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The Role And Status Of Women Of Meitei Society In Manipur

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Introduction

Meitei women in Manipur hold a paradoxically central yet complex position in society. While highly visible and economically independent through institutions like the historic Ima Keithel (Mothers' Market), they remain subject to patriarchal norms, political underrepresentation, and high rates of domestic conflict within the community the Meitei society in Manipur, a Brahmanical Hindu society, royally patronized is unique with instances of female independence and power. To a certain extent the women of Manipur enjoyed a degree of freedom as in case of choosing their life partner, the absence of dowry and honour killings but the women are still not free from being the victims of exploitation of a patriarchal setup.

The women do have a highly productive role in the socio-economic realm of the society as well as in the household but they still do not occupy an equal status with the men. They still do not have much say in making decisions. The purpose of this essay is to discuss how the role played by the Meitei women is very different to the status they occupy in the society.

The role and status of Meitei women are defined by several specific cultural and socio-political dynamics

1. Economic Power and the Ima Keithel

A defining feature of Meitei society is the central role women play in the local economy. This is best exemplified by the **Ima Keithel** (Mother's Market) in Imphal. Managed and operated exclusively by thousands of Meitei women, this centuries-old market is the largest all-women market in the world and serves as a crucial hub for the state's internal trade. Historically, the *Lallup* system (an ancient forced labor practice for men) forced women to take charge of agriculture and trade, establishing a legacy of female economic independence

2. Social and Political Activism

Meitei women are the traditional guardians of society and have a long history of sociopolitical activism. Notable examples include:

Nupi Lan (Women's Wars): Historic agitations in 1904 and 1939 led by Meitei women against oppressive British economic and administrative policies

Meira Paibi (Torch Bearers): Meaning "torch holders," these grassroots, women-led groups patrol neighborhoods at night to combat social evils (such as alcoholism and drug abuse) and advocate for human rights and justice

3. Religious and Cultural Significance

Historically, Meitei cosmology features strong female deities, with major figures representing households, war, and polity, which points to a strong traditional foundation of female importance. However, the introduction of Hinduism in the 18th century brought stronger patriarchal norms to the region, diminishing women's roles in traditional rituals and altering the social structure.

4. Patriarchy and Gender Inequality

Despite their visible public contributions and high social idealization, Meitei women face deep-seated systemic marginalization. Culturally, strict patriarchal norms govern marriage and child birth, with women often relinquishing their lineage and enduring periods of enforced isolation (such as post-childbirth purity rituals). Furthermore, despite their political activism, decision-making power remains disproportionately held by men, and domestic violence rates in the region remain a significant concern

Patrilineal in Form and Matrilineal in Practice of Meitei Society

Family name of Meitei society is taken from the father side. Once a women married then the women is known by the men's identity and all the offspring are given the title of father. After marriage women are destined to live at men's house till she died. Father is a bread earner and mother took the responsibility of raising the kids. Nevertheless there is has several household wherein both the husband and wife earn and raise their offspring collectively.

In a family if their new born baby is male or female matter least both sons and daughter are treated equally. Male head of the family took the decision of family in consultation with their respective life partner and even included all the female folk of the family. In time of marriage it is entirely the mother, sisters, aunts and grandmother that took the final decision. The women have liberty to choose life partner.

The social gathering like Thabal Chongba, Leikai Chak Chanaba, Leikai Singyen, Sumang Lila, Eshei Nongmai, Epom, etc., all are mainly organised by the female of Meitei society. This exhibit the strong women status and role in Meitei society. These practices have passed down when the state of Manipur enter the phase of political turmoil. Once the role played for social service now turn to the political service to be render by the women folk of Meitei. Thus in this way Meitei women political activism became more prominent and loud. Beginning from Nupi Lan to Meira Paibi Meitei women had taken the responsibility that men folk are hard to take.

In Meitei society, women hold a deeply respected, vital, and highly visible status. Historically, they are recognized as the backbone of the economy and society, enjoying significant independence. They are prominent figures in agriculture, trade, and grassroots movements, though they still navigate complex traditional expectations.

