

CHAPTER IV

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In the preceding chapter, the general profile of the Manipuri community has been vividly illustrated. The present chapter aims at highlighting the Manipuri women as a whole. Since, understanding a society from a holistic perspective necessitates the understanding of the ‘other’ half or the often neglected half of the society, i.e. women. Their role and contribution towards various walks of life is of utmost importance to the study of the given society. Their status in the society can be construed as a pointer to a nation’s development index. Over and above, the social outlook and treatment meted out towards them accentuates their condition and place in life and society. Viewed from these angles, we perceive that almost in all the societies of India which are androgenic in nature, women are cornered in every sphere of life. The status of women in India, in general, is still far from being a rosy picture even in recent times. Compared to this demoralising scenario, the status of women in Manipuri society seems to be far better from different angles, if not the best. This better feature maybe solely because of some innate qualities, traits and aptitudes which are inherent in the Manipuri women that have compelled the society to respect and support them in their various roles and activities of life. Keeping these above points in view, this chapter will concentrate on the study of Manipuri women from numerous aspects, right from the pre-historic era to the modern age. It will try to highlight how their status had several paradigm shifts during the course of Manipur’s history.

Manipuri Women in ancient period

From times immemorial, ample references to Manipuri women have been manifested in the myths and legends of Manipur. Mention of their capabilities and calibres has been so often alluded to in oral tradition and literature as well as in ancient texts like the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur¹. The Court Chronicle, which is one the most important authenticated sources of history of Manipur, testifies to the fact that ‘*Chakpas*’ (pre-Meiteis), the indigenous inhabitants

of the region before the advent of the *Porei* group or the *Pakhangba* group, had *Yumkhei Ngakpi*, women defenders of the kingdom who guarded and protected the palace and the people as well². Hence it is often supposed that the region must have had a matriarchal system in pre-historic times. Records of the royal household lineage tilting towards the maternal side have also been traced in the said chronicle. Therefore, it is an indicative allusion to the importance of women and their relatively high position in society in the ancient period of history. Several names of women spring forth from the myths and legends of the Meiteis of Manipur. They possessed such personalities and attributes that are noticeable in the later Meitei women of Manipur. Some have been mentioned below:

Women and Myth

In the myths of Manipur, we come across several women who are worshipped as deities (even today) for their merit and worth. They are associated with the indigenous religion of the Meiteis which is better known as Meiteism or Sanamahism.

Leimarel Shidabi

Leimarel Shidabi, the consort of *Atiya Guru Shidaba* (Creator of the Universe) is one such deity who is worshipped in every Meitei household even today. There is the myth of their two sons *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba* competing with each other by undertaking the task of circling round the Universe seven times for the acquisition of the throne of their father. While *Sanamahi*, who was his father's choice on the throne, embarked on the journey around the Universe immediately, *Pakhangba*, the younger one and a favourite of his mother, sought the advice of his mother. She instructed her son that as his father was the Lord of the Universe, circling round the throne of his father seven times was, as such, equivalent to circling round the whole Universe. Subsequently, he followed his mother's advice and won the throne and thus became the monarch. In this myth, we find that *Leimaren* played a key role in the accession of her favoured son to the throne with her quick insight and reasoning prowess.

Panthoibi

Panthoibi, the Goddess of warfare, is another deity who emanates the qualities of assertiveness, confidence and independence in women. According to the myth, she was the beautiful daughter of the Meitei chief of *Loichang* Hill who gave her heart

away to *Nongpok Ningthou*, Lord of the *Langmai* Hills. Though she married the *Khaba* prince, *Taram Khoinu* in response to the wishes of her parents, she asserted her feelings for *Nongpok Ningthou*. She escaped from her husband's place and married *Nongpok Ningthou* much to the chagrin of her *Khaba* in-laws. The *Khabas* even pursued her but failed. The union of the happy couple was celebrated with music and dances. Later, the *Khabas* worshipped them annually with music and dance which became an integral part of the famous *Lai Haraoba* festival³.

Imoinu

The Goddess of wealth, *Imoinu*, is another household deity who is considered as a symbol of idealism and feminine values in women. People believed that worshipping this Goddess would endow the traits of a good and dutiful wife: the qualities of a perfect homemaker in all women. She would enable every woman to maintain a clean and sanctified household as well as ensure peace and understanding in the family.⁴

Phouoibi

The Goddess of crops, *Phouoibi*, to the contrary, happens to be a woman of strong and righteous principle. The myth surrounding her portrays this attitude. When she took the human form of a pretty girl one day, she met a brave *Moirang* man named *Akongjamba* and both fell in love with each other. As the *Moirang* was on king's duty, he could not marry her then but promised to return after a couple of days. As time passed by and *Akongjamba* did not keep his promise, she decided to pay a visit to his place in the guise of a hill woman. There she found that her betrothed *Akongjamba* was already married. She was certainly displeased and despite his pleas to come back, she refused to spend her life among inconsistent mortals and spurned him altogether. However, she promised of their union in another life as human beings.⁵

Yumjao Lairembi

There is also the myth of *Petanga Liklu Louthibi* who won the status of a deity as '*Yumjao Lairembi*' after her demise. The story is about the Meitei prince, *Hongnemyoi Khumjao*, who married *Petanga Liklu Louthibi*, the daughter of the *Langmai* Chief, and lived with her among her kinsmen happily. In course of time, due to some untoward incident, there ensued a fight between the *Langmais* and the

Meiteis where some *Langmai* warriors were killed. This incident enraged the *Langmais* and intended to avenge the attack on the Meitei Prince. Rising to the situation, *Petanga Liklu Louthibi* was quick in foreseeing the danger and was courageous enough to protect the life of her beloved, the Meitei prince, *Hongnemyoi Khumjao*, by tactfully making him escape from the clutches of her *Langmai* kinsmen. She even instructed him not to return directly to his Meitei kingdom but to take refuge in the *Khuman* kingdom. During his stay among the *Khumans*, their king offered his daughter in marriage to the Meitei prince. Later, the *Moirang* king also did likewise. Many years later, the Meitei queen recalled her son back home to succeed his father *UraKonthouba* to the throne as *Naothingkhong* in 663CE. He made his second wife, the *Khuman* princess as his queen and totally forgot about his first wife *Petanga* who had saved his precious life. Meanwhile, *Petanga* realising that her husband was taking too long to recall her, went to the palace herself to claim her rightful place. However, seeing that her beloved, the king was already with a queen, she gave up her life instantly. She was deified as '*Yumjao Lairembi*' and resided near the *Langmai* Hills.⁶

Leima Lainaotabi

In genesis of the Meiteis, there exists a myth about the couple, *Chingkhong Poreiton* and *Leima Lainaotabi*, who came with their people to the region of Manipur from the East. *Leima Lainaotabi*, the queen, was resourceful and far-sighted by nature. She supplied provisions of fruits and vegetables which she brought along with her for sustenance in the new land. She acted as a *Maibi* or a priestess of their society. Her sister-in-law or sister of *Poreiton*, *Laisara* or *Laisana* was married to *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*, the first king of Manipur. She was the chief queen and held office of importance because of her rank and position.⁷

Women and Legend

Among the several legends of Manipur, the *Moirang* episodes are more popular and well-retained in the memories of the people. The kingdom of *Moirang* had flourished for a long time which made great contributions to the history of that period before its decline came in the hands of the Meitei kings. From the *Moirang* legends of love and sacrifice, there are several instances of the sacrificial traits of the women in the face of obligations towards either their parents, the king or to unforeseen plights of fortune.

Mention may be made of the legends of *Leima Lairuklembi*, *Yaithing Konu*, *Tonu Laijinglembi*, *Sappa Chanu Silheibi*, *Khamnu*, *Thoibi*, *Thambalnu*, etc.

Leima Lairuklembi

In the legend of *Henjunaha* and *Leima Lairuklembi*, we discover the boy brought up by his widowed mother and the girl, by her father. They both grew up together and love blossomed between them. On an ill-fated day, *Henjunaha's* mother, upon seeing a disturbing dream, forbade her son from stepping out of the house. But his desire to meet his beloved being stronger, quietly he slipped out of his house in the silence of the night. On the way he came across some evil spirits searching for human flesh. *Henjunaha* tried running away from them and rushed to *Lairuklembi's* house with the spirits quick at his heels. They killed him just as he was about to reach her house. When *Lairuklembi* saw her lover's corpse in front of her house later, she too killed herself instantly. The God of the Dead, *Thongaren*, refused to accept the soul of *Lairuklembi* in His world though He granted entry to *Henjunaha's* soul citing his destiny for a short life on earth. Nevertheless, when He realised her sacrifice for her love and her undeterred persistence to be together with her lover, He finally granted both a boon to return to earth for a blissful life of a hundred years.⁸

Yaithing Konu

The legend of *Khuyol Haoba* and *Yaithing Konu* dates back to the 12th century and, therefore, include real incidents and people as a basis for its narrative. The story revolves around two orphans, *Khuyol Haoba* and his sister who led a wretched life. After the death of their father, *Khundouremba*, who was an indispensable courtier of the king during his time, the two orphans almost sank into oblivion. In the meantime, drought and famine struck the kingdom wrecking great havoc on the land and people. A false soothsayer predicted that the situation could be controlled by appeasing Lord *Thangjing*, the presiding deity of *Moirang* with the sacrifice of an orphan. And to escape from this, *Khuyol Haoba* had been hiding among the *phooms* (decomposed grasses and reeds floating on the waters) of the Loktak lake. One day, when only the maidens of *Moirang* were on a fishing trip to the Loktak lake, *Khuyol Haoba* accidentally met *Yaithing Konu*, the beautiful daughter of *Luwang Huiningsumba*, a nobleman. Both fell in love with each other. As time passed by, the King came to

know about *Haoba* and his lineage and was more than happy to offer the post of his father. Life seemed to be ever so pleasant for both the lovers. But it did not last long. Owing to an untoward incident, *Huiningsumba*, was held captive by *Kaoba Hingamba*, a *Khuman* warrior who demanded *Huiningsumba's* daughter as ransom. Consequently, *Yaithing Konu* was married off to the *Khuman* warrior. Meanwhile, *Haoba*, unable to bear the separation from his beloved, would secretly visit *Konu*. *Kaoba Hingamba* soon discovered this development and subsequently sent *Konu* out of his house. Thus the two parted lovers finally got their fulfilment of love.⁹

