

Women Market of Manipur: An Anthro-Historical Perspective

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Human beings live and have lived together in societies under a wide variety of cultural arrangements. In any social system, the quality of institutional roles and individual personality is related to the ethos of the particular culture, and the specific role expectations and personal dispositions to the value of this culture (Kluckhohn, 1961). Moreover, human being is activated by various needs. As to fulfill his needs, he has to exert power on the nature, on the society and on other group-mates, thereby develop diverse types of institutions and organizations. Similarly, social roles and functions are also determined by cultural background. In every society, there are some conventional or customary roles and functions, which every individual is to follow. On the other hand, sometime specific social situations are responsible for the emergence of new roles and functions.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper discusses certain aspects of women market, situated at the center of Imphal town, Manipur. The women's market has a distinctive position, because of its function as controlling institution of women that affects and contributes to the whole economy of the state. Nowhere in India, does such a large ensemble of women handling such a massive volume of the economy exist, and therein lies its status and unique nature although women in the region of South-East Asia do commonly control and manage local markets.

The people of Manipur are composed of two major ethnic groups, "the Meities of the valley and the Nagas and Kuki-chins of the surrounding hills" (Pandey, 1999: 4). At present, the state has 29 S.T, 7S.C. the Meities and the Meitei Pangan (Manipuri Muslims) and representatives of people from different regions of India. (Singh, 2002: 70). From historical period, Manipuri women took part in performing both household works as well as outside work besides taking active part in various affairs of the state. To a certain extent, socio-cultural background determines the roles and activities, thereby affecting the status. Of course, assessing the 'status of women' in any society is a complicated

affair. Until the women's movement sent waves of heightened political consciousness across academic disciplines, there were few studies of women's life in non-western societies. Women's lives and women's symbolic images came into light after a decade of serious ethnography of women's world in the 1970's. The status of women in a society is determined by the prevalent ideals and functions. Normally, the status of women varies in accordance to her functions in social organization. If the socio-economic functions of women are higher and more valuable in a tribe, her status is naturally higher. If her economic functions are not very important, she does not enjoy a high social status. However, socio-economic function is not the sole factor determining social status.

Before analyzing the women market, an emphasis has been made to explore the social function/status of women in Manipur during historical period. Because, the past if it can be located, contains the key to the present. We can hardly conceive of a social situation or social structure, which is not rooted in conditions and forces long in operation. The role of women in Manipuri society was quite prominent from early stage. In 1886, Dun referred about the type of freedom enjoyed by the women of Manipur. He observed "all the marketing is done by the women, all the works of buying and selling in public, carrying to and fro of articles to be sold, whilst at home, they busy employed in weaving and spinning." (Dun, 1886).

It is traced from the history and also asserted by many scholars that the existence of certain institution or system has pushed the women to take part in family economy and one such institution was *Lallup-Kaba*. "This is a some kind of forced labour prevalent in Manipur. This institution has very ancient origin in Manipur." (Brown, 1879). The general system of *Lallup* was based on the assumption that every male between the ages of 17 and 60 must place his services at the disposal of the state, without remuneration for a certain number of days. The number of days thus placed was so arranged that of the state is ten days in every forty remained at the disposal

of the state. These ten days service was so arranged that a man working ten days had interval thirty with regularity all the year round. An individual coming of age to perform *Lallup*, was entitled to cultivate for his support one puree (about 2 acre) of land subject to the payment in kind the tax to the Raja (Brown, 1879: 82). The system of *Lallup* was abolished in 1892 but the exploitative form of forced labour known as *Potang* continued during the first two decades of the 20th century. However, in 1915 *Potang* was abolished. The aristocrat sections of the society were exempted from *Lallup*, while the majority of the populations are to undergo through this process. The system directly or indirectly compelled the women to take active role in buying and selling for maintaining the family. Thus, a section of the trade at the market place is in the hands of Manipuri women. "This seems to be a new development in the 18th and the 19th centuries as a result of the effort of the kings to raise more and more soldiers for the fight against the Burmese. Even after the later half of the 19th century, the practice continued." (Singh, 1975).

Women in Manipur also took various steps to raise the status of common women both during the pre-British and British periods. After independence, they became more aware about their right and status. In 1939, women revolted against the king and British authority to stop the export of rice from Manipur. That was a great event and still known as *Nupi-lun* (*Nupi-women, lun-war*) In 1904, thousand of ladies demonstrated in the town to protest and disobey the order of the superintendent that public should supply bamboo, cane, etc. to construct the houses of Assistant Superintendent which was burnt at night. (Singh, 1963: 196). Demonstration with slogan and agitation had continuously been made against water tax in 1932. "But inspite of very crucial role in economy, the social position of women was inferior." (Pandey, 1999: 13) Moreover "women education began lately i.e. 1891. Before it female education was considered to be a luxury and confined only in the noble family" (Singh, 1963). After the British period, women of Manipur are rapidly advanced in different direction with the impact of western education. Consequently, some women's associations and organizations have been set up for the betterment of women.

