

## **Position of Manipuri Women**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The people of Manipur respect their women in high degree considering, their contributions to the nation. They look after their children and the whole members of family carefully. They work very hard for the welfare of their family and participated social obligations. Many scholars and outsiders describe and praised them seeing their courage and contributions for the sake of welfare of the nation. They work hard both day and night to be sound family and society. They impart their wards good moral education at home prior to school. In short, they participate in every journey of life.

Women of Manipur take part very important role in various stages of history since time immemorial. They do all the buying and selling of essential commodities of the house and society. They came out to forge a united stand during the critical junctions of the land. They are not confined to the household works. Many outsiders described about the activities of Manipuri women in high status. E.W. Dun praised – “They are very industrious. The most of work of the country except the heaviest is performed by them. It would be difficult to find a more industrious women in India than the Manipur.”<sup>1</sup> It is a genuine tradition of the Manipuri women. Mrs.Grimwood also says – “Manipuris do not shut up their women, as is the custom in most parts of the India and they are more enlightened and intelligent in consequent”<sup>2</sup>.

The position of Manipuri women can be discussed under three heads. They are –

i) Social women, 2) Economic Women and 3) Political Women. Their contributions and activities to the society will be discussed briefly.

### **Key words:**

Meira Paibi: A woman association for moral upliftment and protection of national pillars.

Nisha Bandh: A woman organisation, against drugs and liquor.

Hitongba (Hiyang): Boat festival

Maibi: Fortune Teller

Keithel: Market

Khutlang: Tit for tat / Team work

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### **I. SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN**

Since the dawn of history, women held a very high social status in Manipur Society. But before their marriage, they are subjected to various restrictions, for instance, they act everything according to their parent's instructions or elderly Persons'. The position of women in a subordinate status has been legitimized with the coming of Hinduism in Manipur.<sup>3</sup> Cleanliness is the gift for Manipuri women. Without bathing and brushing they do nothing. They strictly follow and do not waste time in unnecessary ways. They are early risers and keep their houses neat and clean. They are, so to say polite and courteous with a good knowledge of society and obligations.<sup>4</sup> Upto the age of 35-40 women always engaged in domestic works.

School or college going girls do a lot of domestic works before school time and after. They help their parents, for instance, in washing, cooking and cleaning house, etc. But those of the well-to-do families are free from these responsibilities. Even the educated government employed ladies bear these responsibilities. On the other hand, uneducated women above the age of fifty usually go out to do buying and selling the products of the land. Even old women who are above seventy years sell vegetables, dresses, ornaments, etc. in the **Keithel** (market). In former days, even queens were not spared too. They were engaged in domestic work like husking the paddies.<sup>5</sup> Some women become social workers while others are engaged in semi-government organisations.

Now-a-days majority of them are engaging themselves in small internal trade and commerce, weaving and agricultural works, etc.

In early times, the women made all the necessary clothes of the household of the family. They organised and established various organisations viz. Meira Paibi, Nisha Bandh, etc. Thus they contribute a lot of eradication of social evils. They maintain their families and give their children education. They struggle and fight very hard in the social fields of life. In short, all classes of women whoever they may be richer, poorer, educated and uneducated have played a great role in Manipur society since time immemorial. They generally accept what the menfolk have already decided.<sup>6</sup>

Child marriage is not known to the Meiteis. Widows may remarry. And Purdah system is not found in Manipuri society. Wives act according to their husbands' instructions. It is to say that they are very much royal to their husbands. Women always preserve their prestige. If one person or minister captured a married woman, she committed suicide in lieu of becoming one's wife. For instance, in 1768, Leima, daughter of Ratan Singh committed suicide when kidnapped by Sana Sappa, a close associated of Yuvaraja (prince). As in other parts of the world, Manipuri women do not confine in a particular religion of their own. They always worship God and Goddesses under the guidance of and advice of the menfolk. They were never exhausted in worshipping God and Goddesses throughout their lives. The Maibis of Manipur were outstanding in view of their contribution to the culture of Manipur.<sup>7</sup> Thus in the Meitei-Hitongba (Hidongba) and other ritual ceremonies, based on Meitei customs or traditions, etc. They dedicated their lives to God and Goddesses for the sake of their husbands, children and families. Thus the activities of women uplift the society in better way. Women are, in fact, the mirror of the society.

## II. THE ECONOMIC WOMEN

The Meitei women take a great part in enriching the economic condition for the nation. They are very industrious and their contribution to the economic life of the land is still considerable and satisfactory. They are engaged in weaving. James Johnstone said about the Manipuri women thus: "The women are famous as weavers and in many cases have completely killed out the manufactures of cloths formerly peculiar to certain hill tribes, over whom the Manipuris have obtained mastery by superior intellect".<sup>8</sup> It says that Manipuri women are very expert weavers. Their economic contribution is not a new one to the Manipuris.

In every house the wife weaves the cotton clothes for her family and husband.<sup>9</sup> They not only can sell clothes and vegetables freely in the market places, but also support their families by earning their daily needs. Majority of the women in the rural areas work in the paddy fields from early morning. They perform in team-work called '**Khutlang**'. During the harvesting season, they are very busy and earn a good amount of money. Sometimes women work as hireling.

