



Chapter Four

Research Setting (Manipur – A land of Jewels)

Manipur is a state in Northeastern India, with the city of Imphal as its capital. Manipur consist of Meitei, Pangal, Naga, Zomi, Kuki and Mizo people, and is bounded by the Indian states of Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, and Assam to the west; it also borders Burma to the east. It covers an area of 22,347 square kilometres (8,628 sq mi).

Manipur, as the name suggests, is a land of jewels. Its rich culture excels in every aspect as in martial arts, dance, theatre and sculpture. The charm of the place is the greenery with the moderate climate making it a tourists' heaven.

Taking into account the state's geographical location, Manipur can serve as the India's Gateway to the South-East Asia. The proposed Trans-Asian Railway Network (TARN) if constructed will pass on from Manipur, connecting India to Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. As such, economists suggest that Manipur could transform into a bustling economic powerhouse state in the next couple of decades.

The Meiteis (Meeteis), who live primarily in the state's valley region, form the primary ethnic group (60% of the total population) but occupy only 10% of the total land area. Their language, Meiteilon (Meeteilon), (also known as *Manipuri*), is also the lingua franca in the state, and was recognized as one of the national languages of India in 1992. The Muslims (Meitei-Pangal) also live in the valley; the Kukis, Nagas, Zomis and other smaller groups form about 40% of the population but occupy the remaining 90% of the total land area of Manipur. Manipur is considered a sensitive border state.

Foreigners entering Manipur prior to January 1, 2011 (including foreign citizens born in Manipur) were required to possess a Restricted Area Permit. As of January 1, 2011 foreign citizens are no longer required to have a Protected Areas Permit (PAP).

Etymology

Manipur had been known throughout the ages as Meitrabak, Kangleipak or Meiteileipak as well as by more than twenty other names. Sanamahi Laikan wrote that Manipur's new nomenclature was adopted in the eighteenth century during the reign of Meidingu Pamheiba. According to Sakok Lamlen, the area had different names according to the era. During the Hayachak period it was known as *Mayai Koren poirei namthak saronpung* or *Tilli Koktong Ahanba*, then in the Khunungchak period as *Meera Pongthoklam*. Thereafter during the Langbachak era, it became *Tilli Koktong Leikoiren* and finally *Muwapalli* in the Konnachak epoch. During the latter part of its history, Manipur and its people were known by different names to their neighbours. The Shans or Pongs called the area Cassay, the Burmese Kathe, and the Assamese Meklee. In the first treaty between the British East India Company and Meidingu Chingthangkomba (Bhagyachandra) signed in 1762, the kingdom was recorded as Meckley. Bhagyachandra and his successors issued coins engraved with the title of Manipureshwar, or lord of Manipur and the name Meckley was discarded. Later on, the Sanskritisation work, *Dharani Samhita* (1825–34) popularized the legends of the derivation of Manipur's name.

History



The Kangla Gate (west entrance to the Kangla Fort)

Manipur came under British rule as a princely state (kangleipak) in 1891 and existed until 1947, when it acceded to the newly independent Union of India. During the World War II, Manipur was the scene of many fierce battles between the Japanese and the Allied forces. The Japanese were beaten back before they could enter Imphal, and this proved to be one of the turning points of the war. After the War, the Manipur Constitution Act of 1947 established a democratic form of government with the Maharaja as the Executive Head and an elected legislature. In 1949, Maharaja Budhachandra was summoned to Shillong, capital of the then Indian province of Assam. The legislative assembly was dissolved on the controversial annexation of the state with the republic of India in October 1949. Manipur was a union territory from 1956 and later became a full-fledged state in 1972.

Manipur became a Union Territory in 1956 and later, in 1972, a full-fledged state of India with **Muhammad Alimuddin** becoming the first statehood Chief Minister (1972–74).

There has been a separatist movement in Manipur since 1964 with the establishment of United National Liberation Front, with several violent groups desirous of a sovereign Manipur. Special permission must also be obtained for those who wish to enter Manipur, as it is considered a "sensitive area" on account of its political troubles and geographical location.