In the context of aforesaid brief analysis, an attempt has been made in this paper to focus

certain salient features of women market in Manipur, which is exclusively organized and controlled by women. Cases were collected from 36 *Meitei* women, who were engaged in purchasing and selling of different commodities in the market. The people of Manipur are predominantly Mongoloid stock, who speak Tibeto-Burmese language. *Meiteis* are divided into seven clans. They restrict their marriage within their own community and are rigid in clan exogamy.

HISTORY OF WOMEN MARKET

The indications of the beginning of exchanging essential commodities of daily use, which was known as barter system could be traced during the reign of Meidingu Thangwai Ningthouba in 1805. And a great number of markets were established during the period of Meidingu Senbi Khagemba (1592-1652) in different places by observing suitable conditions of business transactions relating to respective areas. The women's market of Manipur is the only market of women in the north-east region of India. In the market all selling and buying are done by women. The women who are involved in this trade mostly belong to age group of 45-70 years.

According to Gazetteer of Manipur 1786, all the marketing of the country was conducted by women in the open air and the markets were held in the morning. Of course the situation is different at present period and the market is opened from morning till night. The shops are built by the government and the shopkeeper is to pay tax for it. The women from different places come to this market and it is a glaring example of the way the Manipuri women are struggling for their existence. All the essential commodities are made available here. The power of the market women of Manipur were demonstrated on various occasions. They had to face the challenge of rival markets, managed and controlled by men of the Indian trading community. 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. The other major incident occurred in the early nineties, when the women of the entire market area of the three main sections of the market and the adjoining areas were served eviction notice. But the women body of the market objected to this latest on-slaught. They refused to budge even an

inch away from the present market. So strong was their voice that their opponent had no choice. They finally consented to give to the women what was rightly their's. Credit must be given to those courageous women, who not only guarded their role as economic providers of their families but also took a strong stand to guard what was something sacred for them. Women from different places come to this market and it is one of the means of livelihood for them. Some of the women come to this market not only for money but they have started it long back and get pleasure out of it. But the majority are involved in this trade due to economic compulsion.

It has already been mentioned that for the present study, 36 Meitie women were interviewed who were actively engaged in purchasing and selling of commodities in the market. It is revealed from Table 1, that the highest number of women are found within the age group of 56-60 years. Next is in the age group of 51-55 years. It is also evident that women from younger age group rarely go for this trade. There is not a single woman in the age group of 31-35 years who is engaged in this trade. Whereas only single case is found in the age group of 26-30 and 36-40 years respectively. The data itself confirmed the general opinion that normally elderly women prefer to engage in this trade.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by age group

Age Group	Number
26-30 years	1
31-35 years	Nil
36-41 years	1
41-45 years	3
46-50 years	6
51-55 years	8
56-60 years	9
61-65 years	5
66-70 years	3

Table 2 reveals that out of 36 respondents 18 live in nuclear families, while the remaining 16 live in joint families. Two cases were found where the women live alone either due to divorce or due to death of her husband. The educational level of the women indicates that out of 36 women 27 are termed as illiterate. There are only two pre-degree and one degree level women found in the sample of women. Another trend is revealed that literacy level is slightly encouraging in the younger age group. Not a single literate woman is found above

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to their family types

S. No.	Family Type	No.	%
1	Nuclear family	18	50
2	Joint family	16	44.44
3	Broken	2	5.5

the age group of 56 years. The Table 3 highlights that among the 36 respondents 22 have owned permanent shop, 8 run the business in the rented shop and 6 do not have any permanent place and casually sit here and there. The study also reveals that out of 36 women 23 pursued the trade as a secondary source of income. There are only 13 women who were continuing it as a primary means.

The occupational status of the husband's of the respondents are considered important as husband's occupation to a certain extent determine the role of women. Of the 36 respondents as many as 13 respondent's husband were engaged in some kind of government services or business. The persons continuing agriculture as a primary or a secondary means of livelihood is almost absent. Attempt has also been made to see

Table 3: Ownership of respondent's shop

Permanent Owner	Rented	Temporary
22	8	6

how many of the respondents took this trade as a means of livelihood. The study also looks into the circumstances, which compel the women to go for this trade and opinion for pursuing it.

S.M.Devi, aged 52 years has a stall, where she sells *mekhela*. That shop is the only means of her economic support. She was separated from her husband after two months of their marriage. Though she lives with her brother, yet she is maintaining her living by herself. Her parents gave her half acre of cultivable land. It was managed by a farmer who gave half of the paddy. To maintain her day to day living, she opened the shop by taking a loan of Rs.2000 from the bank.

