Chapter-I
INTRODUCTION

The research work will focus on the status of Muslim women in Manipur and whether their status changed and why over a period of time. Status refers to the position an individual enjoys in a society. And Manipur having been an ancient kingdom with a recorded History from 33 A.D. accorded a different kind of status to women in Manipur. There is even a school of thought that in the early period a matrilineal system existed in Manipur. Moreover ‘maibis’ or ‘priestesses’ enjoy a very special and high status in Manipur.

Sociologists and anthropologists have expressed varying views regarding social status. According to Linton,¹ ‘a status is a position in a particular pattern. It is, quite correct to speak of each individual as having many statuses, since each individual participates in the expression of a number of patterns. However unless the term is qualified, the status of any individual means the sum total of all the statuses which he occupies. It represents his position in relation to the society.’ Linton perceives role as a dynamic component of status. Thus, the role an individual plays or does not, leads to change in status.² According to Zaniecki,³ a person who is needed by a social circle and whose self possesses the qualities required for the role for which he is needed, has a definite social status.’

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Giddens⁴ ‘status is the ‘social honour or prestige which a particular group is accorded by other members of the society. Giddens also feels that this status and prestige may be positive or negative.⁵

In the context of Manipur the British ethnographers have described their opinion about the status of the women in Manipur. E.W. Dun⁶, in his ‘Gazetteer of Manipur’ and R. Brown’s ‘Statistical Account’ of Manipur⁷ stated that, ‘the women of Manipur married or unmarried are not confined in zenanas as they are in Bengal or Hindustan; all classes are alike in this respect; neither do they cover their faces before strangers. They are very industrious; in this respect the opposite of the men, who are lazy and indolent. Most of the work of the country, except the heaviest, is performed by them, and they are consequently the mainstay of the family circle. All the marketing is done by women, all the work of buying and selling in public, and carrying to and fro of the articles to be sold; while at home they are busily employed in weaving and spinning. It would be difficult to find a more industrious woman in India than the Manipuri. With all their industriousness and usefulness, women hold but a very inferior social position, and are considered more in the light of goods and chattels than as persons to be treated with honour and consideration.⁸ T.C. Hodson, ‘the women hold a high and free position in Manipur, all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them.’⁹

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⁵ Seema Pandey, opcit. P. 40.
⁸ E.W. Dun, op. cit., p. 17.
Meitei women are not only major economic contributors; they also have considerable voice in the political sphere. The Cheirap court was the chief court composed of twenty-five permanent members and about sixty to eighty ex-officio members. Both state and village officials held ex-officio status. One separate court was maintained only for women. This all-women’s court was known as ‘Pacha’. The Pacha comprised eleven members headed by the King’s Mother along with women members of the royal family. This court dealt with matters like adultery, divorce, wife-beating, assault and other cases where women were involved. The Pacha decided the form of punishment.

Meitei Pangal girls sing and dance at the time of marriage. A few persons are trained in singing religious songs and are called ‘Maliphat’. Inter marriage with other communities is not rare. In most cases women from other communities are absorbed into their husband’s community. However it is rare to find a Manipuri Muslim woman marrying a non Muslim man.

Status is directly connected with the role played by a person. If the role is recognized as important the status will improve automatically. According to sociologists’ view, women’s inferior status is rooted in private property and class divided society. ‘Sexist ideology and structures like the family, maintain women’s inferior status in society. Powers is derived from sex and class and manifested in patriarchy and class relations. The major task is to discover the

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10 Several legends abound the power of the Pacha Court in the past. King Charairongba (1697-1709) was once even charged by it of adultery and was given token punishment by the stroke of a golden cane.
inter dependent class and patriarchy. The Indian Constitution provides equal status to both men and women. According to Article 14 of the Constitution, the state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. Equal opportunities and facilities are available to all. But, in reality, all women do not enjoy this equality of status.

Sociologists like Seema Sharma and Kanta Sharma mention in their books about the position of the women in Islam, ‘The honourable position accorded by Islam to women is symbolically demonstrated by the performance of the rite of ‘sai’, as an important part of the pilgrimage to Mecca, made at least once in a lifetime as a religious duty by all believers who can afford the journey. The rite of sai is performed by running back and forth seven times between Safa and Marwah, two hillocks near the Kaaba. This running, enjoined upon every pilgrim, be they rich or poor, literate or illiterate, Kings or commoners, is in imitation of the desperate quest of Hajar (hagar), Abraham’s wife, for water to quench the thirst of her crying infant, when they arrived in this dry desert country, four thousand years ago, at God’s behest, long before there was any such city at Mecca. The performance in this rite is a lesson in struggling for the cause of God. It is of the utmost significance that, this was an act first performed by a woman. Perhaps there could be no better demonstration of a woman’s greatness than God’s command to men, literally to follow in her footsteps.