In the rural areas of Manipur, every family has been engaged in vegetable-gardening in the fields and surrounding campuses. It is done after paddy harvest every year. These products add a huge income to the nation. Majority of the women earn their daily bread of selling vegetable, sweet and others in the market and roadside of the state. Fishing, rice-pounding, embroidery, firewood collecting, etc. are other economic activities of the Manipur women. Thus running a family smoothly and uplifting the society high are based on women.

## III. THE POLITICAL WOMEN

In the political fields of Manipur, women have played a great role in various stages of the Manipuri history since time immemorial. Their movements are very forceful till today. Even they corrected the injustice manner or decision practised by the King or any officials of the land. In this regard, S.K. Bhuyan describes thus: "At the same time Manipuri women have shown their gallantry and valour in desperate and critical situations."<sup>10</sup> They participate in the political process as voters, candidates in elections. They are always ready to strengthen the nation. In former days, though women in general were usually engaged in household affairs, they were not debarred from general administrations. **Laisna**, Queen of **Nongda Lairen Pakhangba** is said to have held the presidentship of Pacha, a court which tried all cases relating to women.<sup>11</sup> Queen Linthoingambi was also a great wit-woman and wisdom who assisted in the affairs of the country. Her courage and wisdom subdued a group of Tangkhul invaders when the King was out of station on an expedition. And further Queen – Kumudini mother of King Chandrakirti, ruler of Manipur when her son was child. Kuranganayani had her own place in the history of Assam for her exceptional intellect and courage that led to the restoration of Swaragadeo-Lakshmi Singh to the throne after his dethronement.<sup>12</sup>

In the later part of the history of Manipur, there occurred two distinct women movements, popularly known as 'Nupi-lan' (Women war). Both was took places during the British rule. The first Nupi-lan was occurred during the reign of Churachand who was a subordinate king of the British. The Assistant Superintendent's residence was burnt in 1904, people of the surrounding Imphal areas were ordered for teak-wood from Kabaw (about 108 kms. Away from Imphal) to construct the said residence. It was protested by the people. The Government curfewed not to assemble there. Curfew orders were disobeyed and women force

entered the Political Agent's residency and then the superintendent's. The British Government lathi-charged them for that movement. As a result, some of them got injuries. This movement could be said to be partially successful because some people were permitted to supply bamboos from near the capital. From this agitation the British learnt well about the courage and wisdom of the Manipuri women. Thus the first Nupi-Lan came to an end.

Then the second Nupi-Lan occurred in 1939 and it was in the month of December. Aanganphou (early paddy) was available at that time. It is to say that new harvests started coming into the Keithel (market) to improve the rice.

But some monopolist's businessmen sent out too much rice and paddy outside the land. The monopolists sent out the husked rice ceaselessly only for their profit in lieu of selling to the people of Manipur. As a result, there were famine and cries of woe from starvation echoed everywhere. Owing to these circumstances, in the morning of December eleventh (11), the Manipuri women, without any sort of instigation assembled in Khwairamband Keithel and block the lorries which were full of rice and paddy, ready for export. It was the starting stage of the agitation. Yet the export was not banned. In the morning of December 12, the fasting women masses automatically gathered at Khwairamband Keithel again without any intimation appeal. All the carts with rice or paddy were seized by the womenfolk coming from various and different sides.

They took all the seized loads of rice and paddy to the Imphal Police station. The police station and the seized things were surrounded by the women agitators. This time, Mr. Sharp, the Durbar President informed them that it would not be possible without the permission of the King Churachand Singh who was at Nabawip of West Bengal. But he convinced them sending a telegram to the King soon.

In this second agitation, many women were injured when they were gheraoing the telegram office. Suddenly, the sepoy, of the Assam Rifles came to disperse the mob when Laishram Kanhai, the co-worker of Hijam Irabot, delivered to continue the women agitation. Many womenfolk were charge with lathis, butts, and baynotes by the sepoy. Some women leaders in this agitation were 'Tong-gou Devi, Shabi Devi, Chaobiton Devi, Leipaklei Devi and Khongang Devi, etc. and twenty women were wounded, six seriously in the agitation.<sup>13</sup>

Then, the women masses were dispersed with very cruel tortures. But they would retreat as result, they approached direct to the rice mills from the telegram office. This time Neta Irabot was out of station. The movement of the women was so strong and forceful that Mr. Grimson, the Political Agent, but compelled to stop the rice mills. Then the women's movement was fruitful. After the King's arrival at Imphal, the Durbar resolution approved the demands of the women. Thus both Nupi-lans were very important events in the political history of Manipur.

After these two events, the Manipur women worked in various organisations under the leadership of Hijam Irabot. In the 1940s, among the organisations led by Irabot Singh, Mahila Sammelini was also one important organisation. This organisation actively participated in every political movement led by Irabot Singh.

The women of Manipur are so to say Goddesses. They show the active participation in social, religious, economical and political activities, etc. Thus without women, the human society would have been rootless and meaningless.

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