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Women's Empowerment in Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur is a state situated in North-Eastern corner of India. Two-thirds of the population comprise the Meiteis, majority ethnic community in Manipur. Meitei women are renowned for their unique role and status in history. Women in Manipur are particularly noted for their active economic participation and are renowned for their collective empowerment and strong force as depicted in the two Nupilans (women's wars, or uprisings) against the British when the state was under colonial rule. They are also renowned for their activism against liquor consumption as Nisha Bandhis which later evolved into their powerful role as Meira Paibis (Women torch bearers), a collective of women that are actively involved in civil society movements for justice and human rights. The study seeks to find out whether this legacy of women's collective strength has translated into greater decision-making power at home and in political representation. The paper uses secondary data to depict the myriad roles that women play in Manipur society, contradictory at times, visible on one hand in high economic participation, powerful as a collective in their role as Meira Paibis, and yet individually still constrained by patriarchy and not prominent when it comes to real decision-making power. It argues that a movement towards tangible actual empowerment is a must.

Keywords: Status, Empowerment, Economic Participation, Meira Paibi, Decision Making Power, Collective Strength, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

Women comprise half of humanity. The level of advancement of the whole society could be measured through the status of women as all social and economic inequalities find their reflection in the status of women. The status of women has thus become an indicator of development of every country and on a global scale. The only way to win the struggle against poverty, hunger and demographic problems is through the fullest involvement of women as participants and beneficiaries of development. Hence, the empowerment of women enabling them to enjoy higher status becomes an important development goal (Arambam, 2013).

An important indicator of women's empowerment is their involvement in decision-making processes, at home or in society. In this context political empowerment assumes an important role. The process of political empowerment has to do with power or influences which can make others behave in line with one's wishes; and women's political

empowerment has to do with women's political influence and the institutionalisation of their participation in political decision-making processes (Gangmei, 2016).

Globally, women are underrepresented in decision-making positions worldwide. Only 24.3 percent of all national parliamentarians were women as of February 2019, a slow increase from 11.3 percent in 1995 (UNWomen, 2020) In India too, women's representation in decision-making process are also extremely low. As on August 2020, only 13% of the Parliamentarians in India are women.

In Manipur, women's agency in terms of involvement in social issues is high in Manipur. Hence an attempt is made to study whether that active involvement in issues of polity and society has translated into greater decision-making power at home and society.

The State of Manipur is situated on the North-eastern border of India. Its population is about 27.2 lakhs according to 2011 census, of which the Meiteis comprise above two-thirds. The other one-third of the population is comprised mainly of the scheduled tribes (mostly Christians) and a minority are the Manipuri Muslims. The Naga and Kuki-Chin groups constitute the hill people or Scheduled tribes of Manipur. There are many sub-tribes within these groups. More than 90% of them follow Christianity though some retain their old religion. Both the tribes and their subgroups follow patriarchal system.

The land is surrounded by nine ranges of mountains and the heartland of this state is the valley which is the homeland of the Meiteis. The Meiteis have a highly developed culture with an extensive written literature in the ancient Meitei script dating back a thousand years or more (Parratt and Parratt, 2011: 39).

Women in Manipur enjoy a unique status in society. The high social and economic status of women in Meitei society was frequently remarked upon by British colonial officers.¹ Despite the dominance of Hinduism in the plains of Manipur, Meitei women suffered none of the humiliating oppression of their sisters elsewhere on the subcontinent. Above all, the women controlled the food supplies and the markets, and were therefore a dominant economic force. From the beginning of the British period, they had showed themselves capable and organized enough to take mass action when occasion demanded (Parratt and Parratt, 2001).

Women's empowerment is seen in the high economic participation rate of women, physically manifested in the myriad activities carried out in the economic sphere as evidenced in the Ima keithel, a market run almost exclusively by women. They are also in a better position as compared to that of women in the rest of India in the fact that there are no official figures of female foeticide, female infanticide, no dowry-related harassment, bride burning, etc.

In the words of Thokchom (2010), *"What are considered to be the social handicaps that make women completely voiceless and powerless... are absent in Manipur. This genuine aspect in the Manipuri culture where the girl child is so well-placed unlike other patrilineal society is something which all of us should be proud of"*

2. Objectives, Methodology, Scope and Limitations of the Paper

The paper provides a brief overview of the issues regarding women's empowerment in Manipur. It tries to depict the myriad roles that women play in Manipur society, considering their high economic participation and powerful social role as Meira Paibis². It seeks to study their participation in actual decision-making processes in Manipur, whether at home or in the political arena and to find out whether they are really empowered in the true sense of the word. The paper is a review paper using secondary sources of data from books, theses, government publications, reports, etc. It is constrained only by lack of updated government data.