Tonu Laijinglembi

The legend of *Kadeng Thangjahanba* and *Tonu Laijinglembi* was also of love and separation leading to reunion at the end. Here *Thangjahanba* was a blacksmith endowed with unmatched skill that earned him the good favours of the king. *Tonu Laijinglembi* was the only daughter of *Kadang Selungba*, a nobleman of king *Laijunglakpa's* court. Though *Thangjahanba* and *Laijinglembi* were deeply in love, their union was not fated as expected. The king had no male heir and the royal priest suggested that he should marry a maiden of his namesake. Obviously, the suggestion targeted was none other than *Laijinglembi*. Hence, while *Thangjahanba* was away hunting game for the upcoming annual festival, *Laijinglembi* was given in marriage to the king. She could not protest against or voice her choice to her father or the king. She suffered internally for her lost love yet fulfilled her obligations towards her father and the king. *Thangjahanba*, too, was broken hearted when he came to know of such alliance. He made two swords and on one, he engraved the images of *Laijinglembi* and himself and on the other, the young Queen and the King. Thus he presented both the swords to the king. The king could not decipher the meaning of both the engravings. In due course, *Thangjahanba* was taken seriously ill and his deteriorating health alarmed the king and *Laijinglembi* alike. Eventually, the meaning of the pictures on the swords dawned on the king. He regretted and felt the need to repair his mistake. He gave away *Laijinglembi* to *Thangjahanba*. Finally the two got united.¹⁰

Pidonnu

A woman of great inner strength and boundless sacrifice, *Tonu Laijinglembi* hardly complained and instead resigned to her fate. Though she found her love in the end, it

was not supposed to last long and she had to strive and persevere in her later life too. The next legend on *Uranaha Khongjomba* and *Pidonnu*, a sequel to the previous one, will testify to that fact. *Khongjomba* was the son of *Tonu Laijinglembi* by king *Laijunglakpa* born in *Kadeng Thangjahanba's* house. *Thangjahanba* did not live long and so the sole responsibility of bringing up *Khongjomba* as well as concealing his real identity for his safety fell on *Laijinglembi*. Duly she confined herself and her son during his childhood in the house of her husband's friend, the chief of the *Leihou* tribe in the hills. Returning to their homestead in *Moirang* when *Khongjomba* grew up to be a young man, both mother and son had to face hard times for survival. *Khongjomba* would collect firewood from the forest and his mother would sell the lot in the market. One day, *Khongjomba* chanced to meet *Pidonnu*, the daughter of a nobleman in a Kang match and as expected, fell in love with her. Meanwhile, the king, being heirless, had adopted a son, *Nidram* by name and made him heir apparent. *Nidram* was not pleased with *Khongjomba* and bought his time to vanquish him. When the girls of *Moirang* were having their day out fishing at the Loktak lake, *Khongjomba* was discovered among them. He was caught, beaten up and brought before the king. His mother immediately rushed to the king to spare her son and doing so, revealed their true identities. The king rued for their misfortunes and mended his negligence by placing his son on the throne. The pair of lovers also lived happily.¹¹

Sappa Chanu Silheibi

The next legend of *Wanglen Pungdinghaba* and *Sappa Chanu Silheibi* dealt with the talent and calibre of both in their respective fields. While *Pungdinghaba* was a genius in crafting the indigenous drum called 'pung', *Silheibi* had her forte in exquisite weaving. Their rare talents made them popular among young men and women. One day, they proposed to engage in a friendly contest of their expertise and then get married. *Pungdinghaba* would make a *pung* right from the beginning and *Silheibi* would weave a beautiful piece of cloth. Just as she was about to cut the completed cloth from the loom, she heard the resounding boom of the *pung* drummed by a friend of *Pungdinghaba* by mistake. She mentally concluded that she had lost the contest. Feeling embarrassed, she killed herself. Upon seeing her dead by the side of her loom, *Pungdinghaba* followed suit, unable to bear separation.¹²

Thoibi

The last legends of *Moirang* is the often quoted, frequently narrated in ballads, and performed in dances and plays, popularly known as the legend of *Khamba* and *Thoibi*. In this legend of the 14th century, we find *Khamba* and his elder sister *Khamnu* as destitutes, and *Khamnu* assuming the tenacious responsibility of rearing up her younger brother *Khamba* with undaunted care and dignity. She epitomises the mother figure of every persevering Manipuri women. When *Khamba* went to the house of *Chingkhuh Naha Telheiba*, the king's younger brother in search of work, he chanced to see his only daughter, the beautiful *Thoibi*. *Thoibi*, the princess of *Moirang*, was a woman of true wit, liberal thinking, assertiveness and determination. She was instantly attracted to *Khamba* while he showed reluctance initially due to his humble background. *Khamba's* rare feats of courage and valour instilled fondness in *Chingkhuh* and the king too but incurred the envy and jealousy of a certain nobleman named *Nongban*. *Nongban* was also resentful of the relationship of *Khamba* and *Thoibi* as he had always eyed on *Thoibi* as his. Likewise, *Chingkhuh* did not approve the closeness of *Khamba* and *Thoibi*. He sent his daughter to banishment from the kingdom to *Kabaw* for some time. *Thoibi* possessed the intelligence and sensibility to obey her father. The same attributes also prompted her to decide on in favour of *Khamba* as her rightful choice for marriage despite her father's reluctance and married him soon after her return from exile. She represented the woman of substance endowed with the knowledge to identify her rights and procure them and never to be subdued or cornered by injustice and subjugation.¹³

Another legend of Manipur narrates the sacrifice of *Thambalnu*, a simple rural woman. When the kingdom was devastated by disastrous floods that wreaked havoc on public and property during the reign of Maharaja Gambhir Singh, it was predicted that sacrifice of a maiden with her name ending with 'nu' would save the situation. The prediction suggested *Thambalnu*. She rose to the occasion, sacrificed her lover and family, and gave up her life for the sake of the welfare of the kingdom.

Women of the pre-Hindu period

The Meitei women of the pre-Hindu period can broadly be divided into two categories— those who belonged to the royal household such as the queens, princesses

and the close relations of the royal household and those who are the common women of the society. Both the categories of women exhibited certain distinctive traits which are inherent in Meitei women of today too.

Women of the royal household

During the reign of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*, there was political consciousness and awareness among the women of that period. The necessity of an office to run the royal household and the kingdom on a daily basis was realised from the times of *Pakhangba*. Therefore, there existed an administrative office (*Kuchu*) especially for women and by women with nine members or ministers called *Phamdou*. The Chief Queen of *Pakhangba*, *Laisara* or *Laisana* was the head of the *Kuchu*. The office is better known as *Laisarapham*. The administrative policies and functions of the people were taken care of by the *Kuchu*. In course of time, the *Kuchu* was sub-divided into two units, namely *Lakkhong* and *Laton*.¹⁴

Lakkhong

Lakkhong was headed by the chief queen, *Laisara*. It consisted of fifteen members called *Achanbi* who were senior woman-members of various clans and close relations of the royal family. The office, situated in the palace compounds, had its daily sessions in early morning where daily reports were discussed and administration of the royal palace was dealt with.

Laton

The other unit, *Laton*, was headed by the sixth queen of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*. She was better known as *Laimakhubi* or the youngest queen. *Laton* was therefore called *Laimakhubi Phamlup* and comprised of twelve members. They were responsible for the actual administration of the royal household as well as the whole kingdom. The members looked after the financial resources, granary, fishery, salt-making, clothing, horses, elephants, cattle, transportation, etc. of the kingdom.

Lakkhong was entrusted with vital powers and functions. Presentation of daily reports on activities of *Lakkhong* and *Laton* were obligatory. The king was obliged to adhere to the strict rules and regulations set by *Lakkhong*. Any breach of rules and conduct

amounted to punishment. However, the rules were so framed as to favour the chief queen or the *Leimalen*.

Pacha

From the time of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* onwards, women's court, '*Pacha*' was also formed. The chief queen, *Laisara* was the head of the *Pacha* in the initial stage. *Pacha* catered to solving the problems involving women. Disputes concerning social, economic, political or cultural matters were taken up and settled with good judgement. Later, *Pacha* was headed by a *Pachahanba*. The *Pacha*, therefore, was a symbol of good and efficient judiciary system concerning women in ancient times.

Since the institutions of *Lakkhong*, *Laton* and *Pacha* were strictly maintained, cases tried in the court and found guilty were punished. Punishment meted out did not spare the royal families too. Even the King's intimate cases were taken up in the women's court.¹⁵ The royal women were also not above law. Punishment ranged from paying penalty, being thrashed in public places to banishment to degrading places (*Loithaba*). Capital punishment or death sentence was also imposed on women according to the severity of the crimes they committed.¹⁶

We also come across several instances of women from the royal household exhibiting courage and military prowess from historical records. To a large extent, they were skilled in warfare, in wielding swords and the use of other weapons. They were capable of riding horses and fighting in battle. Usually they worked on honing their skills in defence motives rather than attacks in battle. These royal women showed their talent and tactfulness in war defence strategies when the kingdom was off-guard and the people were in peril. They would accompany the King in raids and attacks or on their own too. It was recorded in the '*Chada Laihui*' which was the royal chronicle on the genealogy of the mothers of the kings of Manipur, that the Meitei Kings were trained in the art of warfare and tactics to attack and win over the enemy by the mothers and queens. Sometimes, they even resorted to tricks and presence of mind to avert killings and battle.

