

**EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT:  
A STUDY OF MANIPUR WOMEN**

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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF MANIPUR WOMEN**”, submitted by CHAKHO KAYA MAO in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY, of Jawaharlal Nehru University. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for the award of any degree to this or any other University, and is her original work.

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The present study is an attempt to understand the role of education in empowering women of Manipur. Education plays an important role in enlightening the people about their rights, duties and also imparts skills to lead a satisfying life in society. Manipur is one of the eight states in the North-east India, bordering Myanmar. Imphal is the Capital of Manipur. The State is a hill – girt tract of land. The girding hills not only demarcate its march but wall it off from the neighbouring regions into a distinct geographical entity. In each geographical region, there are several communities having their own culture, social order and polity. Agriculture is the main economic means of the state, rice being its main crop. Irrigation is absent and thus, Manipur people depend on monsoon rains to a large extent. Manipur society follows the patrilineal and patriarchal system. Polygamy is a common practice among the *Meitei* community. Meitei is a community that dominates on demography so far as people settled in the valleys are concerned. The valley consists of the four districts of Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal, and Bishnupur. They are predominantly Hindu. There are also small pockets of people belonging to the traditional pre-Hindu faith, a small percentage of Muslims and even smaller percentage of people belonging to the Punjabi and Marwari communities. On the other hand people living in the hill areas are divided into five districts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, and Chandel and are inhabited mostly by various tribes of *Nagas* and *Kukis* and other smaller tribes along with a sizable population of Nepalis. Most of the hill people, excluding the Nepalis are Christians and practice monogamy.

Rural women in India suffer from being both economically and socially 'invisible'. Economic invisibility stems from the perception that women are not relevant to the wage and market economy. Social invisibility is a result of the general status of



second class citizens. Women are considered as the weaker section and are given as subordinate status in the Hindu society. The Indian male- dominated paternal system confines her to survive as secondary member of the family and lower citizen of society. The condition in which poor women live is characterized by low wages, poor nutrition, and lack of access to health care, education and training. Emphasis on improving the daily conditions of women's existence curtailed women's awareness of, and readiness to act against, the less visible but powerful underlying structures of subordination and inequality. While receiving material benefits women should not be deprived of their wage to achieve a better role, their will power to reach a higher quality of life and their commitment to an enhanced status in family, community and society. Poverty is known to have driven countless women to low status, low paying occupations in domestic services, worse still, they become easy prey of organized prostitution posing as migrants away from their homes at times across international borders exposing them to considerable risk of economic exploitation and sexual abuse.

Women in Manipur, both in the valley and in the hills, enjoy a great deal of freedom and hold high distinctive positions at various social, religious and political levels. However, their 'high position' in the society cannot be equated to that 'superior positions' of their male counterparts. Inequality in the distribution of available resources persistently manifests women discrimination in the state. Similarly, there are numerous obstacles that hinder the women in Manipur to move beyond their 'superficial liberty' so as to cope with the changing needs and demands of the day.

The present socio-economic and political scenario in Manipur is marred by myriad of problems, such as male – oriented social norms, unstable law and order situation, insurgencies, unemployment, drugs addiction and HIV/AIDS diseases, alcoholism, corruption, degradation of moral values, unbalanced development which is giving thrust to rural-urban migration, ethnic clash and so on. Waking up to such as pandemonium, women of different sections of the society have made intensive efforts to harmonize conflicts and social disorders in Manipur. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to look into the various facets of their activities and limitations to examine their roles in empowering women more critically.

Manipur valley, where *Meiteis* comprise two-third of the population are distinct from the tribals many of whom live in the hills, in terms of socio-religious set-up because majority of the meitei community are Hindus, and the hill tribes of the Kukis and Nagas are Christians. Social norms are based on patriarchal structures and the joint family system is common, increasing women's dependence on the larger patriarchal family. Women remain dependent on husbands even though Meitei women historically have had economically positive roles. The '*Nupi Lal*' is a case in point, wherein, Meitei women made a historic mass movement (1904 and 1939) against British colonialism and the feudal regime of the King. The site of the women's movement was the all-women market in Imphal that continues to form the basis of social interaction even today.