Geography, vegetation and climate

Geography

Manipur is one of the seven states of Northeast India. The state is bound by Nagaland in the north, by Mizoram in the south, by Assam in the west, and by the borders of the country Burma in the east as well as in the south. The state capital of Manipur is Imphal. The state lies at latitude of 23°83'N – 25°68'N and longitude of 93°03'E – 94°78'E. The total area covered by the state is 22,347 km². The capital lies in an oval-shaped valley of approximately 700 square miles (2,000 km²) surrounded by blue mountains and is at an elevation of 790 metres above the sea level. The slope of the valley is from north to south. The presence of the mountain ranges not only prevents the cold winds from the north from reaching the valley but also acts as a barrier to the cyclonic storms originating from the Bay of Bengal.

There are four major river basins in Manipur State, the Barak River Basin (Barak Valley) to the west, the Manipur River Basin in central Manipur, the Yu River Basin in the east, and a portion of the Lanye River Basin in the north. The total water resources of Barak and Manipur river basins are about 1.8487 Mham. The overall water balance of the state amounts to 0.7236 Mham in the annual water budget. (By way of comparison, India receives 400 Mham (million hectare meters) of rain annually) The Barak river, the largest river of Manipur, originates in the Manipur Hills and is joined by a number of tributaries such as the Irang, Maku, and Tuivai. After its junction with the Tuivai, the Barak River turns north and forms the border with Assam State, and then enters the Cachar Assam just

above Lakhipur. The Manipur river basin has eight major rivers: the Manipur, Imphal, Iri, Nambul, Sekmai, Chakpi, Thoubal and Khuga. All these rivers originate from the surrounding hills.

Almost all the rivers in the valley area are in the mature stage and, therefore, deposit their sediment load in the Loktak lake. The rivers draining the Manipur Hills are comparatively young, due to the hilly terrain through which they flow. These rivers are corrosive in nature and assume turbulent form in the rainy season. Important rivers draining the western area include the Maku, Barak, Jiri, Irang and Leimatak. Rivers draining the eastern part of the state, the Yu River Basin, include the Chamu, Khunou and other short streams.

Physiographically, Manipur may be characterised in two distinct physical regions – an outlying area of rugged hills and narrow valleys, and the inner area of flat plain, with all associated land forms. These two areas are not only distinct in respect of physical features but are also conspicuous with regard to various flora and fauna. The valley region would have been a monotonous, featureless plain but for a number of hills and mounds rising above the flat surface. The Loktak lake is an important feature of the central plain. The total area occupied by all the lakes is about 600 km². The altitude ranges from 40 m at Jiribam to 2,994 m at Mt. Iso Peak near Mao Songsong.

The soil cover can be divided into two broad types, viz. the red ferruginous soil in the hill area and the alluvium in the valley. The valley soils generally contain loam, small rock fragments, sand and sandy clay, and are quite varied. On the plains, especially flood plains and deltas, the soil is quite thick. The top soil on the steep slopes is very thin. Soil on the steep hill slopes is subject to high erosion, resulting in gullies and barren rock slopes. The normal pH value ranges from 5.4 to 6.8. The climate of the State is salubrious with approximate average

annual rainfall varying from 933 mm at Imphal to 2593 mm at Tamenglong. The temperature ranges from sub-zero to 36°C.

Districts

Manipur has currently nine administrative districts.

Table no. 4.1: Administrative Districts of Manipur

District	Area	Population	Headquarters
Bishnupur	496	208,368	Bishnupur
Churachandpur	4570	227,905	Churachandpur
Chandel	3313	118,327	Chandel
Imphal East	709	394,876	Porompat
Imphal West	519	444,382	Lamphelpat
Senapati	3271	283,621	Senapati
Tamenglong	4391	111,499	Tamenglong
Thoubal	514	364,140	Thoubal
Ukhrul	4544	140,778	Ukhrul

Vegetation

The natural vegetation occupies an area of about 14,365 km² which is nearly 64% of the total geographical area of the state. The vegetation consists of a large variety of plants ranging from short and tall grasses, reeds and bamboos to trees of various species. Broadly, there are four types of forests:

- Tropical Semi-evergreen.
- Dry Temperate Forest
- Sub-Tropical Pine
- Tropical Moist Deciduous

Teak, pine, oak, uningthou, leihao, bamboo, cane, etc. are important forest resources growing in plenty. In addition, rubber, tea, coffee, orange, and cardamom are grown in hill areas. Rice is a staple food for Manipuris. Rice and cash crops make up the main vegetation cover in the valley.

