Chapter-VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This Chapter contains a summary of the research, and the most important findings. The thesis is divided into 6 chapters the first of which is the Introduction. The introduction commences with a brief description of the research being undertaken, and is followed by the Hypothesis, the Methodology, the Problem and scope of the work, the Objectives of research and a comprehensive review of available literature.

Manipur, an ancient kingdom with a recorded history commencing from 33 A.D. accorded a different superior kind of status to Women. It is even believed that in the early historical period a matrilineal system existed and the probability is strengthened by the status granted to ‘Maibis’ or priestesses in Manipur’s society British ethnographers have praised the Manipur women and described them as the most industrious in India. Meitei women have throughout history been major economic contributors managing all the trade and exchange of produce in the kingdom.

The Muslim who came to Manipur in 1606 A.D., one thousand in number, came as prisoners of war, captives of the Manipur King Khagemba. They were asked to surrender and they did so. In a reciprocal action King Khagemba adopted a liberal, benign attitude towards the Muslim prisoners, he gave them land both for settlement and cultivation, and Meitei women to marry
as the prisoners were all male soldiers, who were unaccompanied by any family members.

Most of the Meitei women who entered into marriage with the Muslims were ‘Nai’ or women who were in the service of the Queen and resided in the Royal Palace. They were respectable women, who like all Meitei women enjoyed a high status and formed the nucleus of a stable Muslim society who rendered help to the King whenever necessary. Except for their profession of Islam, there was not much else to distinguish them from Meitei women who followed their primeval religion- Sanamahism. The Muslims were given the nomenclature of Meitei Pangal as the 1000 Muslim men married Meitei women, and because they originally hailed from ‘Bengal’ which in Manipur was corrupted into ‘Pangal’.

Their proficiency in Meiteilon, imparted to them by their wives, enabled them to teach Islamic tenets to their family members in the native tongue. Having transformed their men folk from foreigners to natives in Manipur the Meitei Pangal women never antagonized their husbands and voluntarily abided by the laws of Islam, which was not difficult as in the 17th and 18th centuries the Meitei Pangal men were not very rigid in the observance of religious rituals.

Because of their small number polygamy was permitted among Meitei Pangals. But even Meitei Pangal women were allowed to remarry after divorce and several women did so. Meitei women showed no reluctance to enter into wedlock with Muslim men, as this did not adversely impact their status. The Muslim men were happy to have a Dual Identity- Meitei Pangal- especially as
their Meitei wives were diligent and hard working. The men did not make any attempt to force their wives to adopt Muslim dress viz. the burkha and veil, as this would have severely impacted their mobility and economic contribution. Instead the men adopted the Meitei traditional attire of dhoti and vest as also the Meitei wedding dress for both the groom and bride. The Meitei Pangal male offered lallup (feudal service) to the king as did the Meiteis, this made the economic contribution of women important and necessary for sustainable livelihood. The Meitei Pangal women also had the right of residence in their natal home-unmarried sisters, divorcees, widows- a remarkable feature in a patrilineal set up.

The Meitei Pangal women made the Pangal society a kinship society as was Meitei society and also influenced their men folk to adopt the traditional Yumnaks (surname) and sageis (clans) allotted on the basis of occupation. The men also adopted Meitei cuisine as most of the rituals associated with the Passage of Rites for e.g. the marriage nikah was preded by the Manipuri Heijingpot ceremony and the wedding ceremony was followed by a wedding feast resembling the Meitei Chakouba.

The third chapter explains the link between Muslim women’s essential economic contribution and their status. Like all women in Manipur, Muslim women were diligent and hardworking, and their monetary contribution to the family kitty was both welcome and appreciated by their husbands and other male family members. At the end of the 19th century, the entire Muslim population consisted of only 4500 individuals, but by 1961 the growth rate was higher than
the national average and by the end of the 20th century they numbered 1,90,939 constituting 8.32% of the total population. Of the historical experience that set apart the Manipur Muslim was the common bond and genealogy that they shared with their Meitei sisters. Besides all women being diligent, historical factors like the *Lallup* or compulsory feudal service by all able bodied men to the state, 10 days out of every 40 days, the Seven Years Devastation (1819-1827) when the Burmese reduced the population of Imphal to a bare minimum of 10,000 souls, the constant warfare with Burma and other neighboring kingdoms, meant that women had to be multi-tasking, managing their home, the kingdom’s economy and also keep the kitchen hearth burning by earning of sustainable livelihood. All women were required to be mobile and economically productive, working both in the paddy field and also marketing the product of their kitchen gardens, and the handicrafts they made at home. As the Muslims are credited with introducing wet rice cultivation in Manipur. Meitei Pangal women were closely associated with whole process of production. Although there is a the condition of women in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, it can be assumed that Muslim women retained their independence and enjoyed free mobility, and as their menfolk were away from home for the most part, their status remained high as they were economically independent and made all decisions pertaining to financial matters. This despite the prevalence of patriarchy- notionally a Muslim wife had to obey and respect her husband, and take his consent before arriving at a decision herself. Moreover the market was the nerve centre of the state’s economy, and the Sana Keithel was an All Women’s Market, where Muslim women vendors were allotted a certain number of stalls or spaces.
The advent of British colonialism in 1891 provided an opportunity to the women to extend their economic activities in Manipur, and beyond Manipur. Muslim women were adept at weaving and produced all that was required even for the awonpot (gifts given by parents to their daughters at the time of their marriage).