With the change in time, the traditional joint family structure of Manipur has changed to nuclear family particularly in urban areas. Owing to social change women are taking up different roles other than looking after the family and doing domestic chore. Very often, they are emotionally and psychologically disturbed due to differences in opinion and ideas, and distribution of responsibilities in the family management. The multiple roles of women add stress and tensions in the home and society. Very often women are blamed if their husbands or sons turn alcoholics or drug abusers, and as such they are stigmatized in the society for no fault of theirs. This causes great harm to women because "Women do not have their own identity but are often identified by their husband or son" (Umarani, *et al* 2001: 124).

Ironically, though the fact remains that the women of Manipur hold better positions in the society as compared to women in other parts of India and the absence of social evil practices against women such as sati, dowry, purdah system, female foeticide, etc. which are prevalent elsewhere in the country, there is recognition of the fact that they are also still not free from victimisation and subordination in the male dominated society. The doorway of modernization in our society reinforces patriarchal system. In every section of the society, women are by subdued age-old, social norms, beliefs, practices, etc. handed down from generation to generation. Men and women are always treated differently prescribing gender rules in and outside the family system. With the dawn of democratic ideas and democratic form of government, especially after the Second World

War, various efforts have been made by government and non-governmental organizations to provide space for women to assert their rights. The declaration of human rights by the United Nations in 1948 has added another dimension by granting equal rights to both men and women. But in many parts of India, the social reality is somewhat different. Majority of women especially in rural areas still remains traditional and continues to hold subordinate and inferior position in the patriarchal society. As the state of Manipur is also a patriarchal society, even though women play significant role in the society and enjoy a higher status than her counterparts in other parts of India, there are certain social restrictions deforming her social jurisdiction. For instance, in meitei society, women are not allowed to eat the things, which were offered to family God at the time of *Apokpa Khurumba* (worship of family). Also, they should not put their *phaneks* (wrappers) in front of the house for drying in the sun because it is inauspicious for men, etc.

In the hill areas of Manipur, as per their custom, women are not allowed to inherit ancestral property. Instead they are given certain domestic materials like almirah, suitcase, beds, clothes, shawls, and kitchen wares for their daily use at the time of their marriage, thereby reinforcing the notion that their roles is confined to domestic chores, and her needs should be centred around her family and home. But in the valley of Manipur, parental properties are distributed among their sons and daughters. However in Manipur, sons are always given preference as is the case with the rest of the country. This clearly indicates that the social condition of women is in subordinate position in Manipur society.

With the emergence of modernization and embracement of Christianity has led to further participation of women in the society. Women get employed and contribute to the economy but their contribution is undervalued and the society continues to sideline them. Due recognition is not given to their input and there is little profit from their labour. They do not control factors of production that continue to be held by men. Women are the worst sufferers in health, poverty, and literacy. Even the Naga Customary laws are gender discriminatory and the government is codifying these. Women are not represented to a large extend in their village councils of their tribes and at district level.

The state continues to be agriculture based with small scale and handloom industry as big owners. The land person ratio is very low and the tribal population is rapidly losing their land, their only asset and to make things harder, there is a very low utilisation of human resources (Human Development Report 2004: 98). It is also reported that while there is high literacy and enrolment in Manipur state compared to the national average, there is low per capita income, low consumption levels and inadequate health care systems. Women's role in the decision making process is minimal. In fact in ongoing modernization, participation of women in productive work has been falling as compared to their participation in traditional productive activities (Human Development Report 2004: 111). The reasons are that the scope of employment of men in traditional productive activities has fallen and the burden of maintaining family, through earning in traditional activities is on women.

Years of conflict, violence, lack of economic opportunities, breakdown of rule of law and military presence has militarised society and led to much alienation and despair. In militarized societies, all institutions get gendered and male privilege dominates as women stay confined to their homes for fear of sexual harassment and abuse by military personals. Economic life and movement is disrupted due to frequent emergency orders, curfews, and restrictions. Women being already unequal are again unequally affected. There is a general feeling among women in Manipur their economic activities is perpetually mimed by payment of double taxes, extortion on the highways, confiscation of goods and money by state commandos and other paramilitary forces, *bandhs* and curfews. They believe that their struggle to eke out a livelihood is carried out under sheer personal risks.

Under such severe constraints and conflicts in the state, women continually face various problems in different forms. Women are often forced to do various unwanted or undignified professions to support their self, children and family in general. They are obliged to take up professions like black marketing of tickets at cinema halls, flesh trade, drug peddling and other odd jobs. They are easy prey to big businessmen and employers in returns for money and security. Many women become victims of rape, widowhood, homelessness, destitution, forced migration, sole earning member of the family, divorce

cases, family disintegration, harassment by law enforcement authority, denial of rights to property, sexual abuse, stigma and security etc. Very often, women are used as a means for corruption and political campaign. The above factors make it difficult for women to lead a secure life and think positively for further development. With limited knowledge and skills, women find it difficult to cope-up with the rapid social changes.

