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Role of Manipuri Women in the Socio- economic life of the State

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Abstract

In Manipur society, women hold a significant role in socio-economic life, contributing both traditionally and in contemporary settings to the social, cultural, and economic aspect of the community. The women of Manipur have been known for their courage, bravery, patience and hard-working qualities. The traditional religious books and literature of the early period of Manipur bear ample testimony to their exceptional qualities and the role they played in the process of the formation and consolidation of the society. From this fact, it can be said that right from the very early period of time the womenfolk of Manipur have been enjoying a high status and playing a very important role in the society. They have a certain degree of economic independence as they played a vital role in the economic life of the society. They are actively engaged in traditional crafts, including weaving, which is an important source of livelihood and cultural identity. This craftsmanship is passed down to generations and has enable Manipuri women to contribute to the state's economy. The "Ima Keithel", or "Mother's Market," is a prominent example where Manipuri women manage, own, and operate stalls, symbolizing both their economic agency and social authority. This space serves not only as an economic centre but also as a gathering place where women build solidarity and support each other, reinforcing social bonds within the community. Along with it, they have always played a significant role in other social and economic affairs of the state. This article examines the role women played in every sphere of social and economic life of the state.

Keywords: Traditional Crafts, Ima Keithel, Mythodology, Symbolizing, Kang Sanaba

Introduction:

Manipur is a unique state because the women of this land is unique. Women have all the elegance, beauty and grace and they been known for their courage, and hard-working nature. Manipuri women have always been ready to fight for justice and for the welfare of the people. They always took a pivotal role in the socio-economic and cultural development of the society. In the mythology, one cannot ignore the role played by Leimarel Shidabi as a kingmaker and that of Nongthangleima in time of creating then universe. From this fact, it

can be said that right from the very early period of time the womenfolk of Manipur have been playing a very important role in the society. The study is carried out with the hypothesis that the women of Manipur have never been lagging behind the men when it comes to that of facing challenges thrown up by socio-economic problems of the society.

Methodology:

The study employed a descriptive, exploratory and analytical methods to examine the socio-economic status of Manipuri women during the earlier time as well as in contemporary settings. Data from documents and records available, newspapers, relevant books and magazines etc. have been collected to carry out this study.

Women and social life of the community:

Manipuri women are always engaged in domestic work irrespective of their age and status. In earlier times even the queens were engaged in domestic works. Even the daughter of the king did fishing either for sports or as a part of their social life. Almost all Manipuri women including those belonging to the well to do families were expert weavers. It is said that a girl cannot be married unless she knows weaving and she carries her loom to her husband's house after marriage. Most of the girls and women learn to dance, for in Manipur dancing skill is a must for them. There were a number of traditional games and sports, where women participated. Kang- Sannaba was one of the popular traditional games which were played by young women and girls during the spring season. The reputation of Manipuri women in contemporary games and sports is also formidable. They have won many laurels both at national and international levels. Women like Kunjrani, Surjalata, Sanamacha Chanu, Brajeswori, Merry Kom, Sarita, Mirabai Chanu, Sanjita Chanu, Sushila Chanu, Kalpana Devi, Bombayla Devi Laishram have played at national as well as at international levels and brought glory not only to the state but also to the entire nation. In games like cycling, Judo, Hockey, weight lifting and archery, Manipuri women have shown their mettle well. In agricultural works also almost all the works except tilling is done mainly by women. Village women below 50 years of age are engaged in some work or the other in the paddy fields.

Apart from their heavy domestic works women of Manipur have always played an important role in the social life. There are lots of evidences where the women played a vital role in the growth and evolution of the society. Women used to attend social gatherings, religious ceremonies and festival throughout the year. In addition to their household responsibilities and upbringing of children, it has become compulsory for every Manipuri woman to participate in social functions and festivals of their locality. It has been in these social gatherings and festivals that women exchanged their ideas relating to social, political and economic matters of the society.

Women and Cultural Life of the society:

Manipuri women have made remarkable contributions in the field of culture. Culture includes dance, drama, literature and other traditional religious function and festivals. Some of the important cultural functions where women actively participated are Lai-Haraoba, Ras Lila, Nupi Pala, Holi pala etc. Literally Lai Haraoba means "Rejoicing of the Gods". It is observed in honour of God and Goddesses locally known as the Umang Lai (Umang means forest; Lai means deity). Participation of women is evident from the role of Maibis (Priestesses) during the Lai Haraoba festival. The participation of Maibis is considered to be compulsory in the observation of this religious festival. Ras Lila is a form of dance based on

religion depicting the divine play between Krishna and Radha. In this dance women took the role of both Krishna and Radha. Again, many women in Manipur form Nupi Pala (a group of women singers) and participate in the religious festivals like Holi, Rath Yatra, Durga Puja, Jhulon, etc. These groups of women singers participate in every religious and cultural function of their communities throughout the year. There is no bar for women to participate in these religious functions in Manipur. Their participation in the cultural and religious ceremonies and festivals is always considered as essential and compulsory. In the field of literature also many women have made a great contribution by writing poems, novels, short stories, etc. Notable among them are T. Thoibi, Kh. Pramodini, Nee Devi, Ningombam Surma, Kshetrimayum Subdani, Binalakshmi Nepram and M.K Binodini who won Sahitya Academy Awards. Therefore, one can say that there is no aspect of cultural life where there is no participation of women.