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PROBLEM AND SCOPE OF THE WORK

There is limited published literature on Muslim women of Manipur. The published literatures are mainly limited to the economic contribution and education of Muslim women. There is no published text, which provides a holistic picture of the position of Muslim women from the time of their emergence in Manipuri society to the present day. The present research work is an attempt to fill the lacunae. This research work will cover the period from the 17th century to 20th century, the reason being that some Meitei women converted to Islam in the 17th century when they were given in marriage to Muslim prisoners of war by the King of Manipur. This research work is confined to the state of Manipur. The objectives of this research work are to investigate the changing status of women in Manipur. To understand how the life of the Meitei women who converted to Islam reflected on their status. To analyses the status of Muslim women in the 17th and 18th century. To examine what changed their status in the 19th and 20th century AD.

The hypotheses are the status of Muslim women changed over a period of time. The first Muslim women were Meiteis who converted to Islam, but had an overriding influence over their husbands. The Meitei Pangal women because of conversion to Islam had to change to some extent but remained economically independent. Further change in status of the women was caused by a movement for Muslim Revivalism and the Muslim Quest for Identity.
The Methodology will primarily consist of 3 steps enumerated below. First is learning what the categories of evidence are, the critical elements that differentiate them, and what these mean to investigators. Specialized concepts, points of view, or techniques are required to deal with different categories of evidence.

Second is collecting evidence, this involves bibliographic search, description, concept and analysis or annotation. Huge accumulation of aids and techniques make this field more manageable than in the past. This method will include recording evidence, deciding what to record and how much to process the material.

Third will be the communication of evidence. External criticism will determine the authenticity of evidence. For example in the case documents, an external criticism essentially authenticates the evidence and establishes the texts in the most nearly accurate form possible. Internal criticism will also be a part of ‘using evidence’ – the determination of meaning and value, or credibility of evidence and finally synthesis the blending of evidence into an account that accurately describes historical events or solves historical problems16.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Reviewing available literature reveals paucity of material on Muslim women in Manipur. But in the present context with the great increase in the

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Muslim population the subject assumes significance especially as the Manipuri Muslims are engaged in a ‘Quest for Identity’.

R.K. Jhalajit Singh in his book ‘A short History of Manipur’ (From A.D.33 to the present time) published in 1992, 2nd edition mentions that Manipuri Muslims who began to settle in Manipur were from East Bengal and they inhabited fertile tracts of land on the banks of the Imphal and Iril River. He further says that any man who came from East Bengal irrespective of his religion was called Pangal. In his book he makes some reference to the Muslims during the reigns of Kings like Mungyamba (1562-1597), Khunjaoba (1652-1666) and Paikhomba (1666-1698). He also gives a brief history of the capture of Muslims by King Khagemba and of the King giving them land for settlement in Manipur as well as the establishment of a new office for the welfare of the Muslims. Unfortunately, he has not made any mention about the conversion of Meitei women to Islam or Muslim women in general. He has written only three or four sentences about women in general i.e. a bride was escorted by her husband, she had to submit to the authority of her husband was assigned only household duties, including arduous ones like husking rice. These statements are applicable to Muslim women as also other women belonging to different communities.

Meitei Pangal Hourakfam is one of the important books on the Muslims of Manipur. It mostly analyses the different Pangal Sageis (clans). In this book, the authors Kulachandra Sharma and Badaruddin wrote about the coming of Muslims in King Khagemba’s reign. The Muslims were given Sageis according to their occupational/profession and the work they performed. They state that
some Meiteis also converted to Islam and were assigned sageis, such as Oinam and Thangjam. They stated that before the coming of Hinduism to Manipur (1718), the Muslims enjoyed the same status as the Meiteis, and the Meitei women and Muslim women had no differences. Before the Islamic Revivalist Movement, the Muslim women wore the same dress as Meiteis women. The status of Muslim women started changing from this time, a few started using a ‘purda’ that covered their faces and there were restrictions placed on doing work outside the house.