¹ Among others, by W. McCulloch, *An Account of the Valley of Munnipore and the Hill Tribes* (Calcutta, 1859); R. Brown, *Annual Report on the Munnipore Political Agency* (Calcutta, 1874); and J. Shakespear, 'The Religion of Manipur', in *Folk Lore* 24 (1913), PP- 409-55(cited in Parratt and Parratt 2001)

² Women torch bearers

Women's agency seen in terms of active participation in society and polity is unique in the World. The paper seeks to highlight that aspect. Women in Manipur comprise an aggregate of different groups like the Meitei women (majority ethnic community) mainly following Hinduism, Manipuri Muslim women and tribal women (mostly following Christianity). Data on women of Manipur from secondary data sources constitute aggregate of women, including Meiteis, the Manipuri Muslims and scheduled tribes. But the brief information on ancient history and religion are mainly concerned with Meitei Women mainly because of availability of literature and written script of the Meiteis from ancient times.

3. Literature Review:

Empowerment is the power of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you (Cambridge Dictionary).

Empowerment is a word which brings up the question of personal agency, one that links action to needs, and one that results in making significant collective change. It is also a concept that does not merely concern personal identity but brings out a broader analysis of human rights and social justice. Applied to gender issues, the discussion of empowerment brings women into the political sphere, both private and public. In this context, empowerment is a process to change the distribution of power between men and women, both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society (Tandon, 2016).

The Human Development Report relates empowerment to participation. It says that since development is for the people, they must participate fully in the decisions and processes that affect their lives (UNDP, 1995).

Rowlands sees empowerment as a bottom-up process that cannot be formulated from top-down. To Rowlands, empowerment does not only mean to have access to decision making but also being able and entitled to occupy the decision-making space (Rowlands, 1995).

The issue of women empowerment is relatively a new term. Its popularity spread all over the world in the late 20th century. The Cairo conference in 1994 organised by UN on population and Development (UNDP) called attention to women empowerment and UNDP development and Gender Empowerment measure (GEM) which focuses on three variables that reflect women participation in society, political power or decision making, education and health (Chakrabarty, 2012).

Gender equality and empowerment of women is now recognized globally as a key element to achieve progress in all areas. To promote development of women, many countries along with various international associations have adopted a number of laws and conventions. In this regard, the UN adopted a convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women on 18th December 1979, which came into force on 3rd September 1981. Despite such conventions and time-bound measurable goals, world statistics tell the deplorable condition of women. They are marginalized from enjoying the fruits and benefits of equality and independent status (Singha 2016: 116).

Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right but it is also crucial to accelerating sustainable development as studies have proved that empowering women and girls has a multiplier effect driving up economic growth and development. Goal 5 of the Sustainable development goals aims to ensure gender equality and to empower all women and girls. The Sustainable Development Goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. The 17 Goals were adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the Goals (United Nations, 2019).

One of the main indicators of women's empowerment is participation in decision making processes and equitable representation in such processes, whether at home or in society as elected representatives in electoral exercises or political representation.

Hanna Pitkin's book *The Concept of Representation* (1967) is a seminal work that legitimized the quest for increased representation for women. Pitkin's assertion that minorities should be fairly represented in government paved the way for future theories on women's representation (Colman, 2014).

"Women's participation in decision-making is essential for women's interests to be incorporated into governance. It has been widely experienced that governance structures which do not provide for adequate participation of women, often suffer from state interventions which are neither inclusive nor democratic. Including women, especially in local governments is an essential step towards creating gender equal opportunities and gender-sensitive policies. Since women have different needs and perspectives on social and political issues, it is important to involve women in governments to incorporate all the societal viewpoints in policy and decision-making processes. Women are actively involved in household and community work and hence aware of real issues faced by common people. This gives them insight and perspective which can be instrumental in sustainable overall development" (Nisha and Vezhaventhan, 2018: 4724).

Women's leadership in political spheres is shown to be socially beneficial (World Economic Forum, 2017), and is a matter of women's right to equal opportunity and access (ESCAP, 2019).

Women's participation in politics is said to be socially transformative. Research shows that women in politics raise issues that others overlook, pass bills that others oppose, invest in projects that others dismiss and seek to end abuse that others ignore; if they participate in peace processes, the chances of reaching an agreement at all improve, and the peace is likely to last at least 15 years. Yet women face many barriers to their political participation. At current rates of progress, political parity will not be reached until 2080, making equality in politics the highest hurdle women face (National Democratic Institute, 2019).

Women in India, at both the socio-economic and political levels do not enjoy the same level of powers as the men. Gender disparities were evident in employment, health, education, and political participation. The new wave of decentralization in 1990's, through 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments gave 33.33% representation for women in local governments. This paved a route to political empowerment and gender equity by giving opportunity for a large number of women to enter into local governments and to be a part of decision-making bodies (Pandey 2013).