Climate



The Dzuko Valley lying on the border of Manipur and Nagaland

The climate of Manipur is largely influenced by the topography of this hilly region which defines the geography of Manipur. Lying 790 meters above sea level, Manipur is wedged between hills on all sides. This northeastern corner of India enjoys a generally amiable climate, though the winters can be a little chilly. The maximum temperature in the summer months is 32 degree C. In winter the temperature often falls below zero, bringing frost. Snow sometimes falls in some hilly regions due to the Western Disturbance. The coldest month is January, and the warmest July. The ideal time for tourism in the state, in terms of climate, is from October to February, when the weather remains bright and sunny without the sun being too hot.

The state is drenched in rains from May until mid-October. It receives an average annual rainfall of 1467.5 mm. However, the rain distribution varies from 933 mm in Imphal to 2593 mm in Tamenglong. The precipitation ranges from

light drizzles to heavy downpour. The normal rainfall of Manipur enriches the soil and helps in agricultural processes and irrigation. The South Westerly Monsoon picks up moisture from the Bay of Bengal and heads toward Manipur, hits the eastern Himalaya ranges and produces a massive amount of rain in the state.

Population

Manipur has a population of 2,388,634. Of this total, 58.9% live in the valley and the remaining 41.1% in the hilly region. The hills are inhabited mainly by the Nagas, Kukis, Paite(Zomi) and smaller tribal communities and the valley mainly by the Meiteis, Pangal, and "Bhamons" who are literally non-Meiteis). Some Naga, Kuki, Paite and Hmar settlements are also found in the valley region. Racially, Manipuri people are unique and special as they have features similar to South east Asian except for Brahmins in the state who were believed to be more Indian as they have Indian features. The distribution of area, population and density, literacy rate, etc. as per the 2001 Census provisional figures are as below:

Language

The official languages of the state are Manipuri (Meiteilon) and English.

Manipuri language

Meiteilon, the official language of Manipur, has a long history. Courses on Manipuri Language and Literature are offered as a subject up to M.A. level in both Central and State Universities. It is the main language of communication among all different tribes and people inhabiting Manipur. English is also slowly gaining ground as a common language of communication. Hindi is also in use by the migrants from northern India. Meiteilon has been recognized as the Manipuri language by the Indian Union and has been included in the list of scheduled

languages (included in the 8th schedule by the 71st amendment of the constitution in 1992). Meitei is taught as a subject up to postgraduate level (Ph.D.) in Indian universities, apart from being a medium of instruction up to the undergraduate level in Manipur.

Manipuri script

Meitei Mayek is a script, commonly referred as Mayek, which has been used since ancient times. The origins of the Manipuri alphabet, or Meetei Mayek as it is known in Manipuri, are shrouded in mystery as many historical documents were destroyed at the beginning of the 18th century during the reign of King Pamheiba. Some believe the alphabet has been used for almost 4,000 years.

Between 1709 and the middle of the 20th century, the Manipuri language was written with the Bengali alphabet. During the 1940's and 50's, Manipuri scholars began campaigning to bring back the old Manipuri alphabet. In 1976 at a writer's conference all the scholars finally agreed on a new version of the alphabet containing a number of additional letters to represent sounds not present in the language when the script was first developed. The current Manipuri script is a reconstruction of the ancient Manipuri script. Since the early 1980's the Manipuri alphabet has been taught in schools in Manipur.