Chingkhei Thanbi

In ancient times, the clan dynasties in the Manipur valley were always at war with each other. The Meiteis and the *Khumans* were always warring enemies just as the

Khumans were with the *Moirangs*. However, it was also prevalent during those times where daughters of the Chiefs were exchanged in marriage with each other to maintain friendship and peace between the clans. *Chingkhei Thanbi*, daughter of *Thawan Thaba*, the Meitei Chief, was given in marriage to *Adon Punshiba*, the Khuman Chief while the daughter of *Adon Punshiba*, *Khayoiron Tangja Samphabi* was given in marriage to *Thawan Thaba* to maintain amity between the two principalities. However, *Khayoiron Tangja Samphabi* was treacherously murdered by the intrigue of the Chief Queen of *Thawan Thaba*. This incident enraged her father *Adon Punshiba* who swore to take revenge on *Thawan Thaba*. He was invited to an expedition against a tribe by *Adon Punshiba* who was waiting with his wife *Chingkhei Thanbi* for the latter's arrival. *Chingkhei Thanbi*, knowing her husband's intention and plans, signalled her father to go back while pretending to beckon. Thus she tactfully averted his arrival and saved him from being killed treacherously. Of course, she had to meet almost a similar kind of sad death for helping her father escape her husband's attack.¹⁷

Lingthoi Ngambi

In another case, we are made aware of valour and quick insight in defence strategies of Queen *Lingthoi Ngambi*. When the king, *Ningthou Khomba* was away on an expedition to Akla in 1443 CE, the Chief of the Tangkhul tribe took the opportunity to seize Imphal, the capital of the Meitei kingdom. The Queen quickly thought of a plan to outwit the Tangkhul chief. She donned the garb of the king and her female attendants of the palace disguised themselves as soldiers. She then charged the Tangkhul chief for not providing assistance in the expedition to Akla as promised. The latter, believing the queen to be the king, was taken aback. Later in the night, after the Tangkhul chief and his men were sufficiently drugged in their food and drinks they partook, they were easily captured by the queen and her female attendants and thus protected the palace and the capital from the impending raid of the Tangkhuls.

Tangja Khombi

Some royal women would fight like seasoned warriors. The adventures of queen *Tangja Khombi* will illustrate that fact. In the absence of the king *Nongpok*

Khongphen, queen *Tangja Khombi* led several expeditions to the tribes of *Tangda* village, *Kuyom*, *Kujong*, *Tangkhul*, *Kashom*, etc. and came back victorious. Similar to those cases were the attacks of queen *Takhenbi* and *Khurai Sanaton* on the villages of *Kuyong*, *Khutlai*, etc. They were victorious and captured many men and women as their laurels.¹⁸

When the enmity between the warring tribes was intense, battles and attacks happened off and on. The victorious of the two would capture men and even women too. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records of such capture and torture from 12th century onwards.¹⁹ King *Kongyamba* battled against the *Chakpas* and captured the women defenders of *Chakpa* tribe and others.²⁰ It also records of a certain attack where they did not spare the Meitei queen who was off guard as she was inspecting the harvesting in the paddy fields.²¹

It is generally known that the royal women who were born in or married to the royal household enjoyed a lot of privileges and better life and fortune. More often than not, the maidens of the *Angom* clan married to the Meitei kings usually became the principal Meitei queen.²² However, the Meitei kings maintained many wives at the same time. In spite of that fact, generally equal status was provided to all of them. Each wife was given the opportunity to ascend to the throne as Chief Queen according to the king's wishes.²³ Besides attending palatial celebrations of the royal families in their best fashion of wearing beautiful floral decorations in the ears and sometimes taking part in orgies, they were interested in sports too, which was totally a masculine area. The royal women would collect their maid servants and other common women and participate in the annual boat races held in the capital as early as 1594 CE.²⁴

The queens, as a rule, performed a lot of duties and obligations towards the royal family and the society in general. Besides military activities, they would engage themselves in work which any Meitei women would do. They would help in harvesting, go fishing at the various lakes and ponds, especially the *Loktak* lake; fishing being a favourite sport for them as mentioned in the legends. They had proficiency in weaving pretty designs on cloths and producing exquisite and intricate embroidery. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* mentions the innovations made in weaving and embroidery in the dresses the royal women wore. In 969 CE²⁵, it refers to a certain 'khei' pattern along the border of the *phanek* (sarong-like wrap around the waist worn

by Manipuri women) that was designed and introduced among the women of the royal household. In another entry, the mention of the spinning of fine yarn to weave into delicate clothes is recorded.²⁶ All these references indicate how weaving and embroidery which is an exclusive field for women had developed and how royal women aspired to introduce intricate designs and innovative forms in the attires they wore.

Besides, during peace times, they always involved themselves in political administration of the kingdom along with the King in all respects. They followed the King in his royal rounds of visiting villages, meeting the food grains to the people, inspecting lands, rivers, barricades, buildings, palaces, temples, and so on and subjects, distributing so forth. During the times of scarcity of food due to droughts or floods, the king and the queen would personally go to the villages and distribute reliefs to the people.²⁷ The royal women also engaged themselves in dedicating trees, paddy fields, lands, ponds, markets elephants to the public for general service or for religious and cultural purpose. There were instances where royal women were dedicated to the 'lai' (deities) also.²⁸

It is also found that giving of bride price or bride wealth was prevalent during the ancient times. There are several records in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* where the prospective kings and princes presented a lot of gifts ranging from money and gold to horses and elephants to the king whose daughter they have chosen to marry. There is a record where the bride price of a cattle-drawn palanquin and other items was found to be inadequate and so returned. Later when an elephant with other valuable items were again gifted, then only it was received.²⁹

Generally the Meitei royal household had marriage alliances outside the kingdom of Manipur too with the neighbouring kingdoms of Mayang (Cachar), Tekhao (Assam), Takhen (Tripura), Pong and Awa (Burma) and so on. There is the mention of a Meitei maiden given in marriage to a Tekhao king as early as 1536 CE.³⁰ The Meitei kings and princes also married maidens from the neighbouring kingdoms.

Common women of the society

Not much is known of common women of different principalities of Manipur in the pre-historic times. What little is found in the various myths and legends and also the

chronicles relate to their ability to shoulder social responsibilities and daily management of their household affairs. Like all women of other communities, the maintenance of the home and the hearth was their biggest priority. Besides they were engaged in the paddy fields assisting their husbands in cultivation. They maintained the kitchen gardens for their direct consumption as well as for sale in the markets. They spun yarns from cotton and silk-worm cocoons, and plied on their looms to weave cloths to wear. They even dyed clothes with colours extracted from various plants, leaves and flowers. They engaged themselves in manufacturing pottery and salt too. They went fishing in lakes and ponds; and were experts in treating the fish in various ways for preservation. We come to know of their weaving expertise and fishing habits from various myths and legends too.

The common women were also proficient in cooking and preparing various food items. They extracted oil from mustards seeds and other varieties of seeds, produced sugar from sugarcane, and could prepare a variety of sweets too. They even made wine from rice. Since the Meiteis were accustomed to wine and meat-eating profusely in ancient times, the women exhibited superb proficiency in preparing grand feast to entertain friends and enemies alike.

It was often a regular practice in olden times that when a skilful warrior of a clan or principality was interested to prove his valour and might, he usually threw a challenge to any other warrior of another clan to contest in single combat (with one another). Thus a duel would ensue out of rivalry where the two opponents would fight unto death and the winner got the head of the loser. Sometimes the fight would end amicably without killing each other. Whatsoever be the outcome, the two warring brave men would initially get treated themselves to lavish food and drinks along with jovial conversation before the fight. The sumptuous food and drinks shared between the peers was customary. It was the sole responsibility of the wives of those warriors to prepare and provide the grand feast for the success of their men. Though the outcome of such duels would bring happiness or grief to the respective wives, such combats were common and frequent between the different clans in those periods of history.³¹

One real yet sad and moving story is the contest between *Chakha Moiremba* of the *Khuman* clan and *Kangbishu* of the strong *Heirem* community. *Namun Chaobi*,

Chakha Moiremba's wife forewarned him against the combat as she had a premonition from her dream. Nevertheless, she prepared the usual pleasantries of delicious food and drinks and sent them packing with her husband as a dutiful wife. When *Chakha Moiremba* was defeated and his head taken away by his rival, his wife made an appeal to the king to avenge his death. When her pleas fell on deaf ears, *Namun Chaobi* persevered on in search of her brother-in-law, and finally finding him, repeated her request for revenge. The brother-in-law complied with her earnest request and performed the task of beheading the enemy to the pleasure of his sister-in-law.³²

Another account of such a fight was between two *Moirang* men and a *Khuman* warrior. The two *Moirang* men, *Ahou Meikayang* and *Athingmongbishu*, were friends who were chided by their wives to prove their manliness by challenging a combat against the unrivalled dauntless *Khuman* warrior, *Tongbu*. They were further instructed by their wives that only one should invite the *Khuman* for the fight and the other should lay low and wait for the opponent. *Tongbu* hesitated to accept the challenge as he considered the *Moirang* as a neighbour and an unmatched opponent too. Moreover, he tried to excuse himself citing his recuperation from injuries incurred from a previous encounter. His wife also forbade him from the combat though she prepared the customary feast as instructed by her husband. Against his and his wife's wishes, *Tongbu* finally went to face the fight where he was deceitfully wounded by the other *Moirang*. Like a true warrior, undeterred he offered the *Moirangs* the food and drinks, his possessions and himself to be beheaded. The two *Moirang* friends then returned home to the great joy of their wives.³³

Women were wont to go to the market place to buy and sell things. There is the mention of *Khamnu* selling firewood and Princess *Thoibi* buying from her in the legend of *Khamba* and *Thoibi*. Women could also row boats and canoes in the big lakes and rivers. They usually would use boats when they had to transport their goods and wares for sale in the markets. Major markets grew up on the banks of rivers. The *Lakkhong* used to supervise these markets.

The common men of the society were always engaged in *Lallup* service in the palace where they had to work for every ten days out of forty days; or else they were most of the times away from their homes following the King when he was in some warfare

with the neighbouring chiefs and rulers. These activities led the womenfolk to shoulder the familial and social obligations all by themselves. They had to depend and rely on themselves to maintain the basic needs of life. They were bound to come out of their homes to sell their goods and wares either in the morning or in the evening. The market place soon became a venue for their meets and congregation where they discuss and share the problems and grievances of each other's lives and also of the society in general. These women discuss and analyse anything related to social, economic and political affairs of the kingdom when they meet in the market place. In times of need, the women of the markets also stand for each other, thus strengthening the bond between them.

On cultural and religious front, it is the women who maintained the worship of the various deities with proper rituals and ceremonies. The Academy of *Maibis* was given ample independence to profess their activities and worship. Besides the worship of deities all year round, elderly women also performed rituals like *Lamta Thangja Saroi Khongba* which is the appeasing of the spirits at the end of the year. *Panthoibi*, the Goddess of warfare, is worshipped by those who practise martial arts and weapons. During the *Lai Haraoba* festival, women participate in singing and dancing under the leadership of the Maibis. They also take active participation in games and sports too. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records of women who took part in races and other sports like the annual boat race in ancient times.