On August 27, 2009, the Union Cabinet of the Government of India approved 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). The Indian states Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, West Bengal and Uttarakhand have implemented 50% reservation for women in PRIs. The majority of candidates in these Panchayats are women. Currently 100% of elected members in Kodassery Panchayat in Kerala are women. Kerala is the real success story of Panchayats in India.

4. Women in Manipur

4.1: Some Data

The two tables below give an indicative picture of Manipuri women's favourable position compared to women in mainland India.

Table 1: Sex Ratio (India and Manipur)

State/Country	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011	% improvement over last 10 years
Manipur	1036	1015	980	971	958	974	992	1.88
India	946	941	930	934	927	933	943	1.07

Source: Women and Men in India 2018, CSO (2019)

The figures in the above table indicate that sex ratio in Manipur is better compared to that in mainland India.

Table 2: Gender Disparity Index, India and Manipur

State/Country	1981	1991
Manipur	0.802	0.815
India	0.620	0.676

Source: National Human Development Report 2001

Higher the gender disparity index, lower is the gender inequality. Table 2 shows that gender disparity index is higher in Manipur indicating lower gender inequality, compared to all India figures.

4.2 Women and Economic Participation:

A distinct feature of Manipuri women is their predominance in economic activity. On the streets, roads, lanes and by lanes of Manipur we see women working with fervour; selling fruits, vegetables, fish, clothes etc. In Manipur, the work participation rate is quite high for women, as compared to the rest of India. Before COVID-19 related lockdowns, we see the main market, the Ima Market, located in the capital city Imphal, which is the main preserve of women, humming with trade and selling activities. Though the bazaar is now in monitored shut down, women vendors still throng the roads, lanes etc. of the localities of the capital, selling their wares. They actively participate in trade, as also in agriculture, manufacture, and construction activities (Arambam, 2020). Women's work participation rates are much higher for Manipur compared to that of India as a whole. Female WPR for rural areas according to 2011 census is 41.2 % for females in Manipur, 30 % for all India. In urban areas, the figures are 33.2% for females in Manipur, 15.4 % for all India respectively.

The prominent economic role of women has its historical roots in the lallup system of Manipur, where the men folk were obliged to serve the king at times of need, for instance, as state forces in times of war, or by rendering free labour in road construction, digging and clearing riverbeds, or any other service for the king, for which they were not paid, and which left the women to fend for themselves in their husband's or men folks' prolonged absence. They had to shoulder immense economic and social responsibility in the absence of their husbands. They took up farming, tending cattle, weaving, blacksmith, fishing, agriculture, kitchen gardening, etc. Under the implicit burdens on women in Manipur under the lallup system, they had to come on par, if not more than men in the discharge of their economic and social responsibilities (Arunkumar and Arun 2009).

4.3 Women in History (Meitei women):

Written and oral traditions trace the settlement of the various subgroups which now constitute the Meiteis into Manipur back into the beginning of the Christian era. They brought with them a complex religious system. By the middle of the 18th century, enforced Hinduization took place during the reign of Maharaja Garib Niwaz. Yet, there was never a complete takeover of Meitei beliefs and ritual. Significantly Hindu restrictions on women were never adopted. Conflict between the indigenous religion and Hinduism continued until a synthesized form of religion emerged (Parratt and Parratt 2011:38-39).

*“Meitei religion focuses on the worship of the lai (deities, divinities). Though there is a high God (Atingkok) he is almost a *dues otiosus* and his spouse Leirmaren (Supreme Goddess) is far more important. She is the source of creation and of the sacred word. This word is mediated through the maibis (priestesses), who function as charismatic proclaimers of the word of the lais for public and private good. This reflects the importance given to the female in Manipur” (Parratt and Parratt 2011: 39, 44).*

In ancient Manipur, women participated positively in production activities, polity, organization and conduct of civilization for the society. They enjoyed high individuality as exemplified in the lores of the divine female deities, for example, ‘Panthoibi’³ and ‘Phouoibi’⁴, and the mythical (some claim to be a real woman who lived) princess of Moirang, ‘Thoibi’⁵ (Arambam, 2016: 66). Laisna, the wife of the first historical king of Manipur Nongda Lairen Pakhangba who ascended the throne in 33AD had authority almost equal to that of the king, and played an important role in the social, cultural and religious activities of the court. In fact, Queen Laisna was the head of the Pacha Loishang (a women’s court)⁶ and the wives of 10 noblemen assisted her. The wives of keirungbas, keepers of barns, also assisted her (The Pacha Loishang was later formalized during the reign of king Paihomba (1666-1697) (Takhellambam, 2000-01). Then there is the story of the Manipuri queen, ‘Linthoingambi’ (15th century, a queen who donned the garb of her husband King Ningthoukhomba (1432-1467) in his absence and went to battle, and thus defeated the rebels); of Kuranganayani (a Meitei princess who was married to an Ahom king in the 18th century and was responsible for the saving of the Ahom dynasty during the Mao Maria rebellion in the 18th century), etc.