Whenever social norms breakdown, women have to bear the burdens of traumatized and alienated youths. Alcoholism and drug abuse are very common social ailments in Manipur society, the consequences of which is faced by women in the form of sexual abuse and violence against women. Substance abuse is one of the main reasons for destroying family structures and impacting negatively on children. Women in both rural and urban areas have complained of intolerable situation as a result of substance abuse by men who make women's tasks more arduous.

Gender inequality is evident in Manipur too. Women are considered as the weaker sex requiring economic and social protection. This attitude has led to a limitation on their mobility and consequent lack of opportunities for development of their personalities. Women have, therefore, lagged behind in the field of education and skill development. Literacy rate of the female population in Manipur is 59.70% whereas for that of males it is 77.87% (Census of India 2001). This affects the employment opportunities for women, which in turn leaves them at a low status. In economic aspect, though women are engaged in many sectors but their productivity is low. According to 2001 census, in Manipur, the rate of female main worker is only 18.58% as compared to 38.45% for male whereas in the marginal workers, the rate of women marginal workers is 13.70% and only 6.72% for male. Thus women on the whole have positive contribution in the development of the state. Women usually occupy in the less skilled but more laborious and less rewarding job. They have less time to spare for education; also considering preference is given to the male child for education, the girl child has to help in domestic work.

Insurgence interventions in disempowering the Manipur women are another major obstacle for the women in Manipur state. Even though, women step out in the forefront to

protest against various issues like; peace process, rape cases, to repeal Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA, 1958) etc, the role of women leaders remain vague and undefined as their movements are controlled by the different insurgent in the state. Women of Manipur remain a puppet of the insurgents despite their active participation in the political affairs.

It is heartening to note that Manipur female literacy rate is above the national average, and 33% seats are reserved for women in the Manipur legislative assembly, but there are very few women contestants and no women political leaders. There is no 'equal access' for their political participation. It is indeed discouraging for the young women aspirants in politics in particular and the entire women in general. Today the major obstacle they face is illiteracy, ignorance about the political processes in the state, in the country and the world affairs; and although it appears trivial, lack of knowledge and command over English language is also a major hindrance for political aspirants. It also gives a dismal picture of the state as there have been no efforts either by the state government or by the educated civil society members to empower the women in the political realm.

Apart from these, the other problems of power equation between male and female have reinforced due to the processes of modernisation as mentioned earlier. Modernisation has also created its concomitant problems faced by even the developed western countries, where women become the victims of male dominance. Therefore, there is need for empowering women of Manipur. Education is one of the important catalysts for social change. Against such socio-economic and political backdrop, this paper will try to examine how education empowers the Manipur women in particular and also bring to light the various aspects of their life that needs to be empowered. The present study, therefore, will emphasize on the women of Manipur and especially focus on the important indicators – social, economic and political affairs via education as the main imperative instrument of empowerment. Thus, to proceed, we shall first try to conceptualise empowerment and education as its medium.

## Concept of Empowerment

Gender asymmetry is a fact of life. It is one of the most crucial and yet one of the most persistent disparities in most societies. According to the United Nations Decade for women, gender inequality is summed up as 'while women account for half of the world's population and perform two-thirds of the hours worked, they received one-tenth of the world's property registered in their name. These gender inequities are either ignored in development planning and policy formulation, or reinforced through specific development projects and policies' (Sahay, 1998: 2). Gender distinctions are not accidental or a fact of nature but are reproduced institutionally (Epstein, 1988). One of the most important institutions is the family, a principal sight of the reproduction and reinforcement roles of gender. Feminists subscribe to the argument that women's relative lack of economic power is the most important determinant of inequalities, including those of marriage, parenthood and sexuality (Blumberg, 1978). Another dimension of gender inequality is derived from the excessive work burden which women have traditionally been expected to bear. In spite of the fact that women's market participation has increased steadily there is no commensurate reduction in the household responsibilities of women. The culture of sharing housework by male members of the family has not yet, acquired much social acceptability (Moghadam, 1990).