Languages of hill people

There are 29 different dialects spoken in Manipur. Six main hill dialects recognised by Government of Manipur for medium of instruction & examination up to class XII are:

1. Thadou-Kuki, dialect of Thadou people, the second language in the state after Meiteilon during Colonial Period.
2. Tangkhul, dialect of Tangkhul people
3. Paite, dialect of Paite people

4. Hmar, dialect of Hmar people
5. Mao, dialect of Mao People
6. Rongmei dialect of Rongmei people
7. Maring dialect of Maring Naga/Maring, Maring Khoibu, Maring Narum-saibol people

Transportation

Tulihal Airport, Changangei, Imphal, the only airport of Manipur, connects directly with Delhi, Kolkata Guwahati, Silcher and Agartala. National Highway NH-39 links Manipur with the rest of the country through the railway stations at Dimapur in Nagaland at a distance of 215 km (134 mi) from Imphal. National Highway 53 (India) connects Manipur with another railway station at Silchar in Assam, which is 269 km (167 mi) away from Imphal. The road network of Manipur, with a length of 7,170 km (4,460 mi) connects all the important towns and distant villages.

On April 9, 2010, Union Minister of India, Shashi Tharoor announced that the central government is considering a rail link from Manipur to Vietnam.

Religion

Table No.: 4.2, Religion distribution

Religion in Manipur	
Religion	Percent
Hinduism	46.01%
Islam	8.81%
Christianity	34.04%
Others	10.86%

Meiteism (Meeteism) and Sanamahi

The people of Manipur follow several faiths and religions which can be traced down to its unique historical past. Sanamahism is an ancient indigenous religion, rich in mythology and colorful in ritual. The Sanamahi worship is concentrated around the Sun God/Sanamahi. Early Manipuris were the devotees of a Supreme deity "Lainingthou Soralel" following the footprint of their Godly ancestors. That particular kind of ancestor worship and animism, with the central focus of worship on Umang Lai – that is, ethnic governing deities worshipped in sacred groves. Some of the gods (*Lais*) Manipuris worship are Atiya Sidaba, Pakhangba, Sanamahi, Leimaren, Oknarel, Panganba, Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbaren, Koubru. The religious life of the people, even when they adopted non-mainstream Hinduism, retained many characteristics inherited from their prehistoric ancestors. The essentials of this religion remain recognizable to the present day but did not win widespread adoption until relative recent history.

Christianity

Christianity in Manipur started to spread in the 19th century onwards by missionaries. The 20th century saw the establishment of a few Christian schools which then introduced Western-type education in this remote part of the world. Some of the finest schools in Manipur are Little Flower School in Imphal, Don Bosco High School in Imphal, St. Joseph's Convent, Nirmalabas High School.

These schools have produced achievers in various professions such as medicine, engineering, and other branches of science. Sizeable Meitei populations have joined Christianity. Christianity constitutes 34% of the population.

Hinduism

It was in the 15th century that a particular form of Vaisnavism was adopted and spread under the reign of King Kyamba through to King Khagemba in the 19th century. Towards the end of the 19th century and at the advent of the 20th century, a great force of Gaudiya Vaishnavism came and spread in Manipur. Over the last couple of decades there has been a revival of Sanamahi religion and this was evident in the significant growth of the "non-mainstream" religion category in the 2001 census which amounted to 17% of the population. Due to the revival of demographic profile of the state, Sanamahism will now be included in the next Government of India population census in 2011. According to the 2011 census Hinduism is identified with 46% of the population.

Islam

Muslims numbering 190,939 forms about 8.32% of the state population as per 2001 census. Influence of religious preceptors- Shaikh Shah Jalal Yemeni who came to Sylhet in 1303 AD and Azan Fakir Baghdadi in 1690 AD in Assam is also felt among Manipuri Muslims. There are Arab, Turani, Bengali and Mughal or Chaghtai Turk sections among Manipuri Muslims.

Culture

Theatre and society in Manipur are intimately linked, as in many parts of the world. Manipuris are a culturally enthusiastic people. Cultural spirit has never been allowed to be blown out despite the area's remoteness from the outside world. This is why it still thrives in the Manipur valley.

Theatre has always been part of the Laiharaoba festivals since time immemorial. Theatre in Manipur today can be broadly divided, based on the texts, into religious and secular. The former is the adaptation of religious epics or

some episodes from them, performed mainly in the sacred sphere such as temples. Within this *Gauralila* (the story of the childhood days of Caitanya Mahaprabhu), *Sanjenba* (an episode from the play between Krishna and his cows and his Gopis), and *Udukhol* (an episode from Krishna's childhood days) can be incorporated. They are seasonal performances commanding spiritual devotions among the audience.