The traditional puya⁷, the Leimaren laihui,⁸ narrates the manifestation of mother deity Leimaren in three categories of womanhood reflecting her incarnations, namely (1) Yumjao Lairembi, the mother deity of the house (2) Nongthangleima, the female deity of war and sexuality and (3) laikhurembi, the clan mother of polity organization (Arambam 2016:66).

The mother goddess as represented by these three sterling ladies reflects the essential qualities of womanhood. In the first house, the motherly figure in family and society who cares for children, husband, and relatives and is maintainer of peace and sanity in the family and society is reflected in Yumjao Lairembi with 23 other female deities incorporated into this first house. In the second house led by Nongthangleima, the entire reproductive activities of society, the continuity of the race and the vigour and energy of the female in an aggressive form is represented by the goddess of romance and war as Nongthangleima, and there are 33 female deities in this category (Panthoibi etc are included in this). In the third house, led by Laikhurembi, nine (two were later merged and the total became seven in later periods) historical clan mothers only were mentioned in which Laisna the wife of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and 8 other clan mothers are categorised as representative of the power of woman as polity organizers with the same status as their husbands. The mother goddess Leimaren therefore manifested in these three houses identifies the character of Manipuri woman as mother, lover and social organizer (Ibid: 66). Meitei society was most likely matriarchal in ancient times. In fact, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the first historical rule of Manipur who ascended the throne in AD 33 had no knowledge of his father but his mother’s lineage was well known, indicating that up to that time the society had been matriarchal (Takhellambam 2000).

Ancient Manipuri woman were major economic contributors, both in subsistence and trade, and also had a considerable voice in the political sphere. Until the colonial period, there was even a women’s court with formal jural authority vested in women (The Pacha Loishang as mentioned earlier) (Manjusri Chaki Sircar, 1984: 7).

³ Pre-Christian era, daughter of a Meitei chieftain, married to a Khaba chieftain who developed amorous love relationship with a tribal Angom chieftain Nongpok Ningthou and eloped with him. The two were later deified.

⁴ Goddess of paddy, who travelled through the state spreading the art of cultivation, marrying different men and leaving them behind. She is one of a group of seven virgin deities known collectively as heloi taret.

⁵ A princess who resisted the dictates of her father the king of Moirang and married her lover, a poor orphan.

⁶ The court dealt with rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, wife beating, polygamy, divorce and other crimes against women.

⁷ Ancient and sacred texts of the Meiteis of Manipur

⁸ (ancient puya author anonymous)

The myths and mores of Manipuri women extol their high status in ancient times. Yet with the advent of patriarchy, we see that their social status has denigrated somewhat, and we see many beliefs which sustain the superiority of the male over the female.

4.4 Advent of Patriarchy and Meitei Women:

Patriarchal values were introduced amongst the clan settlements when the principles of masculine labour were being introduced in production. The taming of wild animals, the harnessing of animal labour in cultivation and the excessive occurrences of violence and war necessitated more prominence of the male in the organization of human life. The father became the absolute figure on whose values the worldview of the Manipuri society was consolidated. Patriarchy was enhanced with the introduction of Hinduism (Arambam, 2013: 68).

Maharaja Garibniwaz(1709-1748) was instrumental for the spread of the Ramanandi cult of Hinduism in Manipur. He, along with Shantidas Gosain, burnt the sacred texts (puyas) of Manipur and exiled those who refused to embrace the new religion. The excommunicated people were called as lois and treated as outcastes; today these groups form the Scheduled castes of Manipur. Maharaja Garibniwaj was responsible for introducing the caste system in Manipur and his conversion seriously eroded the status of women. Under the new religion, the amaibi-a priestess that had been indispensable in religious affairs was relegated to the background as Hinduism did not encourage female priests (Takhellambam 2000-01).

“Women in myth and legends enjoyed a lot of freedom because their actions were sanctioned by the traditions of that time. Society was open and men and women could have more than one spouse as exemplified by the myth of Phouoibi. With the advent of organised Hinduism in the 18th century, women started to lose their power. So that women today are caught between the liberal traditions of pre-hinduisation and conservative traditions of post-sanskritization. The submissiveness of mythical Hindu women like Sita and Savitri is idealized in society as a conservative tradition of Vaishnavite Hinduism was imposed on the traditionally independent women. So, it is hard for women to find inspiration from the females of myths and legends and to assert their traditional liberty and independence especially their role in the administration of the state. But in the public domain, the inheritance of the pre-Hindu women of myths and legends is still very strong as the numerous women’s uprisings indicate” (Takhellamba 2000-01).

In Manipur, *“Like in the rest of India, her socialization begins from childhood. She is taught domestic chores while her brothers play, and she is made to sacrifice all good things for her brothers.... A girl is considered good if she is adept at household chores, is shy and obedient and devotes her spare time to weaving. Marriage is the goal of all women. In motherhood, the first preference is a son”* (Irengbam, 2000).