The word 'empowerment' was a 'buzzword' during the 1960s used by the social workers. This word is widely used in relation to powerlessness of minority groups (such as women, tribals, dalits and persons with different abilities). It is difficult to measure empowerment but it can be understood and defined through personal, social, economic and political indicators. The compact Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus defines '*empower*' as authority or power. The meaning of empowerment centres on the root concept - power. According to Batliwala (1995: 23), "*Power* can be defined as control over resources, ideology and self, exercised in social, economic and political context among individuals and groups". In other words, 'Empowerment' can be understood not only as control over external resources like, physical, human, intellectual, financial and 'soft resources' like beliefs, values and attitudes, but also a growing self-consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers so as to access available resources to its fullest (Bose, 2004).

Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance (Chandra, 1997: 395). It is both a process and the result of the process. It is transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. It is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of material as well as information resources. The concept of women's empowerment became popular since the mid 1980s. In India, it is the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980- 85) which can be taken as landmark for the cause of women. It is here that the concept of women and development was introduced for the first time. As Batliwala (1995: 34) observed, "In grassroots programmes and policy debates alike, empowerment has virtually replaced terms such as welfare, upliftment, community participation, and poverty alleviation to describe the goal of development and intervention".

Women's empowerment is essentially about changing power relations that subordinate women in the family and society. It is an enabling process that seeks to redistribute power between genders and involves resistance, conflict, and accommodation. Empowerment also involves disempowerment of some structures, systems, and institutions. Given the powerlessness of marginalized women, women's empowerment is more often an externally induced process (Banerjee, 1995: 4).

Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. Power is not a commodity to be transacted; nor can it be given away as aims. Power has to be acquired and once acquired; it needs to be exercised, sustained and preserved. Empowerment, as mentioned earlier is a process and is not, therefore, something that can be given to people. This process of empowerment is both individual and collective, since it is through involvement in groups that people most often begin to develop their awareness and the ability to organize to take action and bring about change (Pillai, 1995: 36).

Karl Marilee (1995) also supports the view that empowerment is not an end product in itself. It is a process that comes through women development. There are four qualities of empowerment: welfare of women fulfilling their basic needs and services,



equality of accesses to resources, particular educational opportunities, consciousness where women themselves take action to reduce the gender discrimination and participation of women in taking decisions along with men and their control over resource. According to Zippy (1995), empowerment represents a means for accomplishing community development tasks and can be conceptualized as involving two key elements giving community members the authority to make decisions and choices and facilitating the development of the knowledge and resources necessary to exercise these choices.

Empowerment is a very positive concept with the capacity of self- action and the transformation of self. It is inextricably linked to both the ability and opportunity to make decisions and to act for oneself. Thus, empowerment is egalitarian in nature, stressing the competence and right of people to take charge of their own destinies. For the powerless, this entails a bottom-up process whereby they transform from passive subjects to positive actors in the drama of their individual lives (Friere, 1973: 35). They become active participants in the creation and implementation of the policies, decisions, and processes which affects them. The ability to redefine oneself and to act effectively for oneself is the essence of individual empowerment, this is a basic human need, rather than merely a positive phenomenon. The person who lacks power and control over his or her own life has been stripped of a fundamental element of one's humanity. This transcends even the loss of dignity- it is the loss of self. The individual who has become more empowered has become more human in the fullest sense of the word.

In 1980s, especially after the failure of 'Women Development' Policies and Programs to bring any significant progress in women's life, empowerment became the most important agent for change. Schemes for poverty alleviation and welfare were sharply criticized for not addressing the structural factors that perpetuate the oppression and exploitation of poor women (Moser, 1989: 10). The authors of the Human Development Report (UNDP 1990) argue that to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living are the most critical of human capabilities and choices. Development enables people to have these choices, by creating conducive environment for people, individually and

collectively, to develop their full potential and to have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives in accord with their needs and interests (Sahay, 1998: 8).

The World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995 took empowerment as one of its prominent objectives, where the “Programme of Action” and the declarations linked up the concept with economic globalization. Mohanty criticizes the objectives as he feels, “empowerment is not the goal, but something to be understood in the context of production and investment (Mohanty, 1996). The declaration did not take into consideration the socio-economic structure, ideology, and political processes which hinder the empowerment process, thus, showing their insensitivity towards the concept. Hence, it is more important to evolve a new definition rather than following the objectives and ideologies set by the west.