Secular theatre is mostly confined to themes that are not religious and is performed in the secular or profane spheres. Within these are Shumang lila and Phampak lila (stage drama). Though the religious genre is loved profoundly by the audience, the torch of theatre is being held aloft by the secular ones. Among the latter also Shumang lila commands a very wide rustic popularity among the audience though the stage drama still does not lack its serene and dignified position mostly because of its community-based themes and styles. Etymologically Shumang lila is the combination of "Shumang" (courtyard) and "Lila" (play or performance). It is performed in an area of 13/13 ft in the centre of any open space, in a very simple style without a raised stage or any set design or heavy props such as curtains, background scenery, visual effects, etc. It uses only one table and two chairs, kept on one side of the performance space. Its claim to be the theatre of the masses is underlined by the way it is performed in the middle of an audience that surrounds it, leaving only one passage as both entrance and exit.

Shumang lila is performed by a touring band of 12-13 professional artists on invitation basis. These troupes may be exclusively female (Nupi Shumang Lila) or exclusively male (Nupa Shumang lila). Though the male characters are played by the female artists in the case of the former, what is most intriguing is the acting of the female roles by the male artists or nupishabis (male actresses). They are feminine in their looks, bodily gestures and facial expressions guised in masculine souls.

Historically the seed of Shumang lila was sown in Phagee lila (farce), performed during the reign of Ningthourel Chandrakirti (1850–1886), though traces of it were already present in the episode of Tangkhul-Nurabi Loutaba of Laiharaoba festival. Then it was succeeded by such plays as Ramlila, Sabha parba, Kabul lila, etc. But the real Shumang lila with various rasas (sentiments) was ushered in with the epic play *Harishchandra* (1918). Then it was followed by others such as Meiraba charan, Thok lila, etc. One of the most successful of this era was *Moirang parba*, an epic play based on the legendary lovers Khamba and Thoibi of Moirang.

On the other hand, the world of Phampak lila (stage drama) performed in the proscenium theatre is similar, in form, to the Western theatrical model and Indian Natyasastra model though its contents are indigenous. The so-called modern theatre descended on Manipuri theatre culture with the performance of Pravas Milan (1902) under the enthusiastic patronage of Sir Churchand Maharaj (1891–1941). The pace of theatrical movement was geared up with the institution of various groups such as Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU) (1930), Arian Theatre (1935), Chitragada Natya Mandir (1936), Society Theatre (1937), Rupmahal (1942), Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union (1968), and the Chorus Repertory Theatre of Ratan Thiyam (1976). These groups started experimenting with various types of plays apart from historical and pauranic ones. Today Manipuri theatre is well respected because of various excellent productions shown in various parts of the country and abroad. Manipuri plays, both Shumang lila and stage lila, have been a regular feature in the annual festival of the National School of Drama, New Delhi.

A classical form of Manipuri dance based and inspired by the theme of Lord Krishna and his beloved Radha's love story and the devotion of the Gopis (companions) toward Lord Krishna. This graceful and slow movement of the dance makes it one of the most acclaimed classical dances of India. The costume

is elegant, as there are nicely embroidered clothes that give luster to the beauty of the art. This dance is very exciting dance.

The auditorium of the theater is situated on the outskirts of Imphal and the campus stretches for about 2 acres (8,100 m²). It has housing and working quarters to accommodate a self-sufficiency of life. The theater association has churned out internationally acclaimed plays like *Chakravyuha* and *Uttarpriyadashi*. Its 25 years of existence in theater had disciplined its performers to a world of excellence. *Chakravyuha* taken from the Mahabharat epic had won Fringe Firsts Award, 1987 at the Edinburgh International Theater Festival. *Chakravyuha* deals with the story of Abhimanyu (son of Arjun) of his last battle and approaching death whereas *Uttarpriyadashi* is an 80-minute exposition of Emperor Ashoka's redemption.