‘Women of Manipur an Alternative Perspective’ is a book authored by Salam Irene. She is focusing on the contradiction inherent in popular beliefs that women in Manipur enjoy a high status. The common perception is that Manipuri women enjoyed a very high position especially in comparison to women in other parts of India, but there is a dichotomy in the public and the private sphere with regard to women’s status. Women representatives at the grassroots level are usually only nominal figureheads and it is the men who make the actual decisions. This applies to Muslim women elected to the Gram Panchayet and Zilla Parishads too. Manipuri society being patriarchal, Muslim women do not have decision making powers at home except in relation to household activities.

Md. Maqbul Ali conducted a study titled, ‘Pangal Women: Social Challenges and Education’. The author has researched the structure of family, the Rite of Passage i.e. Marriage and the social system of the Muslims, and also further scrutinized government initiatives, social challenges, literacy rate and

17 These two sageis are original Meitei sageis, who were converted to Islam.
factors affecting education of women in the community. He argues that the practice of dowry, polygamy and divorce caused instability in the family. He asserts that dowry, which is a prominent feature of a Muslim marriage, and the practice of Polygamy among Pangals too often does not adhere to the prescribed rules are cases of wives being kept at different locations by the husband. However today because of the rise of nuclear families and the high cost of living polygamy is not greatly practiced. Divorce is minimal but it adversely impacts the family. He further states that Polygamy and Divorce are more common in the lower income group but has not stated the reason.

Tingneichong Gangte's, 'Women’s Role in the 20th century Manipur', focuses on the role of women in various fields. She argues that with the spread of modern education the women of Manipur began to participate in diverse modern activities; however these achievements have not enabled them to break the tentacles of patriarchy and enter the decision making channels to enable legislation favorable to them. She has highlighted the role of Muslim women in Manipur and delineated the role of Muslim women in economy, society, culture and polity.

Rita Kamei in her doctoral thesis 'Historical study of Muslim Women in Manipur' has highlighted the economic role of the Muslim women in the society. However she has not given any clear idea about the origin of the Pangal women and their status in the society. She concluded that women play a significant role in society with reference to the rituals associated with the passage of rites, and other important social events.
Salam Irene’s book ‘Muslims of Manipur’ deals with the coming of the Muslims to Manipur during the time of king Khagenba and their marriages to Meitei Women, adoption of Meitei culture as well as assimilation of Muslim men in Meitei society and the reason for the nomenclature “Meitei Pangal”. In the second chapter she focuses on the social life of the Muslims, and the role of Muslims in economy, culture, religion as also the Laws of inheritance etc. are dealt with in the third and fourth chapters. The last chapter deals with administration and governance and political participation of the Muslims in Manipur but no Muslim women’s name has been mentioned except for those who participated in the Second Nupi Lan (Women War). However she has included the gender perspective in each chapter. She concluded that the socio economic indexes show the backwardness of the Muslims especially in the field of education, science, technology, mass communication, health and standard of living. Therefore special incentives, measures and programmes are needed to enable the Muslims to come into their own, especially the women.

THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Muslim women in Manipur were initially Meitei converts to Islam, so possessed the qualities of Meitei women in that they did not hide behind the veil, but played an active role in society, economy, culture, religion. These Meitei women converts possessed an indomitable spirit illustrated by integrating their Muslim husbands who completely assimilated into Meitei society, that they were practically indistinguishable from the Meiteis except for their profession of Islam. The women exercised so much power that Muslim men came to be known
by the nomenclature 'Meitei Pangal'. The research work will focus first on how these Meitei women were successful in their endeavour to totally integrate their Muslim husbands into Manipuri society. The Meitei Pangal women like other Muslims across the world are bound by the Islamic Personal Law. However, in the course of the 17th to 20th centuries there have been several instances of abuse of this law by Muslim men especially in relation to mehr and talaq.

THE EMERGENCE OF MEITEI PANGAL WOMEN IN MANIPUR

Meidingu Khagemba (1597-1652) is regarded as the maker of Manipur by local historians of Manipur and the history of the Muslims in the Meitei Kingdom commences in the early 17th century, which was regarded as a period when the King extended his power practically over the entire Kingdom of Manipur18. According to the text Nongsamei Puya19 and Cheitharol Kumbaba20, the Muslims who came to Manipur were Cacharies who waged war against the Meitei Kingdom. A large army was sent to the Cachar Kingdom by Taraf Chief Mohammad Nawab and in the year 1606, the combined forces of Muslims of Taraf and Cachar invaded the Meitei Kingdom during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652). The war took place at the Yangoi battlefield (which is now situated at Bishnupur district) which ended with a diplomatic peace talk. From then the Muslims began to settle in the state. They were known as Pangal

according to the sources because the Meiteis of the earlier period enunciated ‘b’ as ‘p’ thus, the word Pangal is a corrupted form of the word Bengal\textsuperscript{21}.