Empowerment has become the mainstay of all social development programmes. It should be looked upon as an objective of economic development for all the oppressed groups of the society ranging from unorganized workers and poor parents to tribal people, dalits and women (Mohanty, 1996). The only way to empower women is the bottom-up struggle of women’s organizations that can reach women at the grassroots level and mobilize them. Any attempt to empower these women should come from the grassroots with the help of women’s organizations at the grassroots level. Therefore, organizations and intermediary NGOs that work at the grassroots level play an important role in empowering the poor. However, empowerment is not a top-down or one-way process. It is through the continuous and gradual process of conscientisation that women understand the systematic structures of power that dominate and subjugate them, and develop the capability and strength to influence the direction of social change. Empowerment is not, however, simply a change of mind-set. It also involves collective information for transforming structures of gender subordination. Finally, individual women’s empowerment cannot lead to radical restructuring of power relations in society unless women’s mobilization and collective action through grassroots groups become a political force- an organized mass movement- that challenges and transforms existing power structures (Batliwala, 1993: 12).

However, it is asserted by many scholars that women's organizations generally do not exist in places where they are required most. Kalapana Shah feels even if they exist they do not take interest in improving the position of the poorest women. She observes that "they have social charity type character only" (Sandbergen, 1991: WS 27). This precisely can be termed as the reason for failure of women's development especially in the rural areas. Mohanty partially supports this argument as he pointed out that NGOs are more interested to be called a part of the "Grassroots Movements" interested in social transformation same way as the governmental agencies pick up the concept to fulfil their programme objective of development, for instance, the National Literacy Mission or Panchayati Raj or their Women's Development Schemes (Mohanty, 1996). Mohanty says in the same breath that this attitude of the governmental agencies actually limit the empowerment process as the deprived sections lose their right to struggle in the society. The co-option of the people's movements to carry on their autonomous campaigns has disenchanted people's faith towards the NGOs. The shift from struggle politics to NGO politics has become the focus. While framing Institutional arrangements like 33 percent reservation of women in Panchayats, which is of course essential, stress should be given on transformation of the entire power structure within the society otherwise empowerment will be a symbolic notion which entrusts power to a section without concretizing it in definite spheres (Mohanty, 1996).

According to the National policy of Education, Government of India (1986) "*women become empowered through collective reflection and decision-making, its parameters are building positive self image and self-confidence, developing the ability to think critically, building up group cohesion and fostering decision-making and action, ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change, encouraging group action in order to bring about change in the society, providing the wherewithal for economic independence*" (Rajawat, 2005: 11).

Thus empowerment implies increasing individual as well as collective capabilities of women. Individual capacity related to positive self image and self confidence, develop ability to think critically, decision- making capacity is for enabling women to take control of their own lives, to set their own agenda to organize and help each other and make

demand for change (Reddy *et al*, 2004: 2). Empowerment should also generate new notions of power. Present- day notions of power have evolved in hierarchical, male dominated societies and are based on divisive, destructive and oppressive values. Women's empowerment must evolve a new understanding of power, and experiment with ways of democratizing and sharing new power- building mechanisms for collective responsibility, decision making and accountability.

The majority of women workers in general and Manipur women workers in particular are engaged in subsistence agriculture and the informal sector with little or no regulation, legislative protection and trade union support. The structural adjustment process has generally increased the quantity of employment for women; however, this increase has been mainly in non regular forms of employment including self-employment in the informal sector. The vast majority of women work in self employment activities outside agriculture in low paying trade or service activities, low skilled occupations that are often under highly exploitative conditions. The major constraints faced by women in self employment activities relates to inaccessibility to credit markets and technical skills. Customary law conventions in most places preclude women, particularly women in the hill areas of Manipur, from claiming family assets. Women also lack adequate access to institutional credit facilities.

Women's biological and social reality has created several distinct roles for her in society: that of wife, mother, daughter, homemaker, worker, citizen, etc. These multiple roles of woman make several diverse demands on her time. The work of women in the family, by virtue of her multiple roles, takes up a lot of her time and very often she is the sole contributor in running and keeping the family going. Yet, this contribution of hers is not recognized in the family. A woman does double the amount of work and contribute doubly to the economy, she is still considered a burden and instances of female infanticide and foeticide are common. Nevertheless, it is not possible to think of affecting the situation of the women especially of the poor women in today's economy. The forces against the poor are so many and the social system so biasedly favours the rich that it will not respond to stray demands of the individual poor woman. Therefore, to be able to ameliorate the situation of poverty of women workers, there has to be interventions by

organizing the women workers and enhancing their collective strength which need to be brought together. In the light of the ongoing discussion on women empowerment, the next section will look at the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of education and its various roles in empowering women.