Tourism

Manipur, as the name suggests, is a land of jewels. Its rich culture excels in every aspects as in martial arts, dance, theater and sculpture. The charm of the place is the greenery with the moderate climate making it a tourists' heaven. The beautiful and seasonal Shirui Lily at Ukhrul (district), Sangai (Brow antlered deer) and the floating islands at Loktak Lake are few of the rare things found in Manipur. Polo, which can be called a royal game, also originated from Manipur. Some of the main tourist attractions are:

Imphal (Capital)

The city is mainly inhabited by the Meitei with a large migrant population from Bihar, UP, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, etc. and it is just 7 km (4.3 mi) from the airport of Manipur (Tulihal Airport). The district is divided into East and West and the recently constructed sports complex (Khuman Lampak Sports Complex) for the 1997 National Games is also one of the

attractions consisting of everything from a cyclists velodrome to the main stadium. Most of the imported goods are sold here at its Paona Bazar, Gam-bir Sing Shopping Complex, Ningthibi Collections and Leima Plaza.

Shree Govindajee Temple



Shree Shree Govindajee Temple

This temple in Manipur diplomatically adjoins the palaces of the former rulers of the then kingdom, dull in design with gold domes, a paved court and a large, raised congregation hall. The deity in the center has other idols of Radha Govinda, Balaram and Krishna and Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra on either side of it.

Keibul Lamjao National Park



Sangai at Keibul Lamjao National Park

Keibul Lamjao National Park, 48 km (30 mi) away from Imphal is an abode of, rare and endangered species of Brow Antlered deer (Scientific name: *Rucervus eldii eldii*). This ecosystem is home to 17 rare species of mammals. The greenery of the place and the moderate temperature makes a pleasant experience to visit.^[7] It is the only floating national park of the world.

Loktak Lake

Loktak Lake is a freshwater lake where most of the people of Manipur get their share of fish. The special treat to watch are the floating islands popularly known as Phumdi which is made out of the tangle of watery weeds and other plants. With a nominal fee, people can hire small boats and see the fascinating way of life on these floating islands. The wetland is swampy and is favourable for a number of species to thrive on. It is in the district of Bishnupur. Etymology of Loktak is "Lok = stream and tak= the end" (End of the Streams).

Entry to Manipur

Until recently, entry to Manipur was controlled by the central government, for both foreigners and citizens of India. The state government as per directives from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India on 9 November, relaxed existing guidelines of the ministry's circular No. 249 under letter no. 15011/7/95-F.I dated 29/6/1998 and delegated powers to issue Protected Area Permits (PAP):

- To visiting foreign tourists in a group of two or more persons with a recognized travel agent who would act as an escort of the group up to a maximum period of 30 days.
- Foreigners married to Indian nationals belonging to Manipur can visit the state on tourist visa for a maximum period of 90 days.

- IO/OCI card holder hailing from Manipur, visiting foreign nationals engaged in development/welfare project would continue to require prior permission of MHA after examining proposal in consultation with security agencies, MHA may consider issue of PAP to such visits of foreign nationals initially for a period up to 180 days.

The official order of state Home department also mentioned the permitted areas of foreigners to be visit in the state including, Loktak Lake, Imphal, INA Memorial Moirang, Keibul Lamjao Deer Sanctuary, Waithou Lake, Imphal-Bishnupur-Phubala-Moirang-sendra-Keibul Lamjao-Imphal, Imphal _Moirang Lake-Keibul Lamjao-Churachandpur-Khuga River-Imphal, Imphal-Litan-Ukhrul-Shiroy-Sangshak-Imphal, Imphal-Thoubal- Waithou Lake- Khongjom-Kakching- Thongjao-Waikhong-Sugunu-Imphal, Imphal-Khonghampat-Kanglatombi-Kangpokpi-Senapati-Karong-Mao gate-Imphal and Imphal Noneh-Khongsang-Nungba-Jiribam-Imphal.

The official order further mentioned whereas until now foreigners were required to travel by air from Kolkata to Imphal, henceforth, foreign tourists will also be allowed to enter by road along with NH-39 and NH-53. This circuit would be Dimapur-Kohima-Imphal-Jiribam-Silchar, the official order mentioned.