Economic Independence

Ima Keithel: Meitei women run the famous **Ima Keithel** (Mother's Market), a centuries-old, all-women market in Imphal. It is one of the largest women-run markets in the world.

Household Providers: Beyond the market, women are heavily involved in handloom weaving, agriculture, and small-scale entrepreneurship, serving as the primary financial pillars for many households.

Social and Political Activism

Meira Paibi: Meitei women are known as the "torchbearers" or guardians of society. The **Meira Paibi** is a powerful grassroots women's movement that campaigns against social evils, human rights violations, and substance abuse.

Nupi Lan: Historically, Meitei women led the **Nupi Lan** (Women's Wars) in 1904 and 1939, staging massive protests against oppressive British economic and administrative policies.

Conflict Resolution: During periods of civil unrest or state emergencies, women have often acted as human shields, peacekeepers, and voices for justice within the community.

Cultural and Religious Significance

Divine Feminine: Meitei mythology and religion place a strong emphasis on the female divine, with many important deities being goddesses.

Cultural Keepers: Women are the primary preservers of indigenous Meitei customs, traditional arts, and oral histories, ensuring these practices survive from generation to generation.

Contemporary Challenges

Navigating Patriarchy: While Meitei society is relatively egalitarian compared to many other cultures, it remains largely patriarchal. Major community decisions and formal political leadership are often dominated by men, while women often take the role of foot soldiers in political campaigns.

Impact of Conflict: The ongoing ethnic and civil turmoil in Manipur has heavily affected women, increasing their vulnerability and forcing them into the front lines of protests and village defence.

Manipuri women, particularly the Meitei community, are known for their strong presence in society and their active participation in various aspects of life, including economics, politics, and social activities. They traditionally hold a high status in the economy, leading trade and commerce, and play a significant role in agricultural production, fisheries, and handloom industries. Their contributions are undeniable, and they are also recognized for their strength and resilience, especially during times of conflict. Here's a more detailed look:

Economic Role:

Trade and Commerce:

Meitei women traditionally have been the primary drivers of trade and commerce in Manipur, managing markets and handling the exchange of goods.

Agriculture, Fisheries, and Handlooms:

They play a vital role in the state's economy, contributing to agricultural production, fisheries, and the handloom industry.

Political and Social Activism:

Meira Paibi:

The Meira Paibi, or "torch bearers," are known for their activism and have been involved in movements for human rights and social justice, including protests and demonstrations.

Nupi Lan (Women's War):

This historical movement, also known as the third Nupi Lan, involved Manipuri women actively protesting against British rule and fighting for their rights.

Sharmila Irom:

A notable figure, Irom Sharmila Chanu, a civil rights activist and poet, has been involved in various social and political movements in Manipur.

Cultural Significance:

Classical Dance: Manipur is famous for its classical dance, which is a devotional art form.

Traditional Practices: Meitei women are deeply connected to their traditions and cultural practices, including religious rituals and customs.

Challenges and Resilience:

Conflict:

Manipuri women have faced significant challenges due to the ongoing conflict in the state, and their resilience in the face of adversity has been noted.

Empowerment:

Efforts are being made to empower women and ensure their participation in all aspects of society, including education and employment.

Conclusion

The status of women in Manipur occupies a special place in Indian society. In contrast to much of the nation, Manipuri women have had a relatively higher status and have played an important role in both socio-economic and political life. At different times in history, they have been at the forefront of resistance movements, including the Nupi Lan (Women's War) in 1904 and 1939, where they organized protests against British colonial policy and economic exploitation.

Female Manipuris are also at the forefront in operating local markets, particularly the Ima Keithel (Mother's Market) in Imphal a women-controlled market and one of the biggest in Asia. This reflects their economic independence and position at the heart of trade and business.

Nevertheless, though they have an active presence in the public sphere, women in Manipur endure issues like gender-based violence, abuse related to armed conflict, and lack of political representation. Militarization has only added to the vulnerabilities of women, contributing to human rights issues.

Efforts continue by civil society and women's groups to address these problems and advocate gender equality. By and large, while Manipuri women have a more visible and valued place in society than in much of the rest of the subcontinent, further empowerment and protection of their rights are still necessary.

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