It is often noticed that the common women performed best when they are in groups – be it in paddy fields, cloth-weaving, marketing or in cultural affairs. Female bonding had always been a special strength for women in times of need.

In course of time, by 17th century onwards, the power of the *Lakkhong* declined. A *Pachahanba*, a male minister was appointed to look after the *Kuchu* of the King and the *Lakkhong* of the Queen. The Academy of *Maibis* was not given any independent status from 17th century onwards. It was put under the control of the *Yoiren Loishang*, or the Academy of Priests. And with the coming of the outsiders with a new religion, the status of the women declined gradually.

Manipuri Women in medieval period

The Medieval period in the history of Manipur is generally regarded from the time the popular King Garib Niwaz ascended the throne in 1709 CE till the British took over the political administration of the kingdom in 1891 CE. This period had seen a lot of political upheavals and social unrest which directly or indirectly affected the kingdom in myriad matters of importance. Analysing the situation, we can certainly come to some conclusions about the root causes that affected the social instability in the kingdom. One cause was the influence of the introduction of a new religion during this period. The advent of Hinduism to this region brought about frictions with the existing old faith. The second cause can be deduced from the frequent attacks and invasions the kingdom had faced with from its neighbouring kingdoms, especially from Awa (Burma). The several wars with Burma completely devastated the kingdom for a number of years. And finally, internal conflicts among the royal household for accession to the throne and the British intervention from early 1820's onwards which culminated with its takeover of the kingdom in 1891 CE further spoiled the stability of the political system affecting other grounds.

Impact of new religion

The region of Manipur had witnessed the inroads of immigrants since the pre-historic times. The people who came from the East were called *Nongpokharram*. They were the *Porei* tribe led by a man called *Chingkhei Poreiton*. They got assimilated into the people of this region. There were also people who came from the West who were termed as *Nongchupharram*. The Aryans who came from the West during the 16th-17th century were Hindu Brahmins who tried to introduce their new religion, Hinduism to this new land. The Silk Route, which connected China in the East and Afghanistan and beyond in the West passed through the region of Manipur. It became a vital passage for exchange of trade and commerce as well as culture. The spread of Buddhism from India to South East Asia was through Manipur. Later the Muslims entered Manipur during the Mughal invasions of Assam and also spread the religion of Islam in this region.

However, the Meiteis were unfazed and not very receptive to the new faiths making their presence felt except for a few conversions here and there. They strictly adhered

to the old Meitei faith and hence customs and traditions of the ancient indigenous faith prevailed.

Ramanandi Vaishnavism

Nevertheless, the situation had a radical change when Maharaja *Pamheiba*, better known as Garib Niwaz came to power and ascended the throne of Manipur in 1709 CE. He was a king who exhibited patriarchal monarchy. During his time the kingdom flourished on all fronts. The immigrant Brahmins who came from Bengal approached the king and influenced him and his royal household to accept the new faith, that is, Hindu Vaishnavism of the Ramanandi cult.³⁴ Thereby under the patronage of the king, the religion strengthened its roots and was imposed on the people of the kingdom. To make the conversion to and acceptance of the new faith successful, the king, at first, closed down the institutions of Maibas and Maibis of the old Meitei faith. Temples and shrines dedicated to the old cult were pulled down; and images of indigenous 'lai' (deities) were destroyed.³⁵ When the people revolted, the King also ordered books and manuscripts written in the old Meitei script to be burnt and destroyed. He encouraged the translation of Hindu religious scriptures and texts into Meitei language. The people were subjected to complete abstinence from the consumption of meat and inebriant drinks. The practice of Sati and child marriage was also introduced.³⁶

The Brahmin Pundits were patronised by the king and they became not only religious advisors of the king but began to mentor him on all other affairs of the kingdom as well. They formed the highest class and caste in the society of the kingdom too. All important social, religious and cultural events were conducted under the leadership and guidance of the Brahmin Pundits.

Gouriya Vaishnavism

Later, the Vaishnavite cult of Gouranga Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Bengal made its advent into Manipur which boosted the spread of Hinduism in the kingdom far and wide. This cult became more popular than the earlier Ramanandi cult and the majority of the people began to accept the new cult with all its terms and conditions, grudgingly or otherwise. Idol worship became popular and the pursuance of strict maintenance of rituals and religious ceremonies became the order of the day.

Due to the influence of Hinduism, the practice of cremating the dead started. The King himself cremated the exhumed bones of most of his male ancestors by the *Ningthee* (Chindwin) River. This practice became prevalent among the people of the land also.³⁷

Though Hinduism had been imposed on the subjects, social customs of traditional Manipuri prevailed in many cases. Divorced women continued to remarry which was accepted in pre-Hindu times.³⁸ The king along with the queen and royal ladies came to worship God *Sanamahi* in the market place. They made an offering of 'yu' (indigenous alcohol) to the deity and in the end also drank the same.³⁹

Defection from the new religion

However, the adoption of the new faith was not at all a smooth ride but riddled with oppositions notwithstanding from the royal household itself. The king faced criticism within his royal family. The chief queen, Gomti, was manipulative and strong-willed. Though married to Garib Niwaz, she had intention of avenging the killing of her former husband by him. And hence, she hatched a plot against the king and his eldest son Shyam Shai, the crown prince and expelled them from the kingdom to realise her objective to put her own son Chit Shai on the throne of Manipur. Later, Chit Shai put the king, Garib Niwaz and the crown prince, Shyam Shai to death.

After the death of Maharaja Garib Niwaz, there was turmoil and chaos in the social and political administration of the kingdom. The sudden discontinuation of the institutions of Maibas and Maibis of the ancient Meitei faith, the abrupt introduction of a new religion and its cultural implications, the change of political power on the throne which was rigged with intrigues and murders were not good signs of a developing kingdom. There was lack of social peace and political stability for a long time.

Rift between the two cult followers

After the abdication of Maharaja Garib Niwaz and the accession of the throne by Chit Shai in 1748CE, there were not only political conflicts but also religious rifts. Manipur witnessed an internal disquietude between the Hinduised Meiteis who supported Garib Niwaz and the traditionalists who were the supporters of Chit Shai. Gauriya became the way of living for the Hinduised who maintained strict and rigid

caste rules. But the new king, Chit Shai imposed fines on those followers who were keeping that new code of order. It was clearly indicative that he was interested in overthrowing the imposed religion and its way of life.⁴⁰

Impact of the two faiths on women

This inconsistency had a major impact on the life and conditions of the general subjects especially the women and their status which were normally overlooked by many. During this period, women were the worst sufferers. They had to maintain family and their market economic needs as well as practice the new faith with different rites and rituals. Confusion reigned in them as they were subjected to discontinue their age-old indigenous religion, and then they were told not to discard its practice altogether and fined for the practice of the new faith. So, they continued the worship of the ancient deities alongside the new-found deities. They had to maintain integrity and harmony of both, though trying at times.

Re-establishment of Hinduised Kingdom

During the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra, Hinduism again became even more prominent in social and cultural ethos of the society. He had a mind to convert Manipur into a full-fledged Hinduised kingdom. He introduced the beautiful *Rasleela* dance form after he was inspired by a vision. He motivated his daughter, princess Bimbabati to dance in the first performance.

Princess Bimbabati

Incidentally, the princess was also amply interested in the devotional songs and dances of the Hindu faith. She remained a pious spinster throughout her life. She composed several devotional songs and presented many dance performances in the shrines erected in the name of Shri Govindaji. In this manner, she made great contributions to make the new religion popular among the people of Manipur.

With Hinduism came the practice of Sati in the soil of Manipur. There were a few cases of it recorded in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* which proves that it was not popular in Manipur. Women usually refused to jump into the funeral pyre on their own. In one of such cases, for not doing so, the woman was deported to *Loi to Sugnu*. It was a type of capital punishment by drowning.⁴¹ The dreaded Hindu practice was considered an evil deserving punishment and failing to take root in Manipur, died a natural death.

The common women of the kingdom continued to engage themselves in sports activities and so took part in races and other games.⁴² But it slowly died down as the religious imposition was renewed with great vigour and fervour. The Maharani accompanied by the royal ladies would visit their religious Hindu guru and join in a religious feast.⁴³ Listening to the reading of the religious books was followed. The king accompanied by the queen and other royal ladies went for a pilgrimage to the Ganges where the queen passed away in Brindavan.⁴⁴

By the time Maharaj Gambhir Singh ascended the throne in 1821 and 1823 and also during the interim period ruled by Jatu Singh, the revival of the old Meitei faith started all over again in the kingdom. The *Lai Haraoba* festivals of *Lai Koubru* were celebrated with grandeur with the active participation of the royal ladies.

When Maharaja Gambhir Singh's son, Chandrakirti Singh ruled over Manipur for a long period from 1850 CE to 1886 CE, he tried to maintain peace and harmony politically as well as culturally in the kingdom under the keen guidance of his mother, Kumudini. On the religious front, he maintained both the faiths of Hinduism and Meiteism with tolerance and liberal outlook. He provided equal freedom to both the practices amongst the people. Before the commencement of any noble task, he consulted both the Brahmin Pundits as well as the Maibas and heeded both their advice and suggestions. He revered both the Pundits and Maibas equally. During his reign, he established the shrines for both the religions and worship of both was practised. He would also settle disputes that between the predictions of the Maibas and Hindu Astrologers amicably.

Because of his secular attitude towards providing religious freedom, the people were quite contented with him. People, especially women, could practice the religious rituals with much enthusiasm than before. The Hindu religious festivals, rites and rituals were as maintained as the traditional customs and worship of Meitei deities.

Crime and punishment

On the other hand, the social stigmas like elopement, intermarriage between different castes, tribes and communities, incest, adultery leading to abortion, etc. became taboos and treated as serious crimes. Such cases faced trial in the Court of *Cheirap* or *Garot*. The Maharaja would consult the Pundits and Maibas alike to decide on cases

brought to the *Cheirap* Court.⁴⁵ Punishments meted out varied according to the severity of the cases. ‘*Prayaschit*’ or expiation was conducted by drinking the water of Shri Govindaji.⁴⁶ To solve a dispute, the two persons were made to drink the waste water of the guns.⁴⁷ To know the truth of allegations of adultery, a test was conducted where both the boy and the girl were made to touch the gold and silver placed on front of Shri Govindaji and accordingly given punishment. In case of elopement and intermarriage, usually the man or both face demotion to *Pangans* (Mohammedan) or hill tribes or Haris (scheduled castes). Adultery and abortion were severely dealt with. The accused man and his accomplices were sent to prison or faced deportation; while the woman and the *Maibis* who acted as mid-wives were taken to the scaffold in the market or inflicted ‘*Khungoinaba*’ or banishment. Such severe crimes were not tolerated in the society. Cases of match-making with different castes or with a *Pangan* or a sepoy of a British Sahib invited punishment of exile to Awa, Cachar or other neighbouring areas.