Whereas, the cases of M.D. and P.D are different. M.D.45 years old opened the shop in the year 1994. She was married at the age of 19 years. They have six children. Her husband was doing business. When all children went for higher education, she decided to start the shop to support the husband in running the family. For starting

the shop she took Rs.5000 from her husband. To her it is a good way of earning and enjoying various experiences while dealing with the customers. Similarly P.Y. Devi, 65 years old did not start the shop with any financial necessity. Her husband is a retired government employee. They have only one daughter, who is married and now working as a L.P school teacher. Financially her husband's pension is enough to run the family. But she felt bored at home. According to her sitting in the shop is the best way of passing time by the aged women.

The cases of S.D. and T.D. on the other hand clearly indicate that they had to go for this trade due to economic compulsion. H.D. 55 years old narrated that because of ill health of her husband, she decided to sell commodities in the market. It is not a shop but a free space in the market. She is to manage all her family expenditure from such buying and selling. T.D. 70 years old said that she opened the fruit shop after the death of her husband nearly 30 years ago. It is a rented shop and she collects fruits either from whole seller or from local markets. The earning from the shop is the only means to maintain the family.

Almost all the women agree that market plays a significant role in their socio-economic life. For majority of them it is the only means of livelihood while some of the women are beginning to make use of their leisure and consider it as good place for passing time. The women are so emotionally attached to their market that even one has commented "if I had to stop my shop, it will be like stopping my breath." Regarding the management of the family affairs, all the women agree that each of them are aware of their responsibility towards their family and children. Their involvement in the market never affect their day to day family life. Moreover majority of the women were involved in this trade when their children had grown up. Even those who have younger children, arrangements are always made to look after their needs.

The role of Manipuri women in society was quite prominent from ancient period. Of course, the picture of women in north-east region is also quite significant from many angles. Women in the north-east have traditionally been doing trade and managing markets. The women's market *Nupi-Keithel* of Manipur, for example, is one of the biggest market in Asia controlled and run by women. It has a distinctive position, because of its function as a controlling institution of women

that affects and contributes to the whole economy of the state. It is a glaring example how women continue to play a role in the economy and society, which is a continuance of earlier form of social structure. The advent of colonialism in 1891 integrated Manipur to a worldwide capitalist system, developed transportation network, which further enabled the women, to extend their trading activities throughout and beyond Manipur. Thus, the socio-economic role of women was gradually expanding.

Regarding the entrepreneurship of women in north-east India, there are very few data. According to second all India census of small-scale industries (SSI) units (1990) revealed that 12.5% of the units in the north-east India are controlled and managed by women as against 7.7% in the country. However, there is a state wise variation as women entrepreneurs account for 35.4% in Manipur followed by 23.6% in Mizoram and 18.7% in Assam. Nagaland accounts for a mere 0.3%.

The women market is no doubt a glaring example of women's independent role and the maintenance of an indigenous system, which is also a surviving mechanism of various cottage industry. Though entrepreneurship among women is being vigorously pursued through a number of central and state-sponsored programmes and there is a hue and cry for improving the status of women yet the path to success is not easy. The women market in Manipur is not an exception. The market women were also facing threat from various angles. When attempt was made by the British to oust them from their control of economy, the women initiated and sustained two major wars, *Nupi-Lan* (women's war), the Manipuri women's freedom struggle. Moreover, rival markets managed and controlled by men of the Indian community was another threat to this indigenous market community. Another major incident occurred in the early nineties when the women of the entire market area were served eviction notice. Though women could overcome such challenges, yet the economic back of the women market was rapidly eroded.

The Indian Fiscal economic policies have struck a lethal blow to this decline. Financial and planning institutions of free India have little grasp of the specific needs of the women traders of Manipur and other indigenous communities. But the control of the domestic market by women continues despite numerous attempts to desta-

bilize it by various forces. In such a situation, it is the responsibility of everybody to understand the plight of these indigenous women community and find out ways and means for the survival of this living legend. It is also hoped that the government as well as NGOs should take proper care to strengthen the hands of these women and stabilize the institution.

KEYWORDS Manipur, Imphal, Women market, *Lallup-Kaba*

ABSTRACT The present paper focuses certain aspect of women market of Manipur, situated at the center of Imphal town. The women's market has a distinctive position, because of its function as controlling institution of women that affects and contributes to the whole economy of the state. The institution of *Lallup-Kaba* might be one of the factors that have pushed the women to take part in family economy. Of course the role of women in Manipuri society was quite prominent from early stage. When there is a hue and cry for improving the status of women, these market women were

facing threat from various forces. But the control of domestic market by women continues despite numerous attempts to destabilize it.

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