became amalgamated in a harmonious manner with Muslim beliefs, traditions and practices.
1.2 Need for the study

One of the major concerns of the researcher is to examine the Muslim social system within dynamic of the structure of society. Though, the Muslims had settled in Manipur since the time of king Khagemba, up to date hardly any work on the community, on application of Islamic law and the economic role of the Muslim women in Manipur has been undertaken. Even the available literature is virtually disjointed and focuses mainly on the education. This research work endeavours to fill in the lacunae especially as gender studies has grown in historical importance in the recent times.
1.3 **Objective of the Study**

The broad objectives of the present study are:

a). To trace the historical migration of the Muslims to Manipur.

b). To study and analyse the role and status of women in the dynamic social structure of the Muslim community in Manipur.

c). To examine the status of Muslim women of Manipur with regard to the application of Islamic law.

d). To assess women’s contribution to the economy.
1.4 Research Methodology

In the present historical study of Muslim women in Manipur, only 6(six) districts out of the Nine (9) districts of Manipur will be taken up for the research work. These six (6) districts are the places where the Muslims reside including two hill districts viz. Chandel and Churachandpur and the four valley districts are Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur. Among the Muslim community in Manipur, research will focus only on the womenfolk.

It is hypothesized that the Muslims who settled in Manipur, although they profess Islam are not as orthodox as their co-religionists in other parts of India as well as the world. In the course of research, the present study has made use of oral sources: focus group discussion, personal interviews, collection of statistical data, use of literary sources which yield a lot of relevant information not found in political histories besides an extensive field survey in the four valley districts of Manipur was carried out.
1.5 Outline of the Research Study

All the information collected has been carefully selected, analysed and presented in 6 chapters. The first part gives an introduction to the study. It deals with a brief account of the geographical location of Manipur, the conceptual and theoretical background of the study, need for the study, objectives of the study research design. The second chapter deals with the advent of Muslims in Manipur.

The third chapter discusses the structure of the Muslim society in Manipur. It examines the status of Muslim women in Manipur all through their lives with a special focus on marriage, education, Mehr, divorce, polygamy, death, and demography. The fourth chapter deals with the application of Islamic Law to Muslim women in Manipur, the extent of their knowledge with reference to the provisions of the Shariat and their knowledge of the Quran. It also analyses their public participation in times of crisis as for example with reference to the Nupi Lal, (Women’s War in Manipur) Human rights violations, threat to the state’s integrity etc. The fifth chapter emphasises important contribution of the women to the economy of the state and impact of this contribution. The long hours of work and condition of work adversely impact the majority health of the
women who tend to neglect their health because of lack of time, money, inaccessibility or near absence of health facilities. The Sixth chapter is a summary of the research work undertaken.


1.6 Review of Literature

History of Manipur, volume one pre-colonial period was published by National Publishing House written by Gangmumei Kabui is a celebrated account of the people of Manipur. In this book, a chapter is written on the expansion of the kingdom of Manipur in which only a few pages refer to the Muslims in Manipur. The author deals with the advent of the Muslims in Manipur, the war with the then king Khagemba, (1597-1652 A.D.) the Muslims migrants who came as war prisoners, their settlements and their contributions in agriculture. But not a line is written on the women of the community and its contribution to the society.

‘Women in Indian Society’ written by Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar published by National Book Trust, India depicts the study of women in India regardless of caste, colour or creed, despite the difficulty in tying all these different threads together and weave them into a pattern. It is an attempt to present an account of Indian Women’s journey toward gender equality.

The book thus reflects in a variety of social and economic perspectives of women in India. It examines the position of women in regard to family, education, work-participation, political participation, law
etc. It tries to paint a picture of the changing perceptions of the status and role of women at the threshold of the new millennium. The book further examines into the course of action for change and the emerging concerns for the women community in India.

The planning commission of India defined three major areas in which special attention was paid to women's development, education, social welfare and health. One of the major gender issues taken up by women's groups is women's health. However, the seriousness of health issues was first articulated when the finding of the committee on status of women in India (1974) revealed the declining sex ratio. It also expresses apprehension at the recorded data pertaining to crimes against women indicatives of the growing rate of violence. The attitude and psyche of women succumbing to acts of violence has proved to be one of the baffling issues confronting researchers, scholars, activists and others in their ongoing search for a solution to gender violence.

"Islam women and gender justice" by Asghar Ali Engineer, published by Gyan Publishing House provides a more comprehensive view of the social and religious practices of the Muslim community in India.
This book deals with the several stereotypes about Islam, which have got wide currency.

Broadly, this book discusses the multiple problems faced by the Muslim women apart from legal ones. It further examines the economic, educational, communal problems as well as health problems. An in-depth study of the book reveals that women are not organised in such a manner as to facilitate greater economic participation as also higher remuneration. There is scare mention of any government’s or NGO’s working for the upliftment of women.

It further explores the dichotomty that exists in the thinking of orthodox and liberal Muslims. The former are rigid believers in theology that was penned by the Ulema of the early period of Islamic history and which has little bearing on the life and conditions of Muslim women in India.

"The Muslims of Manipur" by Salam Irene, published by Kalpaz Publications is a historical study of the Manipuri Muslims with special emphasis on gender. The book is dissected into five parts, which gives
detailed information on the Muslim women of Manipur. The book provides an overview of the interfaith approach of Islam today, moral values and ethics, prayer and teachings of Islam, Jihads as also genders justice.