As a result of their high status, Muslim women vendors of the Khwairamd Bazar participated actively in the 2nd Nupi Lan (Women’s War) directed against the British. After Manipur’s Merger with India in 1949 the status of Muslim women changed. The Muslim population increased in every decade, but the majority of women vendors could not obtain licenses, and so occupied any space along the roadsides, where they were constantly harassed by police as they were unlicensed vendors. In Muslim dominated areas, sufficient stalls are allotted to Muslim women but the infrastructure of the market is not so developed as to protect them from the vagaries of weather. In the main market place, Pangal women have been allotted 20% of the total space.

Pangal women also work as maids but many have started working under the MGNREGS and earning a decent livelihood. Some women work in small eateries, hotels and construction sites, because with the advent of increased urbanization, migration, fragmentation of land, nuclear families, the nature of their work changed, and many had to earn a livelihood by become laborers. These women are poor and some to augment their income took up illicit trafficking of psychotropic drugs, which earned them a bad nane, and adversely impacted their status. Their status was also impacted by their late start in education, which
deprived them of upgrading their skills to meet the requirements of a changed economy after 1949.

By the end of the 20th century, a few Muslim women’s organizations sprang up to create awareness and sensitize Pangal women about their rights. But the rise in status only occurred in the present century, and to a minimal extent. However at home, Pangal women are honored and respected. The Muslim women often regard themselves as possessing a ‘Dual Identity’, ‘Meitei’ as they descended from ‘Meitei’, and ‘Pangal’ which was the name assigned to Muslims in Manipur.

Most Pangal women do not possess sufficient capital to set up large scale businesses or enterprises. Some Muslim men however have grown affluent, and this is reflected in their standard of living, which also raises the Pangal woman’s status. Such women/girls have also been able to avail of modern education.

Chapter four’s focus is on Religion and its impact on Muslim Women’s status. The Manipuri Muslims were engaged in a ‘Quest for Identity’ in the beginning of the 20th century and a Muslim Revivalism occurred. Efforts were made to implement the tenets of Islam more strictly. Earlier in the 18th century a wedge appeared between the Meitei and the Pangals when the form converted to Hinduism and looked upon the Muslims as ‘mlecha’. However conversion of Meitei women to Islam at the time of marriage did not change their status in any appreciable measure. Despite fulfilling their religious obligations, the daily routine of Muslim women did not change and they continued to be active
participants in productive enterprises. It is said that the Muslims were not very rigid in their practice of Islam, and it is doubtful that Muslim women read the Quran as they were largely illiterate and possessed no fluency in Arabic. Moreover they did not practice seclusion, and very few wore a burqah even after the Quest for Identity. Despite being Muslim they observed Meitei practices, such as washing their hair with rice water and observing Cheiraoba, the Meitei New Year.

Muslim women almost to the end of the 20th century were not allowed into the Masjid for purposes of prayer. Only one mosque in the second half of the 20th century allowed them entry. Moreover women had no place in formal religious organizations and legal affairs. Only in a Jamia Azizia was established to impart education to girls-religious education, and those who completed the course were allowed to teach in Maktabs, which enhanced their status. But they still retained many characteristics of the Meitei primeval religion.

However in the matter of Nupi-Mamal i.e. Mehr or bride price, Muslim women did not have the ability to ensure payment of the entire bride price. Divorced women were usually deprived of alimony. So a dichotomy existed in their status. The women were not allowed to initiate divorce and the provision of Talaq was misused by men, depreciating women’s status. On the other hand Muslim women observed the practices and taboos associated with child-birth and other associated rituals. The Akika (birth ceremony) of the Muslims was quite akin to the Meitei ‘Swasthi-Puja’, although Muslim women followed Islamic rulings, sacrifice of a goat or cow to ensure good health for a girl child contrasted
with the sacrifice of two goats or cows to ensure good health of a boy child. This adversely impacted the girl child’s status. But the girl child as also the women wore iron amulets to ward off the evil eye just as did the Meiteis. This is an instance of women exerting their power. Although Islamic law sets aside some property for women, Pangal women do not hold pattas or land deeds. But a divorced Muslim woman can return to her Mapam—father’s house and is not discriminated against. This practice raised the self confidence of Pangal women.