Economy

Macro-economic trends

This is a chart of trends of gross state domestic product of Manipur at market prices estimated by *Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation* with figures in ten millions of Indian Rupees.

Period	Gross State Domestic Product (in Rupees, Crores***)
1999–2000	3260
2000–2001	3112
2001–2002	3369
2002–2003	3506
2003–2004	3979
2004–2005	4568
2005–2006	5066
2006–2007	5403
2007–2008	5848
2008–2009	6344

Ima market of Imphal

The Khwairamband Bazaar, Imphal, Manipur is a marketplace with peculiar smell, sweat, cacophony and busy movements of shoppers and as well the shopkeepers. There is hardly anyone who does not require visiting the market. Khwairamnand bazaar or the popular name Ima market or Nupi Keithel is the world's only all-women marketplace and one of Imphal's main tourist attractions. This is because the most important feature of the market is that 4000 odd shopkeepers are women representing the greater mobility and economic participation of Manipuri women.

What is not sold in the Ima Market? One can easily find items ranging from food items such as fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, fish and dried fish to

local herbs to clothes and woollens, and traditional costumes. Metal and bamboo items are also found in the shops. The market consists of two main sections -one where the vegetables, fruits and necessary items are sold and the other where the handloom product of the state is sold. Ima market displays local culture, tradition and biodiversity. Products sold here are mostly local products.



Women vendors selling dry fish, a popular food in north east India

Apart from the economic activities, the market also serves as an important venue of social and political interaction. Manipur has a patriarchal society but in the Keithel, women are encouraged to be individually self-reliant and collectively powerful. It is here, political consciousness and group solidarity is developed and strengthened. It is this dynamic aspect of this market that played a crucial role in the outbreak of the two Great Women Revolts.

At least on two occasions, first in 1904 and again in 1939, they rose against the exploitative colonial British policies and asserted themselves in what came to

be known as the NUPI LAN or Women's war. Nupi Lan unveiled the collective potential of the women for national cause.

Every Keithel in Manipur is founded in methodological and mystical ways. Each market place has a sacred site for the Deity or Deities.

Before starting the day's trading, betel nuts and leaves, fruits flowers and other items are offered for good trading. In *Nupi Keithel*, there is a sanctum for *Keithel Lairembi* and *Lairemba*, - male and female deities of the market.

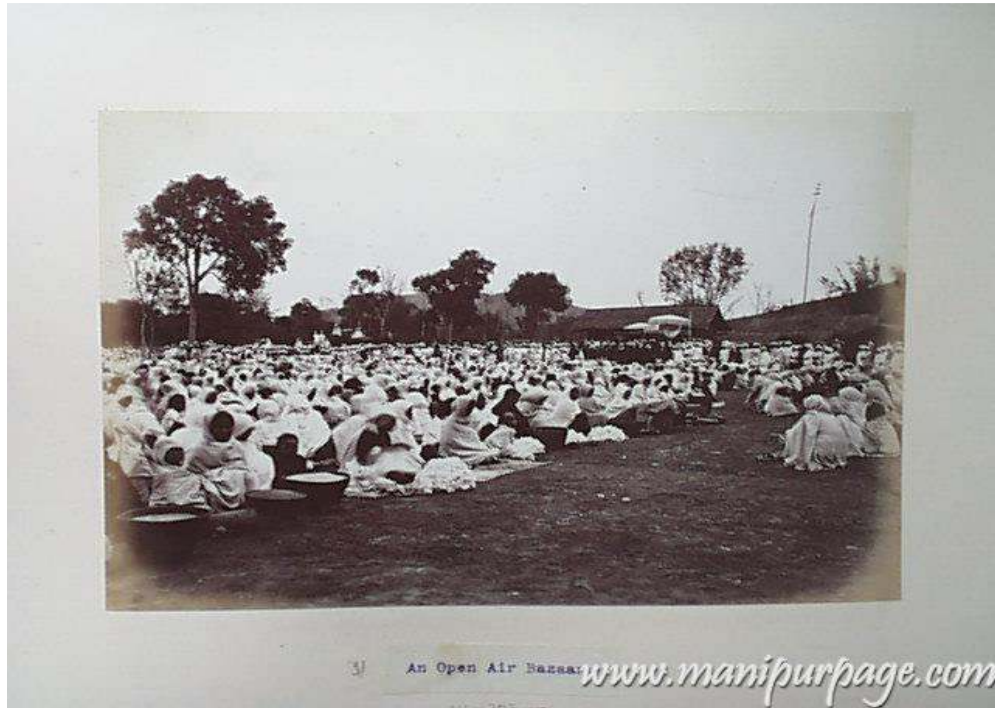
Most Kings of Manipur took keen interest in the development of the *Khwairamband* Keithel. Maharaj Khunjaoba constructed canals and embankments and excavated a Langkhong or Moat in 1660 on the western side of Kangla as well as constructed a 'bund' along the Naga River to check the inflow of excess water in the Khwairamband. Nambul River, at that time, was an important waterway for transporting produce to the market. Maharaj Chandrakriti is credited for developing the actual framework of the *Khwairamband* Bazaar.