In patriarchal Meitei society, a woman who bears sons attains higher social respectability. For instance, if she has a son as her first born, she is chosen to lead the ceremonial procession in social and religious functions related to birth and marriage. Inheritance rights of daughters are still not practically implemented. A son is the one to carry on the lineage, and he means prestige, position, and protection (Arambam, 2016: 69).

Women too perpetuate the existing patriarchal tradition by shaping their children in line with traditional values; it is women who mock husbands that help their wives by calling them adha mora⁹ meaning hen-pecked. They do not question the traditional role of women as natural homemakers- the one who must cook, clean etc. Women themselves minimize the drudgery of housework by saying, ‘It is nothing’ but something to be performed only by women. But this supposedly ‘nothing’ work requires hour after hour of monotonous, repetitive, and tiresome chores (Ibid: 71). Work done unpaid in the home which involves a variety of jobs, are masked under terms such as “housework”, “domestic work” and “family duties”; but any one of these activities conceals the intensive exercise of a wide range of skills, often more than one carried out at the same time, and according to Lewenhak,

⁹ Half-stool, literary meaning.

women who accept such verbal compressions thus connive at their own inequality (Lewenhak 1992: 6).The unequal sharing of the burden of household work can constrain women's ability to excel in her profession.

4.5 Women and Social and Political Movements:

(A) Nupilan's (Women's wars against the British:

It was the Ima Keithel(women's market in the heart of Imphal), which was the launching pad of the epoch making two Nupilan's(women's war) against the British. It is not only an economic base of the *Imas*, but also their political base. This Nupilan (an exclusive women's movement) also marked the first people's organised protest against the British (Brara 2017: 75).

The first Nupilan(women's war) was in 1904(women organized a collective protest against the imposition by the British of requiring male members to rebuild the Bungalow of British officials which was burnt down by unidentified miscreants, leading ultimately to the government withdrawing its order) and the second Nupilan in 1939(this was directed against the artificial scarcity of rice created by colonial policies and Marwari traders, and the government ultimately had to ban the export of rice from the State). To this day, 12 December is celebrated as Nupilan day to mark women's uprising of 1939.

In 1954 and 1959, women played an active part in every movement demanding responsible government in Manipur, by which they implied the government of a full-fledged state instead of the dependent government of a Union territory in line with the Statehood movement of the 1950s and 1960s (Asem, 2016: 35).

After attaining Statehood in 1972, the first government, a coalition one led by the Manipur People's Party was toppled in 1973 due to defection and women agitated against it, even going to the residences of the defectors shouting anti-defection slogans. Thus, women were joining in a struggle for basic political rights of the people. (Ibid, 2016: 36).

(B) Nisha Bandhi and Meira Paibi Movements:

The Nisha Bandi women's movement developed in the late 1970s in the aftermath of increasing phenomenon of alcoholism and its evil effects on society in the years after attaining statehood on January 21, 1972.

The catalyst for the movement of women for stopping the consumption of liquor was the beating up of a woman at a liquor vendor's shop at a place called Turel Awang Leikai on December 30, 1975. She had gone there to stop her husband from drinking and the annoyed shop owner beat her up. On hearing the news, a large group of women assembled there to stop the beating and decided to form Nisha Bandhi Associations all over Manipur. The movement began in Kakching and spread to other areas of Manipur. The women raided liquor vendors; burned alcohol supplies, caught drunks and paraded them all over the neighbourhoods. Nisha Bandhi associations from all over Manipur formed the All-Manipur Women's Social Reformation and Development Samaj (AMWSRDS) (Takhellambam 2000-01)

The actions of the Nisha Bandhi movement led to the introduction of prohibition laws in the state. *"This is one of the best examples of a successful collective action in Manipur in particular and India in general in contemporary history"* (Asem, 2016: 36).

The Nisha Bandhi movement was later transformed into the Meira Paibi movement in response to the changing socio-political and economic situation of the State. When conflict situation intensified in Manipur with the fight between the state forces and the underground insurgent groups, armed as the state forces were with the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, resulting in the capture, arrest and subsequent torture and even killings of men picked up from their residences, women rose up at this critical juncture transforming from

the earlier collective Nisha Bandhi Movement to the Meira Paibi movement. Meira Paibi, literally meaning ‘women torch bearers’ (meira- a torch made of bamboo with tip wrapped with a piece of cloth which is used as a wick, and which is soaked with kerosene; paibi-holder) where women patrol the streets and neighbourhood at night to protect their sons and husbands from being picked up in unwarranted arrests by security forces; to guard their neighbourhood against any surprise search operations by security forces, etc, and nowadays actively involved in civil society movements. “*The lit torch gives Meira Paibis a sense of security and is a symbol of their dignity and moral strength*” (Takhellambam, 2000-01: 38).