Meidingu Khagemba had two brothers Chingsommba and Sanongba who aspired to capture the throne at an opportune moment. The Muslims invasion was the result of not very significant occurrence at the royal palace of Manipur. The annual festival of *Hiyangei Kumjanba*\textsuperscript{22} celebration was held in *Leishang Hidel*, a small stream/river, at the place Langthaba in the year 1603. On the day of the festival, the King invited his younger brother Chingsommba, the *Khurailakpa*\textsuperscript{23} to take part in the boat race. Chingsommba had no boat of his own to take part in the competition so he borrowed a race boat known as ‘*Kabongamba Chaokhongpaba*’ from his younger brother Sanongba, the *Yaiskullakpa*\textsuperscript{24} to participate in the boat race. During the boat race a small portion on the edge of the ‘*Kabongamba Chaokhongpaba*’ was broken due to collision. Chingsomba requested Sanongba to allow him to give a new boat of the same type as the damaged vessel. Sanongba refused to take a new similar boat but demanded the original undamaged one which was not possible. It became a big issue and came to be known as ‘*Sanongba Higaiwa*’ in Manipuri history. It was Changpombi mother of Sanongba, who interfered in the affair of the two brothers. Her

\textsuperscript{22} *Hiyangei Kumjanba* was a traditional Meitei festival celebrated with pomp and show. It was a festival of a boat race, celebrated in the month of April. Boats were a common form of transport and the Royal boat was used for worship because it was considered as Pakhangba, the ancestor of the Meiteis who also used the boat and then disappeared. The festival was discontinued from the reign of King Bodhachandra in 1952.
\textsuperscript{23} Khurailakpa- Sub Divisional officer of the Khurai and Wangkhei Sub Division.
\textsuperscript{24} Yaiskullakpa- Sub Divisional officer of the Yaiskul Sub Division.
intention was to make her son the King of the Kingdom, therefore she instructed Sanongba to refuse to take the new boat offered by Chingsommba. So, Sanongba followed the instruction of his mother\textsuperscript{25}. Then the issue was put up before King. Meidingu Khagembha, who intervened in the favor of Khawirakpa Chingsomba. The King offered a new brand of a similar boat made of gold and silver\textsuperscript{26} to solve the quarrel, but it was also rejected by Sanongba. The King got furious at the rejection of his offer. On the other hand, Sanongba's mother and some of the nobles prepared a conspiracy against the King to dethrone him. The King came to know about the malafide intentions of his step mother and his brother so to resolve the situation Khagembha furiously said ‘\textit{despite the offer of the King, Sanongba insists on the same boat, but even the God could not fulfill such a demand}'. Due to the malafied intentions of Sanongba, the King ordered Sanongba to leave the Kingdom\textsuperscript{27}. As a punishment King Khagembha ordered Sanongba to be exiled\textsuperscript{28}. But Sanongba and his mother Changpombi along with some of their followers fled from the Kingdom and took shelter at the Cachar Kingdom, and both mother and son requested the Cachar king (Sapradas Narayan) to invade Manipur. The Cachar King accepted the request and he sent his general Yakharek and Bhimbal who was his brother with a force in 1604 to help Sanongba to revolt against the King of Manipur\textsuperscript{29}. In the battle, luck was not on the side of the Meiteis force so, they retreated towards the capital. The battle

\textsuperscript{26} O.Bhogeshor and M.A Janab Khan, opcit, pp. 1-6.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
took place at the *Yangoi* field of *Toupul* (modern name Bisnupur district)\(^{30}\). Because of the lack of artillery and guns the Manipuri soldiers were defeated by the invaders in that battle and conquered some of the surrounding areas of the kingdom\(^{31}\) Prince Sanongba was put in charge of the conquered area and asked to pay a tribute to the Cachari. After collecting the tribute the Cachari troops return to their homeland. While returning the Meitei soldiers attacked suddenly midway and killed many soldiers of the Cachari troops. Some of the soldiers were able to escape from the place and reach their homeland. They reported about the attack and the death of the soldiers to the King. The people of Cachar began to blame the King for the death of the soldiers and began to protest. The people in the Cachar kingdom became greatly dissatisfied. The chaos in the state led the Cachari King to prepare for another war. But this time the Cachari king did not act alone, he made a request to Nawab Mohammed of Taraf\(^{32}\) (under Sylhet district) to help him in the war against the Manipuri kingdom\(^{33}\). (Terminology used was Nawab, at the time) *Nongsamei Puya*, mentioned that the Nawab of Taraf sent a large contingent of soldiers under the leadership of his brothers and 15 others such as Munan Khan, Akon, Aluf, Suleiya, Nampha, Phaitong, Tumiya, Khamya, Aman, Khela, Akya, Khembo, Kashra Mohammad etc. who reached Cachar on 15\(^{th}\) of the Meitei month *Mera* (October November) in 1605\(^{34}\). The combined forces invaded the Kingdom of the Meiteis in 1606. The Muslim soldiers arrived at the valley of Manipur through Khoupum and encamped on the