Women and Economic Life of the Society:

Manipuri women have always been playing a pivotal role in the economic life of the society. They play a very significant role in the economy of their family as well as that of the state. Earlier, they hold a high and free since all the internal trade and exchange of products were managed by women. Their activities were not confined to the four walls of their domestic life. They moved freely for the purpose of internal trade and commerce. This economic contribution of women could be traced back to the early period of Manipur. Women not only did all the works of buying and selling in public and carrying to and fro of the articles to be sold and at home also they were engaged in weaving and spinning to earn money and be economically independent. Handloom industry is the backbone of the Manipuri women's economy as it is the main source of their income as well as that of the state. Women produce varieties of cloths and their knowledge and skill of weaving is considered as special qualification of them. Almost every housewife used to provide cloths essential for the family. In addition to weaving, women embroidery work and earn money to supplement the family income. Handloom industry, in fact, has become the most important source of income for women and it is almost exclusively in the hands of Manipuri women. These products are sold in the local market as well as exported to other parts of the country. Thus, women play a vital role in the economic life of the society. Their contribution to the economic life of the family as well as that of the society at large has been aptly described in a popular saying in Manipur. It says: They enjoy a certain degree of the economic independence which enable them to involve in any activities directly or indirectly connected with the social and economic problems of the state. This high status accorded to the womenfolk was regarded as one of the Sana Keithel or Khwairamband Bazar is a living symbol of the involvement of Manipuri women in the economic life of the society. It is at the centre of Imphal is now popularly known as Ima Keithel or Women Market a major market place managed by women in which selling and buying of essential commodities are done. Beside this they discuss and interact with one another about social and political affair of the state in the market place. This makes them aware of the socio-political problems of the state.

Women in the Mythology of Manipur:

In the opinion of Alan Dundes,

“A Myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in the present forms”

and mythology is the collective study of myths. There were many prominent women in the mythology of Manipur like Leimarel Shidabi, Nongthang Leima, Emoinu, Panthoibi, Phouibi, Yumjao Leimarenbi etc. to mention just a few. These women are believed to have played a very important role in various stages of Manipur mythology. The stories of these women also bear ample testimony to the fact that women of Manipur have always played a significant role in the socio- economic life of the society and were accorded a very high status. Some of the Manipuri women in the mythology are being discussed below:

Leimarel Shidabi: In Meitei mythology Atiya Guru Shidaba is believed to be the creator of the Universe. It is also believed that he created Khoyum Shidaba (God) and Leimarel Shidabi (Goddess). Later two sons, Sanamahi and Pakhangba were born to them. When the time came for selecting the successor, Khoyum Shidaba decided to test the ability and strength of his two sons. So, he asked his sons to go round the Universe seven times from the feet of his throne and the one who returns first would be his successor. Sanamahi was strong and healthy and Pakhangba was weak and young. So, their mother Leimarel Shidabi got more concerned about her younger son Pakhangba and advised him to go around his father's throne seven times as it will be the same as going round the universe seven times. While Sanamahi was going round the universe, Pakhangba already completed going seven times round his father's throne and he was appointed as a king. In this way Leimarel Shidabi succeeded in her attempt to appoint his younger son as successor. Thus, Leimarel Shidabi symbolizes the role played by women in family as well as in the making of a king. This is very significant symbolic episode of not only the role of women play in political affairs of the state but also of their role as a kingmaker.

Nongthang Leima: According to the advice of the Atiya Guru Shidaba, Ashiba tried to create the universe but his younger son Harapa always thwarted his efforts to do so. So, Guru Shidaba created Nongthang Leima and asked her to divert the attention of Harapa. Nongthang Leima, by dancing in front of Harapa charmed him and diverted his attention from destroying the creation of the Universe. In the meantime, Ashiba completed the creation of the universe. Thus, the role of Nongthang Leima indicates the role of women in making the universe. Without the help of Nongthang Leima, Ashiba might not have been able to create the universe. The role of Nongthang Leima shows the importance of women in the creation of the universe.

Thus, the different roles and characters of women in the mythology of Manipur reveal that women were bold and courageous. The story of these women influences the women of present-day Manipur in their social, political and economic life and also shows that women played a significant role in various aspects of life in the society.

Conclusion:

It can be concluded that women of Manipur have a long tradition of participation in the socio-economic affairs of the state. They have their own special qualities inherited from their past history. They always took an important role in the socio- economic development of the society. In the mythology, one cannot ignore the role played by Leimarel Shidabi as a kingmaker and also that of Nongthang Leima in time of creating the Universe. It may also be noted that the nature of women's role where the people raised all the while were not directly related with the question of the status of women but related with the question of promoting and safeguarding the socio- economic interest of the people and for the

maintenance of peace and harmony in the society at large. Hence, the involvement of Manipuri women in the socio-economic affairs of the state is to protect and safeguard the interest of the people of the state but not for their own interests.

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