### **Concept of Education and its Role in Empowerment**

Education plays a crucial role in the process of empowerment of women as it provides the way to healthy social life and enhances self confidence, self esteem, positive image and rationality. Women constitute almost 49% of the total population of India (Indiresan, 2002: 3). They suffer from discrimination in caste, class and gender at every stage of their lives. The high rate of female infanticide, decline in sex ratio, low female literacy, low nutritional level, unequal opportunity level and wages and reduced access to health care are some of the areas of concern which needs immediate attention.

Most of the studies show that the contribution of women at home and at work places are undervalued and overlooked. In most cases their roles are confined to that of child bearing and child rearing. Even working women are expected to play their role in the maintenance of their home and raising children which is not considered as work. They have limited access to educational and health facilities. Even the girls enrolled in schools are burdened with household chores. At the work place their occupational choices are limited and are paid less than their male counterparts. There is preference for boy child over girl child in the family too. The lack of education is the root cause of their inferior positions and they experience powerlessness in social, political and economic spheres.

Education has been regarded both as an end in itself and as a means of realizing other desirable ends. It develops the personality and rationality of individuals, qualifies them to fulfil certain economic, political and cultural functions, and thereby improves their socio-economic status. It provides vertical mobility and can thereby help to equalise status between individuals coming from different social strata.

Education is an important means of socialization and is a process of learning

social mores. According to Durkheim, education is an important agent to preserve the social norms and values. It helps in maintaining order in the society because education perpetuates and reinforces sufficient degree of homogeneity that collective life demands through the process of socialisation starting from within the family. Children, in their initial stage of life start learning social norms and values in the family. Hence, leading the child to develop a sense of commitment to social group and maintain social solidarity. Therefore, education is an instrument for the maintenance of the order (Durkheim, 1956: 70-71). Thus, from Durkheimien perspective, we can see that education not only socialize the child into learning the norms and mores of society but also helps in learning the ways of life which helps in integration with society and perform various roles. In modern times, education also helps in learning the skills necessary for leading a rightful social-economic life, and empowers people who posses it.

Women are the chief agents of socialization, particularly in the early formative years of a child, which contribute significantly to the values and social norms of an efficient society (Gore, 1982: 42). Education enhances a woman's sense of her own needs and perspectives, and empowers her to make decisions on various important socio-economic issues. While education is essential for both boys and girls, the benefits of educating girls tend to be greater as 'educated mother educate the family'. Educated women pass on their knowledge to their peers and family members, particularly their daughters, thereby, multiplying the effects of their education manifold. Moreover, realizing the importance of education, they also tend to assert that their daughters be educated to open new opportunities for their upliftment. Today, education is empowering many women to come out of the social barriers especially in a country like India where women are governed by social norms, beliefs and practices. They are able to think rationally, and acquire self-confidence and knowledge to raise their voices for their rights.

The critical issue in respect to the Indian social system is that the educational system in India has failed to implement Durkheimien's education entirely. Haq (1997: 16) stated that the present situation in Indian society seems to be alarming because the education system seems to be broken down and disintegrated as is reflected in rampant malpractices within education and in society. Today, there is an increased tendency of following violent means by the children. Mrs Ameeta Wattal, Principal of a school says,

'a child is influenced by the violence in everyday life' (Oberoi, 2008, July 6: 4). There are many cases where boys and girls steal their parents money from home, students murdering their peers, committing robberies, indulging in immoral activities even inside the classroom, parents assassinate their daughters in the name of 'honour killing' and so on. Children once known for their innocence are now indulging in socially deviant characters creating chaos in the society. Due to frequent reports of violence by the school students; educationists across the country are now probing their own methodologies and the failure to straighten the ways of their students (Oberoi, 2008, July 6: 4). Many thinkers view that the Indian educational system is in complete disarray. Girls in the schools are taught the values to hold secondary position in the society. They are taught to be submissive, passive and obedient as a sister, daughter, wife and mother in the family. Parents set certain restrictions to their daughters that affect their future. In the light of such obsolete practices, there is a growing need for families and schools to impart life skill education and take responsibility to ensure their children don't turn to crime. Until today, institutions like the family and school somehow have failed to maintain social order and preserve social solidarity. There seem to be several unfavourable things that critics of the education system have in mind when they characterize Indian education. However, what we need to consider here is the constructive education that impacts ones' positive development.