Impact of recurrent war with Awa (Burma)

During the medieval period, the relationship between Meitei kingdom and Awa became strenuous and it worsened day by day. Invasions became frequent from the Awa side as the kingdom was larger and man power being greater than Manipur. Even then, there were some attacks where the Meitei kings won, capturing a number of men and women alike.⁴⁸ But more often than not, Awa overpowered Manipur and it went on for decades. Meanwhile, Manipur witnessed the worst form of fratricidal struggle for its throne. The kingdom of Cachar became a safe haven for refuge-seeking princes of Manipur who even drove away the reigning king of Cachar. Taking opportunity of this weak juncture of the kingdom of Manipur, king Bagyidaw of Awa invaded Manipur in 1819 CE and occupied the kingdom placing a vassal king on the throne.⁴⁹ Successive invasions continued till the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1826 CE with the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo.

Seven Years Devastation of Manipur

During the period from 1819 CE to 1826 CE, the Awa forces completely ruined Manipur, land, people, agriculture, cottage industries and all. Again severe famine struck Manipur causing many deaths. This period is normally termed as the *Seven Years Devastation* of Manipur. The kingdom was almost wiped out of its male

population. Many people were either killed in battles or taken prisoner to Awa (around six lakhs)⁵⁰; while some fled to the Surma Valley. Little pockets of Manipuri refugees began settling in different parts of Cachar, Sylhet, Tripura and even Dacca.

Impact on women

When Gambhir Singh was restored the throne of Manipur, the number of adult men was less than 3000.⁵¹ Those who remained were also mostly old and disabled. The male population of Manipur had fallen drastically. Women outnumbered men during those times. Women's responsibilities, burdens, liabilities became many-fold. Survival in all respects depended solely on their shoulders. Reconstruction of the society, rebuilding of lives, struggles for existence and security hardened them and made them strong enough to fight against all odds. Manipuri women did not shrink from hardships. Farming which needed male involvement in digging and ploughing, cottage industries and market economy were all restarted and maintained by them. Their ability to cope with such burdens had made them industrious and self-reliant. Chivalry became almost non-existent in Manipur.

Moreover, since the number of men was fewer than women and the population fell inconsiderably, in order to compensate the equilibrium, polygamy was allowed. It became quite popular. It brought in a lot of negative impact in the social, economic and ethical lives of the people. It further enhanced the sorry plight of womenfolk. They were even more laborious for their survival and existence. In turn, indolence and idleness set in among men folk. Over and above, the social status of women dwindled gradually. In spite of their degrading status, they held their men and sons even higher as their number was still less. Hence men became dominant and androgenic; while women's submissive and feminine nature became their ideal traits.

Contributions of Queen Kumudini

Records from the royal household lean towards a certain notable woman who is still remembered for her courage and ability. She was queen Maisana Kumudini, the second queen of Maharaja Gambhir Singh. She had fought by his side in battles. At the time of the king's death, her two-year old son Chandrakirti became the Maharaja of Manipur. A prince named Nar Singh was the Regent. After ten years of his rule in the name of Maharaja Chandrakirti, the queen mother doubted the credibility and

sincerity of Nar Singh and hatched up a plot to oust him but misfired. Consequently she took her young son and fled to Cachar accompanied by some loyal officers. During her five-year stay in Cachar, she wrote to the British officers many a time for providing security and support. Meanwhile Nar Singh became the king of Manipur followed by his brother, Devendra Singh. When Chandrakirti came of age and ability, he returned to Manipur to regain his rightful kingdom. The people of Manipur supported him too. Chandrakirti overthrew Devendra Singh and claimed the throne of Manipur in 1850CE. He soon recalled his queen mother back to Manipur amidst great pomp and grandeur. He had deep love and respect for his mother as it was reflected by the several records in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* of the king undertaking various works of development in the kingdom mostly along with his mother.

Queen mother Kumudini also seemed to be concerned of the plight of the general public and performed several tasks for the restoration of the kingdom after the *Seven Years Devastation*.⁵² She and her son also directed the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* to be rewritten as she found the history during the period of decadence wrongly recorded.⁵³ During the reign of Chandrakirti, the history of three Maharajas was written in the book called '*Laiyinthou Nongshaba*'. Yet another history of eight Maharajas was included in the royal chronicle on the genealogy of the mothers of the kings of Manipur called *Chada Laihui*.⁵⁴ The King also instructed two scribes to write the history of the Maharaja and his wives contemporary to that period. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* mentions of the great contributions the queen mother made towards the society. She was indeed able to guide his son, the king to noble ways. With her death, the legacy of glorious women of the royal household came to an end. The *Lakkhong* was also closed down after her death.

Princess Kuranga Nayani

Moreover, during the medieval times, there is the mention of a few glorious Meitei princesses married to the neighbouring kingdoms. Their contributions to the social and political affairs of their respective kingdoms deserve merit and appreciation. The Meitei princess, Kuranga Nayani married the Ahom king, Swargadeo Rajeshwar. After the death of her husband, she undertook the charge of protecting her brother-in-law Laxmikant, the crown prince. When the Maomariyas revolted against the throne

in 1769CE, she tactfully killed their leader and strategically restored her brother-in-law on the throne of Assam.

Princess Jandhabi Devi

Another Meitei princess who deserved admiration was queen Jandhabi Devi, daughter of Maharaja Bhagyachandra and married to the king of Tripura. She too, after her husband's death, ruled the kingdom successfully from 1783 CE to 1785 CE and won the adoring title of 'Rajmala'.

Princess Induprabha

Induprabha, the Meitei princess married king Govindachandra of Cachar and became the queen from 1804 CE to 1831 CE. She was admired for her competent administration of the kingdom.⁵⁵

Impact of British intervention

The advent of the British to the small kingdom of Manipur occurred from the time of Maharaja Gambhir Singh. He sought the help of British East India Company to regain some lost regions of the kingdom from the hands of the neighbouring kingdom, Awa. With their help, he was able to do so and drove the Burmese beyond the *Ningthee* River. He had joined the Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) and fought on the side of British East India Company. The war would not have ended early without his unerring support bringing victory to the British. At the end of the war, Manipur was found to be completely devastated. With the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 CE, Manipur was compelled to hand over Kabaw Valley (the western side of *Ningthee* river) to Awa in 1834 CE with a compensatory allowance of rupees five hundred per month to be paid by East India Company to the king of Manipur. Maharaja Gambhir Singh was not pleased with the deal which also quickened his death. Although the stipend continued till Manipur was integrated with the Indian Union in 1949.⁵⁶

The Englishman who came with Gambhir Singh when he reoccupied the throne of Manipur was Captain Grant who was in command of the Manipur Levy in 1825 CE. The Manipur Levy was constituted of 500 men by Gambhir Singh with the agreement of the British to assist Gambhir Singh in recovering his kingdom. The Manipur Levy received training and equipments financed by the British Government. It continued to

stay in Manipur till the death of Gambhir Singh. In 1835, Capt. Grant left Manipur and Capt. Gordon was appointed as a Political Agent in Manipur by the British Government. The political agent worked like an ambassador and did not get involved in the internal political matters of the kingdom.

The British would come with his family and used to join in the social and cultural affairs along with the royal family. They would go with their family to watch the King catch tigers in the forests or watch the annual polo matches. They would look into the construction of new roads and other developmental works. During the period when queen Kumudini fled with her young son to Cachar, she reportedly requested for assistance of the British for the protection and security of the minor heir, Chandrakirti. But they refrained to offer any help directly.

But by 1851, according to a government order, Chandrakirti was recognised as the Maharaja of Manipur and the Government of India undertook the responsibility of protecting his kingship lest any rival princes should attempt to remove him from the throne. It also advised the political agent in Manipur to be a constant guide to the king and also to safeguard his subjects against any oppression from the king. It was indicative that the British were slowly yet steadily beginning to get involved in the internal political affairs of the kingdom. Manipur was humbled to a status of nominal sovereignty. The promise of protecting the subjects against any tyranny of the ruler never materialised and instead allowed the ruler a free hand in his administration. Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh seemed to be excessively committed to the British Government and thus hardly maintained his independent status. This encouraged the British to have an upper hand over the monarch.⁵⁷

Anglo-Manipur War of 1891

By the time of his death in 1886 CE, the kingdom of Manipur again felt the onslaught of political uncertainty and upheavals due to the struggle between the princes for the succession to the coveted throne. The princes were divided into two factions. Maharaja Surchandra who succeeded his father, Maharaja Chandrakirti in 1886 CE was overthrown by his brother, Kulachandra who ascended the throne in 1890CE with prince Tikendrajit as the Jubaraja.⁵⁸ This period was marked with deep political turmoil between the Maharaja and the British political agent, Mr. Grimwood, as they

ran out of favour of each other due to some misunderstanding. The situation further aggravated with the arrival of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Mr. Quinton, which culminated into the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891.

Many firing attacks of the British sepoys on the palace caused great casualty among women and children too. When the situation worsened due to frequent attacks, the royal ladies were shifted from the palace to their respective parental homes with their belongings.⁵⁹ The common folk too, especially old men, women and children began fleeing their homesteads to save their lives. And then the ill-fated mysterious killings of four British officials in the palace occurred which resulted in the final repercussion of the takeover of the kingdom under the commandership of General Collet of the British forces and the public execution of Jubaraja Bir Tikendrajit Singh and Thangal General on 13 August, 1891 CE.