The catalyst for the movement was the atrocities committed by the Central reserve Police Force (CRPF) in April 1980 in Langjing. In retaliation to an attack by insurgents, CRPF personnel went on a rampage, torturing villagers and even raping and killing women. Protests were organized by women against such violations. Despite protests, rallies and memorandums, the casualties of counter insurgency operations increased, so women started patrolling the streets at night with flaming torches in their hands to guard their neighbourhoods against any surprise search operations by security forces. Today all neighbourhoods have Meira Paibi organizations and almost every neighbourhood has its Meira Paibi (Hut) (Ibid: 40-41). Till today, whenever any social or political issue is confronting the state, women come together as Meira Paibis and hold dharnas, go on night marches etc to protest against any injustice and seek recourse for any burning issue. The Meira Paibis represent the strength of women’s collective in Manipur.

With this more recent activism of the Meira paibis, they have now emerged into active protagonists for a new social order (Asem, 2016: 37).

In June 2001 when there was a mass movement in the State for the protection of territorial integrity of Manipur, women played an active part. In 2004, women made history, by stripped themselves naked in front of Kangla gate and extorted the Indian army to rape them; a protest against the arrest, rape and brutal killing of a young girl, Thangjam Manorama Devi, by the armed forces on the night of June 11, 2004. The state security forces ultimately had to leave Kangla.

So, we see the strength of women as a collective which takes part in any movement related to prominent social and political issues.

4.6 Women in Decision Making

An important aspect in the empowerment of women is the extent of their involvement in the process of decision making whether at the household level or at the level of the community or society, that is, in the government.

For all India, in the 16th Lok Sabha Election, out of the total of 543 seats, 62 women were elected as MPs (Only 11% of Lok Sabha MPs were women) (Central Statistics Office, 2019: 95). In the case of Manipur, till date, there has been only one women MP, that too from ST community.

According to the Government of India statistics, for elections held during 2013 to 2017 for various State Legislative Assemblies, percentage of women representation is only as high as 14% (in Bihar, Haryana & Rajasthan). On an average, at all India level, as of 2017, 9% of the State Assembly members and 5% of the State Council members were women. Mizoram, Nagaland and Pondicherry have zero women MLAs (CSO, 2019).

In Manipur, as in the rest of India, the percentage of women in decision-making positions, as elected representatives in the legislature and in parliament and as officers in the bureaucracy are quite low as compared to men, despite the strength of women in collective action.

The representation of women in premier services- such as IAS/IPS/IFS accounted for 7.5 percent only in 1991 (Yumnam, 2000). In Manipur, as on 21st April 2010, the percentage of female MPS officers is only 11%, while that of male is 89%. As on 26th June 2010, the percentage of female MCS officers is only 21% while that of male

is 79 % (Civil list, Government of Manipur). As on 12th April 2018, female IAS officers of Manipur cadre were just 22% of total, while male percentage is 78%. Regarding IPS officers, the percentage of female is just 12% while that of male was 88%.

As on 30.1.2018, there were 171 MPS officers of which 141 were male (82.5%) and 30 only were female (17.5%). As on 7th April 2018, there were 179 MCS officers, of which 136 are male and 43 are female (76% and 24% respectively) (Civil List, Government of Manipur).

Table 3: No. of Women Elected M.L.A in State Assembly Elections (2012& 2017) Manipur

Years	Women	Men	Total	% of Women to total
2012	3	57	60	5%
2017	2	58	60	3.4%

Source: Men and Women in India, CSO (2016), New Delhi.

The representation of women in formal electoral politics is quite low as is evident from the results of two assembly elections. Only 3 women MLS were elected in 2012(5% of total) out of a 60-member assembly. In 2017, only 2 women were elected (3.4% of total).

A study by Kulabidhu(2009) elucidates in detail the continuous defeat of women in elections in Manipur, from the first Manipur Assembly elections in 1972 upto the 9th Assembly elections in 2007.

For 18 long years that is from 1972 till 1990/91 Manipur had to wait for her first woman MLA, the late Hangmila Shaiza(wife of late Yangmasho Shaiza, the fourth Chief Minister of Manipur.) from Ukhrul Assembly Constituency in 1990/91. Then, K. Apabi Devi from Oinam AC and later W Leima Devi from Naoriya Pakhanglakpa AC . W Leima Devi went on to become a Minister of State.

In the 10th Legislative Assembly elections, 2012, the Congress made history by winning 42 seats in the 60-member Assembly. It also saw three women MLAs at the same time, O Landhoni (Khangabok Assembly AC), AK Mirabai (Patsoi AC) and Nemcha Kipgen (Kangpokpi AC).

In the 11th Assembly elections, with a strength of 9,68,312, women voters outnumbered men, (9,21,435), and there were 10 women nominees in the fray of which only 2 won, AC Mirabai patsoi and Nemcha kipgen (Kangpokpi) (Oinam, 2017).