One peculiarity of the Keithel is that all its affairs were managed by women. The reason why women took to the market may be found in Lallup system, prevalent during the times of the Kings. Lallup is a system of compulsory service to the king. Under the Lallup, loosely translating into War Club, every able-bodied, between the age group of 17-60 had to serve the Kings as warriors or as laborers for ten days out of every forty days. While men fought for the King, women had to take charge of their homes and mercantile affairs.

Origin of the market:

There is no clear indication of the beginning of the market. The earliest indication of barter system in Manipur can be traced during the reign of Meidingu Thangwai Ningthouba in 1805. Many markets were established during

1592-1652 in different places for business transaction. Researchers indicated that the Gazetteer of Manipur 1786 indicates that all the marketing of the country was conducted by women in open air and markets were mostly held in morning time. In between 1948-52, a proposal came from some local rich persons in connivance with the petty alien trades to demolish the existing shed. But women were not outnumbered and were successful in retaining it. **Centre for Organisation Research & Education (CORE), Manipur, India in a report published in 2005 pointed out that** ‘these Keithel as not just hubs of commerce, but also of information exchange and socio-political processes’. During lunch or break times women discuss socio political issues and this flow of information keep them aware and empowered. It won’t be wrong to say that the Nupi Lan or women’s uprising against the British in 1904 and 1939 were organized and conceived from the market places. Thus women shopkeepers here are not simply business women but are leading examples of leadership and revolutionist.



An Open Air Bazaar in the early period of Manipur



The aerial view (from flyover) of the Ima Market before the demolition for constructing of the new market

Recent developments:

The 3 (three) Markets in Khwairamband Bazar, namely Ima Market, Laxmi Bazar and Linthoinganbi Bazar constructed by the Imphal Municipal Council has replace the traditional sheds of the Ima market. This development is not beyond controversy. Starting from nomenclature of the three complexes, allotment of shops, feeling of discrimination etc will haunt the celebration for many women. Several indigenous bodies have objected the nomenclature of the three complexes terming it non representative of the culture and history of the land. Shops are allotted to ‘licensed’ vendors while some women said that an average of 300 single women and widows, mostly the widows whose husbands are killed in fake encounters join the market to earn their livelihood. Most of these women have no license. In such a situation there is risk that these women will lose their livelihood. Several bodies have demanded special allotment or reservation for their community women. Kabui community has demanded 200 shops while Muslim community has demanded 9% allotments in the new complexes.



Honourable Chief Minister, Shri. Okram Ibobi. Singh, offering flowers to the Deity on the Inauguration of the market

Whatever the controversies, the market will remain a unique historic symbol of women empowerment and women's leadership in economic development. This is something the policy makers of any country, regions can think of as a model for women empowerment and gender justice in the society.



Honourable Smt. Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson of UPA in the presence of Honourable Shri. Okram Ibobi Singh, Chief Minister, Manipur, and Kumari Selja, Honourable Union Minister (Housing & Urban Poverty Alleviation & Tourism, GOI) inaugurating Ima Market, on 12th of November 2010



The New Ima Market: View no. 1



The New Ima Market: View no. 2