Impact on women

It is said that during earlier times, when the common women would intercede on behalf of a criminal condemned to death, the king would sometimes reprieve him or give him temporary respite. Hence they hoped against hope that the British officers might intervene and pardon the two. Accordingly, they gathered in thousands in the place of execution. But nothing prevailed as the two were hanged in front of all in broad day light. The heart-rending cries and wails of the women and all the people gathered there for the Martyrs of the soil seemed to have shattered the heart of mother earth.⁶⁰

The woes and grief of the people knew no bounds. From then on, the people lost their trust on the foreign control; though the British officers who remained in Manipur introduced many reforms for the development of the kingdom, such as construction of roads and abolish of the *Lallup* system and starting of English education. The feeling of estrangement loomed large between the ruler and the ruled which never got reconciled. There was hardly any time for peace too. There were constant rebellions the British had to quell in and around the State with the forces of Manipur.

Though Churachand Singh, a descendant of Maharaja Nar Singh, was crowned the Raja of Manipur in 1891, the British had a firm control over Manipur and the adjoining areas of North-East India. While the *Lallup* system was abolished, the

House Tax of Rs. 2/- was introduced.⁶¹ The able men were constantly engaged in warfare for the British Government. Naturally the plight of the women of Manipur aggravated. But they seemed to have been hardened by such tough times and tough lives. They continued to work diligently braving all odds to suffice their economic needs. The traditional women markets still continued. Their manner of working together in groups still survived. It promoted great inspiration to the people. Though subservient to the male hegemony and the alien domination, their inner strength and might is best reflected in the modern era.

Manipuri women and modern era

The real portraiture of the Meitei women is best manifested in the Modern period of the history of Manipur. Reeling under the hegemonic dominance of patriarchy as well as British imperialism coupled with a weak and autocratic king as a nominal head by the turn of the 19th century, one would have thought they were the most subjugated and marginalised sufferers of that transitional period of the Victorian era. Contrary to that, these women came out in the open and displaying their mettle, reciprocated with their fights against injustice and oppression, not solely for their lot just as the feminist wave of the western world swept in the European soil, but for the society and community as a whole. What is most striking was the sheer selfless dedication they had for the protection of the people from atrocities and domination when the men of Manipur failed to become a potent force to reckon with. They formed one dynamic structural phenomenon that would never bother for their comforts but rather work and think in groups even to this day. Although, it sounds like a flow against the post-modern current trend of individualism, yet, the spirited struggles of subversion by these women cannot be ruled out as devoid of the very ethos of post-modernism. Recurrent deploring situations had compelled them to bond together. Their strong sense of cohesive consciousness and activities have led to such stupendous outcomes that the world would covet for. They are also best remembered and glorified for their efforts and actions in groups.

Socio-political arena

The effect of that group force is reflected as early as 1904 in the modern era. The state has witnessed two major women movements, popularly called the *NupiLan* (*Nupi* =

women, *Lan = War/Revolution*) of 1904 and 1939 respectively. Both these uprisings, motivated by general social, political and economic crisis, rather than by injustice against the women's legal rights which are the usual issues for women's movement, exhibited tremendous amount of mass women force and power.

Nupilan of 1904

The first *Nupilan* (Women's Revolution) that occurred in 1904 was one of the instances of the courage, cohesive strength and determination of the Manipuri women that set a marvellous experience to be felt. In 1904, an untoward incident occurred that fired public resentment and social unrest in Imphal town. It so happened for some unidentified persons burnt down and demolished the bungalow of the British Assistant Political Agent of Manipur. An order was passed by the British administrator to the effect that the innocent Manipuri menfolk of Imphal town were taken bondage and compelled to fetch the building raw materials from *Kabaw Valley* and reconstruct the bungalow as a sort of punishment. In defiance of the unjustified order of the British, for the first time in the history of Manipur or even the world, the women revolted. They gathered round the residence of the political agent, Mr. Maxwell and demanded the immediate repeal of that order. On seeing the huge gathering of womenfolk, the officer was intimidated into total submission and finally had to rebuild the house at their own cost. Thus, the Manipuri women could save the disgrace and preserve the dignity of their men.

Nupilan of 1939

Such innate spirit of valour is again projected in the second and most memorable *Nupilan* of 1939. One of the immediate causes of this uprising was of economic concern, the rice imbroglio. A poor harvest, coupled with traders with vested interests hoarding the paddy, milling it and exporting the rice to the neighbouring districts of British India, and the sudden price hike of paddy within Manipur, resulted in the occurrence of an artificial man-made famine in Manipur. Taking note of the grim situation and the consequent implications, the womenfolk of the markets, who were the worst-hit, again rose in agitation of a vast magnitude in Manipur.

On 12 December, 1939, some hundreds of Manipuri women held a demonstration in front of the Durbar Hall when the Durbar was in session. They requested the Durbar

to ban the export of rice and stop all the rice mills. T.A. Sharpe, the President of the State Durbar, responded that such an order could not be passed without the consent of the Maharaja, who was then in Nabadwip in West Bengal. Under the pressure of the demonstrators, the President was bound to go to the telegraph office and despatch a telegram to Maharaja Churachand Singh to that effect. The women waited there until they received a definite order banning the export of rice. By this time, the crowd swelled to several thousands. They besieged Sharpe in the telegraph office. A detachment of Assam Rifles came to the scene and dispersed the demonstrators. Violence broke out and some women received serious injuries. Though they suffered setbacks, the women were amazingly resilient enough to continue the agitation for several days. Ultimately, the British political agent had to stall rice mills and when the Maharaja returned back to Imphal, the Durbar resolution was approved preventing the rice export. Eventually, rice, which is the staple food of the people of Manipur, became available at a reasonable rate in the market. Besides bringing economic stability, the uprising also brought about social and political motivation among the people of Manipur.

Impact of *Nupilan*

These movements of dissatisfaction which emerged as a spontaneous response to combat colonial excesses and exploitation eventually set the trend of feminist movement of an exceptional kind, an indigenous product of the soil of Manipur that never displayed any hesitation to fight against injustice when the honour and rights of the land and the people are in peril. The most significant outcome of the mass women movement was the growth of political and national consciousness in the state. The women, for the first time in Manipur's history, expressed their suppressed desire of the people that the British should leave Manipur immediately. Thus, the nature of the movement suddenly shifted from the export policy of the colonial Government to the freedom movement. The outbreak of this movement uncovered the social and administrative vices which were prevailing in the state. The British were subjected to introduce administrative reforms in the state. The movement was so strong that the Manipuri menfolk also joined in the freedom movement under the competent leadership of H. Irabot Singh. The news of this prolonged agitation spread far and wide. The *Weekly Asamiya*, an Assamese Newspaper of those days reports in its 27th

January, 1940 edition, “The leader of the people of Manipur, Sjt. Irabot Singh was arrested on a charge of rebellion for delivering a lecture supporting the cause of the women. As a result of this, the agitation became more intense and consequently autocracy and violence are prevailing in Manipur in full swing. The state authorities are trying to subdue the agitation by force without considering the legitimate political and economic demands of the people...”

The movement had a profound political impact. Its effect was the emergence of a political party named *Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha* out of the original social and religious organisation *Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha*. Thus, through the major contributions of the Manipuri women, the notion of establishing a responsible Government took its shape. The credit for bringing such changes in the very soil of their motherland invariably goes to the brave women of the land.

Emergence of *Meira Paibi*

The Manipuri women have greater political awareness and consciousness in present times. But it is hardly represented in party politics. Instead, they are more interested and committed in forming social organisations for the welfare of the people of the state. One such organisation is the *Meira Paibi* (Women Vigilante Groups). The *Meira Paibi* which began in the late 1970's, is one such successful and active women movement that have metamorphosed from the earlier *Nupilan*. It exhibited women or mother power in their relentless combat against alcoholism and drug abuse in the late 1970s and later on, has extended its sphere of activity to safeguard the people and the society from all sorts of discrimination, marginalisation and State and non-State repression.⁶² The *Meira Paibi* (who are mostly middle-aged mothers) have large enrolments, and usually work at the grass root level. Though spontaneous and powerful, more often than not, they act on impulse. In them, we find the zeal and enthusiasm of fighters against the general hurdles of the land yet never ever alienating themselves from their prior responsibility of their home and hearth.

There are numerous cases where the *Meira Paibi* of the village or locality came out and rescued suspects who were apprehended by the army during their combing operations. In 2004, in yet another case when a suspected woman insurgent was raped and killed by the Assam Rifles jawans, some infuriated Manipuri women, mostly

middle-aged mothers, stripped themselves naked and protested in front of the Assam Rifles army headquarters at Kangla Park in the heart of Imphal town against their excessive inhumane atrocities. They appealed for the repealing of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, an Act that gave sweeping powers to the security forces. This agitation went on for several days. Another incident that occurred in 2009 was the killing of a pregnant woman during the so-called fake encounter between the army and the militants. The Manipuri women, supported by all the social organisations of Manipur, went on a prolonged agitation that even closed down educational institutions in Manipur for months together as a mark of defiance against the prevailing situation of lawlessness in the State.

Crusader Irom Chanu Sharmila

Mention has to be made of the human rights crusader Irom Chanu Sharmila, a woman of true grit, strong will and determination, who has embarked upon a hunger strike since November, 2000 to press the Government for the complete withdrawal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act from the State of Manipur. Her fast was triggered by the killing of ten civilians at Malom near Imphal airport in alleged indiscriminate firing by Assam Rifles troops in retaliation to a militant attack on November 2, 2000. She had staged her hunger strike in Delhi in 2006 as a result of which a case is still pending against her in a Delhi court.

Sharmila has been experiencing the yearly cycle of release from jail and re-arrest. The maximum sentence for her 'offence' of attempting to commit suicide under Section 309 of the IPC is one year. But that has not deterred her indomitable courage and perseverance to make her dream see the light of the day. She has received a lot of awards for her relentless commitment towards her cause. She also donates most of the cash which accompanies the awards for the general welfare of the people of the Manipuri society.

Family, household and social affairs: Religious conduct of Manipuri women

The Manipuri women continued to maintain the practices of the two religious cults of Hinduism and Meiteism in their daily lives in the family household even today. It should be noted here that the womenfolk are pre-eminently religious-minded. Social values like respect for the husband by the wife and of the parents by the children

relate to customs and traditions of both the cults which are invariably observed by the people of the Manipur Valley. The womenfolk try to inculcate the moral and socio-cultural values and virtues of both the religious faiths to the next generation as well. In imbibing the values of both the religions, they harmoniously synchronise with their day-to-day lives as well. Although, the younger generation are slowly neglecting this value-system and culture as they try to imitate the more easily susceptible global cultures of the present world.