Thus, Manipur had just 6 MLAs (Hangmila Shaiza, K Apabi Devi, W Leima Devi, Okram Landhoni, AK Mirabai, Nemcha Kipgen) and one-woman MP (Kim Gangte) in some 40 years of elective exercise.

Hence, we see that despite their prominent role in the State and despite the huger percentage of women voters, women are still not able to contribute significantly in the decision making of the state through electoral politics. It is as if, as Brara(2017: 83) writes, “*there is a glass ceiling where women are told their limits.*”..”*The glass ceiling comes in the form of customary laws, revolving around ownership issues, inheritance laws, land ownership and the exclusion from all kinds of decision making bodies in the village level, barring the states which has Panchayat*”.

4.7 Women in Panchayats:

The representation of women in Panchayats overall is quite high for Manipur, sometimes crossing the one-third mark. For instance, in the 2007 Panchayat elections, out of 165 Gram Pradhans, there were 110(66.7%) men and 55(33.3%) women. Out of 1511 GP members, 962(63.7%) were men and 539(35.7%) were women. Out of 4 Zilla Adhyakshas, 2 were men and 2 were women. And out of 61 ZP members, 39(63.9%) were men and 22(36.1%) were women.

Table 4: Female Zilla Parishad members 2012 and 2017

Years	Gender	Total (%)
2012	female	31(51.7)
	male	29(48.3)
2017	female	26(43.3)
	male	34(56.7)

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India

Percentage of women Zilla Parishad members was 51.7% while that of male was 48.3% in 2012. The percentage has gone down to 43.3% females in 2017; that of male has gone up to 56.7% in 2017.

Table 5: Status of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (as on 15-11-2016)

State/ Country	Elected Representatives		
	Total	Total Women	% of Women
Manipur	1784	868	49
India	2911961	1345990	46

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, cited in Central Statistics Office 2019: 100.

The question that arises is whether they really participate in decision making. As the Draft Manipur State Development writes: *'their capacity to exercise political influence is restricted because their husbands act on their behalf'* (IHD 2006: 240).

Despite their better representation in the Panchayat bodies, the question arises whether we really have good women leaders in the Panchayats. Three studies, by Madam Brara (2001), Tikoo(2000) and Oinam and Singh (2014) point out that women elected representatives do not really exercise real power, Almost all the women who represent a 'gram panchayat' remain a puppet of her house or deny taking strong decisions. They follow the dictates of their husbands/male members of the family, or of their political parties, and in many meetings women's presence was not considered necessary and their thumb impressions were taken after meetings was over; many women have no idea about local issues or decisions taken in the meetings and might not really be sensitive to the issues of the common people. Even when some become involved or vocal, such women are not encouraged because of the bias towards the sense of supremacy and privilege of male members based on the prevailing patriarchal ideology of the society.

For overall India too, though the number of women participating in panchayats has increased, the elected women are facing a number of problems starting from their decision to contest elections to performing their development duties. An evaluation on women's participation in various places reported that they were sometimes not informed or rarely invited to the meetings in panchayats headed by male members. In other cases, husbands accompanying the elected women select members to attend the meetings. Various studies on women's participation in panchayats have found that they agreed to contest elections either due to family pressure or the decision of their community and not because they were keen to do so. In short, the provision of reservation coerced them to participate in decision-making process in local bodies (Singha, 2016:116).

4.8 Decision Making in the Household

Another important domain of decision making is that of the household. The table below gives the extent of currently married women's participation in household decision making.

Table 6: Participation of Currently Married Women in Household Decision (%)

State /Country	Urban	Rural	Total	Total (2015-16)
Manipur	96.4	96.0	96.2	94.4
India	85.8	83.0	84	76.0

Source: NFHS 4 (2015-16), Manipur & India.

The participation of women in household decision-making is quite high in Manipur. But this does not get translated into greater decision-making power at state level.

4.9 Violence against Women:

Women also suffer from domestic violence like their sisters in the rest of India as the data from National Family Health surveys of the Indian Institute of Population Sciences illustrate.

Table 7: Domestic Violence

Forms of Violence	State/Country	NFHS-4 (2015-16)	NFHS-3 (2005-06)
Ever-married women who have ever experienced spousal violence (%)	Manipur	53.1	43.8
	India	28.8	37.2
Ever-married women who have experienced violence during any pregnancy (%)	Manipur	3.4	na
	India	3.3	na

Source: NFHS-3 and 4(2005-06 & 2015-16).

The percentage of ever-married women who have ever experienced spousal violence (%) was 43.8 in 2005-06, NFHS 3, it is 53.1 in 2015-16, NFHS 4.

Thus, Manipuri women are not free from violence and abuse in their lives, despite their economic independence. Evidently, if there is greater decision-making power, it should imply more power, and hence less violence. It could be interpreted that woman, have greater access to decision-making power because of greater economic independence. This the man of the house could resent leading to incidents of violence. On the one hand, women of Manipur have greater economic independence; on the other hand, they are still not free from drudgery and abuse in their lives (Arambam, 2013).