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\(^{30}\) O. Bhogeshor and M.A Janab Khan, opcit, p. 3.
\(^{31}\) Ibid
\(^{32}\) B. Kullachandresharma and badruddin, opcit, p. 19.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) O. Bhogeshor Singh and M.A Janab Khan, opcit, p. 11.
bank of the *Sarang Yangoi* which is at present *Lamangdong* in the Bishnupur District, while the Cachari troops stayed in a camp on the upper hill slope of the Khoupum observing the movement of the Manipuri soldiers or the strength of the Manipuris\(^{35}\). The King of Manipur got fully ready for the battle with a contingent of one Hundred and eighty cavalry and two guns.\(^{36}\) The Cachar troops led by Yakharek and Bhimbal went back to their homeland without informing the Muhammadan troops after learning about the Meiteis skill in the art of warfare\(^{37}\). The Kabuis of Khoupum informed the King of Manipur about the Cacharis’ retreat. King Khagemba’s forces attacked the retreating force of Cachar. In the action some Cachari leaders were killed. Khagemba accidentally fell down from his horse and Manol Khan, a Muslim soldier tried to kill him, but Khagemba was saved by Nongsamei, who attacked Munal Khan with a spear. The Cachari troops retreated to their homeland without giving any information to Muhammad Shani\(^{38}\). Now without the Cachari troops, the Muslim force had to fight against King Khagemba. The King of Manipur realized that the military strength of the Muslim was considerably greater than that of his troops. He decided to have recourse to diplomatic measures as a means of diffusing the situation\(^{39}\). He sent Nongsamei who was well-versed in different languages to negotiate with the leaders of the troops. Nongsamei made a proposal to Prasena, the Muslim leader for withdrawing both their respective troops. The Muslim leader accepted the proposals of Nongsamei. However, after the agreement had been arrived at, the

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\(^{35}\) B. Kullachandrasarma and Badruddin, *opcit*, p. 20.
\(^{36}\) O. Bhogeshor and M.A Janab Khan, *opcit*, P. 261.
\(^{38}\) Ibid. p. 21.
Meitei force judiciously surrounded the unarmed Muslim troops and made an offer of surrender or death. They replied that instead of being killed, they would rather settle in Manipur. The king of Manipur accepted the decision of the Muslims. The liberal ruler of Manipur treated the Muslims as he did his own subjects.

Thus Muslims from Tarf land (North East of Bangladesh) numbered around 1000 and were settled in Manipur. The liberal policy of the King permitted them to settle in Manipur and the King gave Meitei-ladies in marriage to them. Their descendants were known as Meitei-Pangal, who adopted Meiteilon as their mother tongue. These Muslims who came to Manipur in 1606 AD are known as “Indigenous Muslims”, who could not be distinguished from other segments of the Meitei community and their social behavior has been shaped by the folk tradition and culture of Manipur. In this way they have become an inseparable part of the Manipuri society. Meitei society is a patriarchal society. However Meitei women are unique and the first Pangal women possessed the same quality. Their contribution in the society is significant. These women also possessed the qualities of hard work and courage. Despite the fact that the Meitei women who married Muslims had to convert to Islam, besides profession of a new faith, not much change was evinced in their daily life because their husbands willingly accepted the traditions customs, way of life, language, dress, food, ornaments etc. of the Meitei and Meitei Pangal women continued to contribute to

40 M.A. Janab Khan, Manipur Muslim, Imphal, 1974, p. 4.
41 Ibid., p. 13; Salam Irene, The Muslims of Manipur, Kalpaz Publication, New Delhi, 2010, p. 29
the economy of Manipur which because of the lallup system and the constant wars that Manipur was engaged in, resulted in women dominating the economy and in many instances being the bread earner of the family, or contributing substantially to the family kitty. They also controlled all the markets in the Manipur Kingdom.