Social conduct of Manipuri women

The women emanate warm and cordial behaviour with others as well as prove to be truthful and kind-hearted in their relationship with others. Cleanliness is another added virtue of the Manipuris. The women maintain personal cleanliness and of the clothes they wear. Besides maintenance of sanitary hygiene, they also keep their houses and surroundings clean and beautiful.⁶³

Work culture of Manipuri women

Manipuri women are extremely laborious and industrious.⁶⁴ Hard-work is a part of their duty from times immemorial. Female labour, in any form or the other, has been an accepted norm without any complaints or regrets of the Manipuri society. Through work and labour, they try to be independent, self-reliant, and to a great extent, self-sufficient too. It has made Mrs. Grimwood to remark in her book *My Three Years in Manipur* (1975), that “The Manipuris do not shut up their women, as is the custom in most parts of India, and they are much more enlightened and intelligent in consequence”.⁶⁵ Women of Manipur manage all the domestic concerns; sometimes, they are more supporters of the families than their husbands are, and in many cases they support them entirely. This is true of many homes in the valley.

The joint family system is still prevalent among the Manipuris, though smaller single families have also become the normal feature. The role of every woman in the family, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law, etc., is strongly defined by work ethics. House-servants and helpers to perform the day-to-day household chores are unheard of, and also, hard to find. Every able female, young and old, contribute her labour in every possible way for the smooth running of the household. This trait is noticeable not only

in the rural areas but also in the urban population too. Educated working women manage both her home and work with equal fervour.

In the fields

In the rural areas, the household responsibilities are many-fold. Besides their household chores, the women assist their menfolk in agriculture and farming too. They join in every aspect of farming except ploughing the fields, which is forbidden for them. But under unavoidable circumstances, there are cases where women took to ploughing also. Fishing, which is predominantly a male occupation, is taken up as a means of livelihood by many women, even today, to support their families.

In the kitchen garden

Almost every household does maintain a vegetable or kitchen garden, however big or small, it may be. Though it is an added burden to them, the women do not complain and carry on their work diligently. For many, the garden is a means of livelihood. The garden fresh vegetables are for personal consumption or else for sale in the markets so as to contribute to the family income. Elderly women work in their gardens in the morning and by evening, walk miles carrying basket-load of garden products on their heads to sell in the market. Small markets at every corner or roadside of every big locality are a common sight of the Manipuri society.

In weaving

Weaving and spinning has been a vital part of the Manipuri women's lives, irrespective of the status of her family. In early days, her role is to weave and provide every necessary item of clothing of the household. Tales of legendary *Thoibi*, princess of *Moirang* relate of her proficiency in the art of weaving and embroidery. The tradition is still continuing. Nowadays, we notice Manipuri women weaving on a traditional loom as a pastime or for actual business. One rarely comes across a Manipuri house without a loom or some weaving apparatus. This is because, in almost every Manipuri marriage, the bride is given a loom as a gift or dowry by her guardians. The loom symbolizes an occupation she might take up later on. Therefore, every girl or woman is rather bound to be acquainted with the skill of weaving and spinning as it is considered as one of her necessary qualifications or prerequisites. In recent times, certain localities specialise in certain items of cloth as the womenfolk

crave for excellence in quality production. Young girls are still interested in the art of weaving and embroidery in spite of their education and modern outlook, and they are very innovative at the same. Over and above, the persistent adherence of the Manipuri women to their handloom products as their best attire in ceremonies, and, the undying respectability of the tradition of weaving is the secret of its sustenance in spite of the great onslaught of mill cloths.

Socio-economic field

From earlier times, there is no social restriction that binds the Manipuri women to be confined to their homes. They are independent and liberated enough to make a major contribution to the economic enhancement of the family and the society. In the modern period, their role in the internal trade and commerce of the state is incomparable. T.C. Hodson, the British political agent of Manipur in 1808, wrote in his book "*The Meitheis*" that "the women held a high and free position in Manipur, all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them."⁶⁶ *The Encyclopaedia of NE India* also mentions that "thousands of women both in urban and rural areas supplement the income of their families by active participation, nay, by playing leading role in the small business sectors of the main markets."⁶⁷ In some cases, the women who are especially widowed, divorced or abandoned by their husbands, are the only bread earners in the family. These women manage the food security of their families as well as educate their children adequate enough to get better jobs, merely by being market-vendors. Instead of reconciling to their unfortunate fate in life, these women, by dint of strong determination and endurance, shape the future of their children and that of Manipur as a consequence. It is no exaggeration to say that the development of education in Manipur can be attributed, to a large extent, to the contribution of diligent labour of the mothers of the society.

Women vendors in Nupi Keithel

The main market which is the commercial hub of the capital Imphal, is the *Khwairamband Keithel* established by Maharaja Khagemba in 1580 AD. This market or *Keithel* is popularly known as *Nupi Keithel* or *Ima Keithel* ('*Nupi*' meaning 'women' and '*Ima*' meaning 'mother'). The market, run exclusively by women or

mothers, is an important means of livelihood and survival for many homes. The merchandise includes almost anything that a main market usually sells. The market stands tall to claim economic independence that the women of Manipur enjoy from their male counterparts.

The market place is also a place of congregation for the Manipuri women where they meet and share among themselves their views and opinions on almost anything. Besides business management and trade speculations, they discuss the issues relating to various aspects of their lives and hence relevant decisions are made to that effect. It may be noted that the seeds of revolt and woman power were first sown at this *Nupi Keithel* which later gave birth to the great women movements of Manipur.

Women entrepreneurship

Besides the market, there are many trade outlets and business enterprises in and around the capital town run solely by the women nowadays. The handloom, sewing and embroidery industry is entirely controlled by women entrepreneurs. Cottage industries on handicrafts like making dolls, mats, baskets and other related products from the indigenous raw materials are also managed by the women. In recent times, women also indulged in various business enterprises like shoe-making, accessories designing, fashion designing and many more. These products have gained an easy market outside Manipur also as they are especially promoted and propagated by the National and International Trade fairs for their exquisite handiwork. Besides providing employment, the impact of these indigenous industries in elevating the retailing and wholesaling of its products in markets outside Manipur only consolidates the amount of involvement and hard labour of the women folk in the development of the socio-economic life of the Manipuri society. Considering their role and active participation, it is not surprising to find that, according to 2001 census, Manipuri women outnumber their male counterparts as workers in the household, agricultural and industrial field, in the rural as well as in the urban areas.

Practice of *Marup*

Another feature of socio-economic activity prevalent in the society that promotes fellow-feeling and good will for each other is the self-help group scheme known as '*Marup*', a kind of kitty, among the womenfolk. It is a group collection of certain

amount of money, which is given to the winner (by drawing lots) of the group only once, each time when it is played. The member of the group who wins the money can utilize the same to meet her own or her family's economic needs. It is found that many girls and women depend on this *Marup* money for meeting the expenses of their marriages, and thereby do not put an extra burden on their parents and guardians in preparing for their marriages. Almost every locality in Manipur forms different kinds of *Marup*, say cash money or kind (i.e. consumer durables, clothing, vehicles, etc.) In the same manner, there is the *Marup* for deaths and funerals also to assist the bereaved family in its time of need. This *Marup* plays another major role of the Manipuri women rendering financial aid and assistance, boosting community feeling and mainly female bonding among themselves in the society.

Education and Employment

Formal education for women in Manipur came late. T.C. Hodson rightly observed that “the education of women cannot be said to have made equal progress, although it was hoped, not without reason that, in a country like Manipur where women hold such an important position in the economic activity of the state”.⁶⁸ Only a few daughters of the higher classes availed of education at home. In 1898, a girls' primary school was established but faced poor attendance. The spread of education gradually increased only through constitutional provisions, raising thereby the female literacy rate to 70.26 per cent in 2011, even higher than the national average. Now, more and more women are getting educated and the number of employed women is also ever-increasing, though the figure is still very less in comparison to men. Manipuri women are mostly absorbed in professions like teaching and serving in Government Offices. Some have joined semi-governmental organisations and still some of them are social workers in non-governmental organisations.

Literacy rate of Manipuri women

Below is a table showing the increase of literacy rate of Manipuri women from Census 2001 to 2011.

Table no. IV.I: Literacy Rate – Census 2001 and 2011

Census	2001			2011		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
Total Literacy	1,310,534	753,466	557,068	1,908,476	1,039,858	868,618
Literacy %	66.61	77.71	57.29	76.94	83.58	70.26

[Courtesy: Manipur Population Census data 2011. Accessed on 23/01/2016]

Women writers of Literature

Some liberal thinkers like Hijam Irabot Singh and Laishram Somorendra Singh did their best to set the Manipuri women free from the age-old shackles of dominance inherent in the male-dominated Manipuri society. Irabot formed some organisations like the *Bhadra Mahila Samaj* and the *Mahila Sammelani* to bring awareness of the ills of the patriarchal society and encourage the education of women. L. Somorendra too took up his cudgels against the problems the womenfolk had been facing due to the effect of ‘gender-biasness’. Later, with the setting up of Tamphasana Girls’ School in 1935, Manipuri women got the light of western education and with this a sea change in their thinking and outlook in the society came about.

Dominance of male influence

They were the new crop of educated women. Thoibi Devi (1920-1996), M.K. Binodini (1922-2011) and Kh. Pramodini Devi (1924-2006) were amongst the pioneers. They picked up the strain that the male writers had initiated and proceeded to highlight, with vibrant and evocative thought and style in their writings, the state of being of the women in a male-prejudiced society.

Feminine tone

The later part of the 20th century reveals a significant figure of women’s writings in Manipuri Literature. Relevant observations and inquiries begin to appear especially in Manipuri poetry of that period as to the proper representation of women as well as the attempts to present, understand and delineate their emotions, thoughts and ideas by the poets. However, all the writings of modern women writers on women cannot be subsumed as writings on feminism. At the initial stage, a feminine tone marks the writings of most of the female writers. Though phenomenal in their approach, the mood and technique employed in the anthologies are quite conventional.