Further, the book provides an overview of the social life, economic role, culture, religion, law, political participation of Muslim women in Manipur. It depicts the plight of the Muslim women with regard to social status, which is relatively low in the society, and the economic contribution which still fails to provide sustainable livelihood. They are religious by nature but not as orthodox as their counterparts in the Indian mainland perhaps because of their Meitei genealogy. They also register low political participation despite taking active part in women's agitations against attempts to violate the state's territorial integrity, human rights violations etc.

The Book also focuses on the major role of women in the family and society. It emphasises the contribution and hard work of women especially farm labour crucial to the agrarian economy and the role of the Muslim mother in teaching Islamic etiquette, prayers and ways of life.
“What everyone should know about Islam and Muslims” written by Suzanne Haneef, published by S. Sajid Ali for Adam publishers and distributors is a book that defines the beliefs and acts of worship, it stresses on the moral values and the Islamic ways of life, as in observances of festivals and social etiquettes such as family relation and the human relation according to Islam.

The book emphasises on the role of the true Muslim, man and woman alike, anything impure or degrading is abhorrent and to be avoided at all costs, Sexual Purity thus begins in the mind of the believer. With the fear of Allah and the desire to maintain a state of inner balance and cleanliness which is essential to integrity and well-being. Strict modesty of dress, manner and behaviour, and absolute chastity both before and after marriage are advocated.

The book emphasises that all human beings are equal in the sight of Allah, brother to every Muslim. The Muslims are obliged to practice cooperation, not to indulge in competition but to cultivate that traits of helpfulness, kindness, justice and compassion and not to make distinction between people of other faiths. Kindness to animals as well as to human beings is to be cultivated, for abuse or cruelty of any of Allah’s creatures is
abhorrent to the creator. Such virtues are stressed again and again in the Quran and in the Prophet’s Hadiths.

‘The Manipuri Muslim (Pangal) Family and the problems’ written by Md. Riyaz Ahmed Shah was published by Riyaz publications, 2009. The book depicts the socio-cultural life of the Muslims in Manipur. It also deals with the viscous circle of backwardness among them. A section of the book gives suggestions to problems related with family and children and also deals with the role of the Muslim women in Manipur. It concludes with the hazards relating to smoking current among Meitei Pangals.

The book ascribes the social-backwardness of the Manipur Muslims, to their lack of education and political participation. The Muslim parents neglect the western education in favour of religious education which resulted in a low level of literacy in comparison to other communities in the state like the Meiteis and tribals.

The book concludes by stating that the social backwardness of the community is generally characterized by problems like poverty, low-living standard with congestion of population in limited spaces and a behavioural
problem. Poor quality of life is also attributed to mal-nourishment, lack of health care, increase number of manual labourers who are left with little time for spiritual reflection.

The mass migration of Muslims into Manipur from other parts of India began during the reign of king Khagemba. They were locally known as Pangan, derived from Bengal (Bangan-Pangan) as they came from East Bengal. However, some Muslims had already settled in Manipur prior to the enthronement of King Khagemba. This old Muslim settlers in Manipur were known by the name ‘Aribam’ since they were the first and foremost among the Muslim community to settle down in Manipur. The royal chronicle (Cheitharol Kumbaba) and a text known as Nongsamei Puya refer to the invasion of Manipur by a combined force of the Kachari and Muslim mercenaries. The invasion was an outcome of an unhappy trifle incident at the royal palace of Manipur. Khagemba had two brothers Chingsomba and Sanongba. There was a boat race in which his brother Chingsomba borrowed the boat of Sanongba, which was broken due to collision during the boat race. Sanongba on the other hand wanted the original boat, in the same pristine condition in which it was borrowed. As a result Sanongba along with his mother fled to Cachar and approached the Cachari king to invade Manipur. The Cachari king along with his
contingents invaded Manipur but was defeated chiefly due to the diplomatic manoeuvres employed by the Manipuris.

After the battle of 1606, king Khagemba allowed the Muslims to settle in and around the valley of Manipur. Since, they came here without wives they were permitted to marry the local women. From, there onwards they became the permanent settlers of Manipur assimilating and amalgamating with the local population.

In the context of the Muslim women in Manipur they are by and large illiterate and confined to domestic chores. However, unlike their counterparts in different parts of the Indian sub-continent, Muslim women here are extremely mobile, especially women coming from the lower economic strata of society. These women work at a sustainable livelihood mainly as unlicensed markets vendors in the informal sector. Hence, they are deprived of health benefits, pension and retirement options. Since, the original Muslim migrants married into the local Meitei community, many of their customary practices and rituals reveal the impact of Meitei culture and vaishnavite influence. The Meitei converted to Vaishnavism in the 17th century during the reign of King Garib Niwaz. Their dress is also almost a facsimile of the Meitei women's dress, comprising as it does of a
phanek (sharong) and innaphi (Shawl), the only difference is a short kurta being worn over the phanek in place of a shorter blouse and the absence of the chandon mark on the forehead. Food habits are also very similar and the lives of ordinary women though resembling that of the other women resident in the state is more geared towards subsistence than an enhanced quality of life.

Most Muslim women work as market vendors, carrying and selling baskets of vegetables, textiles, eggs etc. from one locality to another. This kind of work earns them only a pittance but is arduous and tedious. Many women are unable to invest in purchasing edible or other items for sale, hire themselves out as maids in homes or as labourers in the construction industry. In the village, they take part in farming and cultivation works. Weaving is also a daily chore but, they earn little by marketing their products as they are not in consonance with the change in dress in today's world and make little use of new technology and raw materials (e.g. new dyes). Within the Imphal city, some women work in small hotels, bakeries and small scale industries as unskilled labour. Due to the lack of entrepreneurial skill and training they received minimum wages. Today, a small section of women have benefitted from formal education and found employment in salaried jobs, but the number remains miniscule.