The practice and misuse of triple talaq in Manipur however, degraded the women’s status. But a women could sue for divorce in an Islamic court on specific grounds such as insanity, impotency etc. she could also buy freedom-Khulla from her husband by paying a sizeable amount of cash which exceeded the bride price. Although Pangal women received one third of the family land, they usually gifted it to their brothers as they considered it shameful to live in their father’s house after marriage, even if they were unhappy or mal-treated.

Many Muslim women work in the Public domain and it would not be practical for them at work to say some of the obligatory daily prayers. Most of the women do not have the liberty to choose a husband or to divorce or to remarry. They also exercise little or no control over their dowry, which is used for common purposes the family. Similarly, they are unable to limit the number of their children, even if they desire to have a small family Profession of Islam did not fundamentally alter a women’s status.
The fifth chapter is the Impact of Modern Education on the Changing Status of Women. Although the Meitei Pangal women continued to be economically productive the Muslim community made a very late start in education. Islamic education is more theologically oriented and the necessity for a wide secular education for women only arose at the end of the twentieth century. By that time all the indigenous communities of Manipur had forged ahead in education while the Muslim women remained ignorant of the need for embracing modern education. They become backward and insular and parochial in their outlook.

This chapter explains through statistical tables the literacy rate of Muslims and the link between education and development. Pangal women’s development became stagnant, because of their lack of access to information, knowledge, and up gradation of skills. Moreover they made no attempt at family planning, even though they were unable to earn a sustainable livelihood. The reasons for Pangal women’s apathy to education have been cited. A deception of maqtabs and madrassas is also included. A small minority of Muslims initially opted for secular education in governments and private schools.

Towards, the end of the 20th century, however some Muslim men began encouraging women and girls to educate themselves but it would only have practical effect in the 21st century, with regard to upgrading women’s status. Some Muslim women’s organizations sprang up at the end of the 20th century and focused on education and skill up gradation. But the fruit of these ventures is only apparent today. Some focused exclusively on social issues, but there was no appreciable increase in the status of Muslim women at the end of the 20th century.
FINDINGS

Meitei Pangal women (Muslim) did not hide behind the veil and the first Meitei Pangal women exercised such a overwhelming influence over their men folk, who embraced wholesale, the Meitei way of life including Meiteilon - the lingua frunca. The men completed integrated in to Meitei society and assimilated in entirety the lifestyle of the Meiteis. From the above it is abundantly clear that the Meitei Pangal woman like the Meitei women enjoyed a high and respectable place in society at least until the advent of colonial rule which ushered in Modern Education which the Manipuri Muslims were averse to. But during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries Meitei Pangal women certainly influenced their husbands to an extent that they were happy to be given the Dual nomenclature of ‘Meitei Pangal’ (Meitei as they married Meiteis and Pangal - corrupt form of Bengal where they originally hailed from.)

As a result of their high status, Muslim women vendors of the Khwairamband Bazar, Imphal, actively participated in the Second Nupi Lan against the British. The market- Sana Keithel was the nerve centre of the state’s economy, and Muslim women vendors were allotted stalls/spaces in this market. Muslim women were self sufficient, producing what they needed for the family, but the situation changed in the second half of the 20th century as the Muslims were averse to imbibing modern education, and were deprived of upgrading their skills to continue to earn a sustainable livelihood. The status of Muslim women who indulged in drug-trafficking was downgraded.

Conversion of Meitei women to Islam did not depreciate their status. Muslim women continued to celebrate Meitei festivals along with Muslim
festivals and also practiced many customs of Meitei women including observing taboos. A dichotomy was apparent in their status. They inherited land but were unable to enforce strict payment of Mehr and prevent its use for common purposes. Triple talaq downgraded their position, but they could buy freedom from an abusive husband.

In the 20th century, the status of Meitei Pangal greatly depreciated because unlike other indigenous communities of Manipur they did not embrace till almost the end of the 20th century- Modern Education. They became backward, insolated and insular in outlook. A small change occurred at the end of the 20th century, but not enough to once again raise the status of women.

From the above it is abundantly clear that Metei Pangal women like Meitei women enjoyed a high and respectable place in society, at least until the advent of colonial rule which ushered in modern education which the Manipuri Muslims did not embrace. But during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, Meitei Pangal women certainly influenced their husbands to an extent that they completely integrated into Meitei society.

The status of Meitei Pangal women fluctuated from a high and respectable position in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries to a low in the 20th century, primarily because the women were apathetic to Modern Education.