Feminist stance

It were Sanjenbam Bhanumati, Moirangthem Borkanya, Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi, Ibemhal, Kh. Subadani, Sabita Bachaspati and others who ushered in the new era of feminist poetry from the 1980s onwards. They set the trend and ultimately carved a niche in feminist Manipuri poetry. Writing with a feminist stance is not an easy task for the female writers burdened with the male hegemony. They are sceptic about their logic behind delineating their experiences as women. However, the increasing consciousness of gender sensitisation in the world around them has instilled them enough courage to voice their feelings and thoughts without inhibition. They proclaim that women have been made to surrender their individualities at the altar of socio-political violence and on repressive patriarchal structure for quite long. As a part of literature, it can be a medium for construction of a new world and a new moral order which is basic to feminist politics.

Socio-cultural milieu

The tradition of community feeling and female bonding in the society is again even more reflected in socio-cultural activities. Women have certain roles and services assigned for them wherever there is a social, cultural or religious occasion in the locality.

Community service or *Khundau Shuba*

Their mass participation to extend assistance to the family where the occasion, say a wedding or funeral ceremony is held, is a social custom which is termed as '*Khundau Shuba*' (Community Service) and is highly expected and appreciated. One would rarely find any woman shunning from such social responsibilities in the locality, however busy or educated she may be.

***Maibi's* role**

In the traditional cult of Meiteism, women still occupy a more prominent place than men in recent times too. For instance, in the *Lai Haraoba* Festival, *Maibis* (priestesses) play a more substantial role than *Maibas* (priests). They are the ones who mainly conduct the rites and rituals of the festival. As a result, the people are in awe of these *Maibis*. The *Maibis* also enjoy a rather high social position and honour for their role as priestesses which are hardly heard of in other societies of the world.

Impact of performing arts: From Meiteism

From ancient times, learning dance and music has been almost a prerequisite for the Manipuri girls. T.C. Hodson said, in this respect, that all girls “whose position is at all respectable, learn to dance, for in Manipur, the dancing profession is often a road to royal dignity and is not despised in any way as is in the case in India”.⁶⁹ Dancers and singers are respected and honoured greatly. Manipuri dance is particularly of two different kinds based on the two religious cults which are still retained with even more enthusiasm and popularity. The first kind are the folk dances of *Khamba-Thoibi*, *Thang-Ta* (Martial Arts), *Lai Haraoba Festival*, etc. which belong to the ancient tradition and culture of Meitei religion. Tales of legendary *Thoibi's* dancing prowess is narrated in the *Moirang Parbas* (Ballads based on *Moirang* episodes) till today.

From Hinduism

The second or the other kind are the classical form of dances like the *Rasleelas*, *Nat Pala*, *Nat Sankirtan*, *Pung Cholom*, etc. which are attributed to the Vaishnavaita faith. The *Rasleela* is acclaimed as one of the first four classical dances of India because of its ethereal beauty, grace, elaborate costumes and deeply religious devotion attached to its performance. One peculiar aspect of this dance is that the performers are all women or girls, even the one who plays the part of Krishna. In the life time of a Manipuri girl, it is quite desirable that she must participate in such traditional *Rasleela* at least once. And since *Rasleelas* are an integral part of the religious and cultural ethos of the Manipuri society, the girls are taught dancing from a very young age.

So also for Manipuri *Nat Sankirtan* music and singing, women are allowed singing devotional (*Sankirtan*) songs in the temple premises also. The *Pala Sankirtan* (a form of devotional dance and music), which is a *Sankirtan* conducted by a team of menfolk, is also no more confined to men alone. Women *Pala Sankirtans* have come up and are performing in marriages and funeral ceremonies all over Manipur. So looking at the roles that women are undertaking in various socio-cultural aspects, it may be noted that there is nothing called a strictly-males zone any more. Women are trying their hands and also striving to excel in any possible field. Besides the women *Pala Sankirtans*, there are the usual age-old *Khubak-Ishei* (devotional song and dance by a team of women), the *Moirang Parba* and *Khongjom Parba* (Ballads on *Moirang*

and Battle of *Khongjom* episodes) sung by women with the *Dholok* (Drum) which are still continuing and are highly esteemed in the society.

Sports activities

In the field of games and sports, the Manipuri women are not lagging behind, but project as much grit, spirit and calibre so as to bring home laurels in both national and international levels. In predominantly male-dominated sports like polo, football, hockey, martial arts, weight lifting, archery, boxing, body-building and many others, the Manipuri women have exhibited considerable brilliance and full-heartedness, a dauntless attitude that has won a lot of medals and trophies for the home state and the country as well.

An indigenous game worth mentioning is the ancient traditional game of '*Kaang*' (an indoor game played by two teams with a flat tortoise shell or a seed of a certain tree) which is played by both men and women combined. Ancient legends indicate that Princess *Thoibi* displayed such excellent tact and skill in the game which is narrated with great admiration in the '*Moirang Parbas*'. The tradition of this game is still maintained in Manipur, and annually *Kaang* competitions are held all over the state. Here too, we notice the enthusiastic role and participation of girls and young women in almost every recreational aspect of the socio-cultural sphere of the society.

Problems faced by Manipuri Women: At home

No doubt, at home, she plays her different roles of a daughter, sister, wife, and mother to perfection. Surprisingly, these women do not give much value and importance to their personal lives. Problems of individual lives and gender are never an issue to be discussed or pondered over; and as such, the drudgery of household chores is usually taken for granted and borne silently. In the societal affairs, her role can be seen as an extension of her domestic concern. Her involvement in the various functions of the society emerges out of her own initiative and interest. Though individuality is lost in the bargain, these women perform best when they work in groups. It is seen that the social-cultural and political tradition of Manipur has accepted the women of Manipur in whatever task that they may take up; though the acceptance is based much more on social and moral approval than on legal sanctions. They stand as carriers of the legacy of women power to act in a non-violent way at different times in history to achieve truth and justice.

In recent times also, their status and dignity, though considered high from various angles, cannot be treated as equal to men. They are more like the sacrificial goats on which family and society depend for their survival and development. The root cause can be found in the various social evils prevailing in the society. The Manipuri society being traditional and patriarchal, the prevalent social customs and taboos restrict the women in many ways till date. Sons are more preferred to daughters as is seen in other parts of India. Married daughters are denied inheritance of any parental property. Widows are also disinherited from their husband's property except her own cash and ornaments.

Though monogamy is the rule, polygamy is widely practised in Manipur. The abiding social norms and conditions do not allow the women to think of leaving their husbands. Women of Manipur today encounter social vulnerability in respect of domestic insecurity and varying degrees of deprivation in many respects. Therefore, economic independence cannot be said to have necessarily provided true empowerment and emancipation to Manipuri women. Again their productive market activities, which include agriculture, cottage industry and labour activities are glorified and encouraged as they yield sufficient returns, while their non-market activities like household activities are proportionately devalued and taken for granted. In such circumstances, a Manipuri woman silently endures all the pain and sacrifice and humiliation.

In economic matters

In the economic field, since the womenfolk have negligible control over their income, they can hardly invest much in their small business. They fall prey to the money-lenders and remain vendors forever. The women entrepreneurs also face numerous setbacks in their handloom and handicraft industry due to shortage of capital and funds, non-availability of raw materials at cheaper rates, lack of mills and factories, etc. Due to these problems large-scale production is hindered and the industries still remain as cottage industries. To top it all, the continuing onslaught of imitation of the Manipuri clothes by mill clothes from outside Manipur is hampering its growth and product-sale.

In education and employment

The progress of female education in the state is also thwarted by poverty, social prejudice and lack of proper facilities. The drop-out rate is also high among girls.

They hardly aspire for higher education as they are more engaged in fulfilling their immediate needs. They join some work or the other, usually in traditional and informal sector, in order to assist in augmenting the family income. This directly has a repercussion in the low employment of women too. They are generally employed in low-paid jobs. Among the women who are employed, most of them serve as school-teachers, clerks in Government offices or nurses in hospitals. The number of women gaining access to professional or technical institutions for education or employment is also minimal. Administration services and high-end jobs have also eluded the fate of Manipuri women. Awareness of gender sensitization being lacking among the people, it is always found that the Manipuri working women have to struggle hard between the demands of their traditional life style and social obligations at home and the strains and rigours of modern work culture and atmosphere. Although coping family, work and society is quite strenuous, more often than not, the women have resigned themselves to their fate and hardly complain about their over-burdened lives.

In political matters

Any amount of political awareness and consciousness of the Manipuri women has not converted into political representation in active politics. Formal politics is still a male domain. The women have never been called to join in any of the higher social decision-making bodies. So also, modern world's terms and usages like women empowerment, gender equality, feminism and major decision making have not permeated to all levels of the society, despite the fact that Manipur has already witnessed women movements of repute. One thing is clear that the women movements of Manipur were basically different from the women movements of the other parts of the western world.

In societal matters

The society of the present Manipur is perpetrated with high level of corruption, insurgency, militant nationalism and ethnic cleansing. Narcotics and drug abuse, AIDS, small arms and light weapons have penetrated into the soul of the society and made it desolate. Armed conflicts, security breaches and army atrocities rule the day. Crime and violence against women is increasing day by day. Women are victims of both the state and the non-state governmental repression. Gender discrimination or gender-based social exclusion prevailing in the society can only be prevented by

framing and implementing policies which are appropriate to the Manipur scenario. Such policies and strategies need to be jointly taken up by related Government departments, civil society organisations, NGOs, educated intellectuals and religious leaders conforming to the needs of the women community as a whole. It is without doubt that the inclusion of women in such policy bodies is inevitable.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the various facets of the Manipuri women right from the pre-historic times to the present age have been highlighted. How the status of these women has undergone changes in different stages of history and their problems arising out of it have also been incorporated. We also capture a fairly better picture and notion of the type of society the Manipuri society is and the outlook it focuses from the nuances described about its women in the course of Manipuri history. We can safely conclude that the Manipuri women are self-appointed custodians of the society.

Feminism of modern times, is connected with non-violent co-operation and has a potential for peace-making where its manifestation can be noticed in its attempts to facilitate participatory human relations rather than control them, and its insistence on making personal political and vice versa. It also implies reconciliation rather than victory. Feminism of this manner, has set in a process by which women in caring, non-violent and peaceful ways are learning to respect themselves, value their own work and to evoke, expect and demand that respect from others. Feminism of this contextual background, coupled with land's very own social, economic, political and cultural uniqueness, make its manifestation, in the myriad roles and activities of the Manipuri women. Considering such women, we hope the day will not be far away when status of Manipuri women will be better and empowerment is duly ensured and enshrined to them.