4.10 Women and the burden of Unpaid Household labour

Women perform three roles: productive, reproductive and community managing. In the household they must play a dual role; they have to do paid work, come home and spend hours on unpaid household labour which is also one of the constraining factors of their lives often ignored in policy discourses and academic literature. This burden of invisible but 'productive' household work is the main area of contention for feminists who have been seeking to incorporate such work in the national income accounts, though now, their inclusion in satellite accounts is all that has been achieved in some countries. But the fact is much of women's work remains unrecognized and undervalued in the system of National Accounts.

Time use studies are often undertaken to bring out the immense time burden of women. In India, the Central Statistical Organization carried out a time-use survey in 1998-99 -pilot on an experimental basis in six selected states, namely, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Meghalaya. The average Indian male spent about 42 hours a week, (or 6 hours a day in SNA¹⁰ activities as compared to only about 19 hours a week, (or

¹⁰ Economic and productive activities according to the UN system of national accounts.

about 2.7 hours a day) by females in SNA activities. In extended SNA¹¹ (Unpaid productive work, which consists of Household chores and Care work, which are dubbed extended SNA activities also in Indian classification of Time Use activities as in UN System of National Accounts) activities-Men spend only about 3.6 hours (3 hours 39 minutes a week, or 31 minutes a day) as compared to 34.6 hours (34 hours and 38 minutes a week or 4 hours and 57 minutes a day) by females on domestic work. Women thus devote about ten times more time than men to extended SNA activities (CSO 2000: 57). More such surveys are now routine. Regarding Manipur, at present there are only two studies on unpaid work for women, both by Mayanglambam(2010, 2016), one on tribal women and another on valley women. The figures she calculated are as given below.

Table 8: Average Time spent on household, paid and unpaid work per day by sex, Manipur (in hrs)

Type of work	Valley District		Hill District		Total	
	F	M	F	M	F	M
Household chores(Non-SNA)	7.4	2.3	8.6	2.7	8	2.5
Unpaid work(Non-SNA+Care)	7.7	4.6	7.5	6.6	7.6	5.6
Total Unpaid work	15.1	6.9	16.1	9.3	15.6	8.1
Paid work(SNA)	7.3	8.4	7.5	8.2	7.4	8.3

Source: Mayanglambam (2010, 2016). Personal Time use Survey, Manipur.

Here household chores and care work are extended SNA activities (Those activities which can be delegated to a third person who can be paid for the activity) and hence can be imputed a value which the author has attempted. The study on time-use studies for women in Manipur show how women bear more of the burden of unpaid work as compared to men.

5. Conclusion

We see that women in Manipur have a rich legacy of being empowered in the sense of being active in productive economic activities from ancient times and for active participation in collective action against social injustices. They also take part in decision-making in the household, but at the same time they are not in major decision-making positions in society and they do not play a powerful role as leaders and decision makers. Though resistance to oppression is on the high agenda of the Meira Paibi's (bearer of torches), and their political consciousness and participation in public affairs as a collective force are quite visible, at the individual level, they seem to be constrained by patriarchy like their sisters in mainland India. They also suffer from domestic violence like their peers elsewhere.

It is the tradition of patriarchy, with its divisions of work, as women's work and men's work which also contribute to the inability of women to balance all and come out as powerful women leaders except for a few. Patriarchy has got a strong hold over the society so that men do not believe in the power of women, and women themselves consider women inefficient. Here cultural norms and traditions play an important role, and the constraints on women regarding the work they must do in the household, their roles as both caretaker of the family, and bread earner also, the difficulty of managing their triple role, their productive, reproductive, and community managing role creates tremendous time constraints on women. They need superhuman abilities to be able to manage all roles efficiently and effectively. Time, family, cultural constraints all handicap women in their ability to participate fully in polity and even to grow to higher levels in their professions. They struggle to walk the tightrope between essential household labour and career needs, thus limiting their ability to participate fully in public affairs and from rising to the top in their professions, except for a select few.

A change in societal attitude is required to recognize that women are also human, not superhuman machines, who also need rest, and help from their other halves- their mates; (If they are married, that is) and from their other family members (if they are single). As more and more women aspire to take their rightful place within governance

¹¹ Productive but non-economic but which can be imputed a value like child care, and other household labour.

bodies, it is important for all institutions (state, family, and community) to respond to women's specific needs. Strategic gender needs¹² should be placed at the core of government processes. There is need for tangible empowerment of women in Manipur by giving them more opportunities for growth and participation in all development processes of society.

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¹² Strategic gender needs are the needs of women identify because of their subordinate position in society. They vary according to particular contexts, related to gender division of labor, power and control, and may include issues such as legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages and women's control over their bodies(Moser 1993).

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