Marxists, sees a close link between education and the relations of production that serves the interests of the capitalist society. As Althusser stated that the reproduction of labour force involves two methods; reproduction of the skills that is necessary for the workforce and their submission to the ruling class ideology. Education in the capitalist society is the reproduction of the workforce under the dominance of the elite's dogma (Althusser, 1972). Similarly, although, India is a democratic society and have egalitarian values, but, women continue to suffer from the lower rank in the society. India's education system teaches the girls to be subservient in the patriarchal society, thus placing them in less recognized jobs with less reward. There is no doubt that many or most Indian women unconsciously internalize their oppressive roles and accept their traditional role of dependence on male relatives. In most cases women silently accept domestic violence by male counterparts as a normal and regular affair. Therefore, this

submission and acceptance is reproduced by '*Masculine State Apparatuses*' like education thereby creating false consciousness which largely maintains them in its subordinate position. Hence, there is a need to empower women through egalitarian education to all. Haq (1997: 15) states that the purpose of education in a democratic society is to equip children, who are citizens in the making, in such a way that they think critically and voluntarily comply with laws, and extend critical understanding of, and participation in the functioning of democratic institutions and processes.

To Bourdieu, the major role of educational system is '*cultural reproduction*' of the '*dominant classes*' because students belonging to dominant classes have better opportunities to attain higher educational level as they have already internalised skills and knowledge in their pre-school years. On the other hand, those from the lower classes are eliminated from attaining higher education. Thus, he concludes that the privileged position of the dominant class is justified by their educational success whereas underprivileged are legitimised by their educational failures (Bourdieu, 1917: vi-vii). Therefore, in the process, schools become an alienating experience for the socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged groups: This has been evident in the studies conducted, for instance Desai (1966: 146-147) in his study found that the schooling system in India has significant impact on the society. It widened the gap between the ruling elites and the ruled masses i.e, higher status students achieve better results than those underprivileged and unequal educational facilities for the minorities prevail. Women are the worst sufferers as they belong to marginalised/powerless group irrespective of their caste, class and religion. We see that number of female enrolment is more in the arts faculty than male number whereas other faculties open their doors more widely for men. Desai also found out that the English speaking people became a class by themselves and lost the sympathy of those who did not know the language. Therefore, in a democratic set up characterised by equality, freedom and justice, educational system should be freed from ascriptive factors of caste, class, community and gender. The present educational system and the social structure has to confront this problem as it supports the dominant caste and class to reach higher whereas the social status of lower sections such as women have not gained much recognition by the society due to dearth of



higher education.

Apart from the Marxist theory of education, Ivan Illich in 1973 in his famous book '*Deschooling society*' stated that the forces of modernization and development are promoting materialism, commercialism, individualism and materialistic view of life. Thus education is promoting the values of life. Education has also become commercial and materialistic and a commodity to be purchased by those who have resources for material interest in mind. Therefore, it has become highly routinized, personalised and ritualistic (Illich, 1973: 82-83). In the process it fails to address the fundamental values of life like morality, sincerity, collective interest, personal interest, equality, social justice, etc. It is because of these lacunas of education, it encourages lopsided personality; promoting a gap between the material advancement on the one hand and social backwardness on the other. The American society is affected by this dilemma and therefore, it is for this very reason Ivan Illich proposes the American society to be deschooled in order to make the balance between the two. This does not mean that school should be abolished. It suggests that the objective of education and the structure of education have to be redefined. It is in this regard Illich proposes a new system of learning called '*Learning Webs*' for the existing system of schooling to pursue.

This approach to schooling is more flexible in the sense that it provides opportunity for the learners to participate fully in the process of learning where the learner himself becomes the centre of learning and learning becomes relevant to the learner. The approach adopted by Ivan Illich is a type of child-centred learning where variety of learning webs are there to which the children are exposed irrespective of the social background of the learners (Illich, 1973: 79). Similarly, in India, education is also about the haves and have-nots which create imbalances in the society. Although unlike America, there is more dependency in India. Materialism is less visible in the education system in India but it is beginning to take roots in India also. India's education system needs an overhaul; in the sense that - It should not be based only on the textual studies and rote learning. It needs to uproot the control which persons and institutions now exercise over their educational values. Also, it needs to liberate the individuals from the

obligations to shape their expectations from different sources. It also needs to impart good moral education to develop individuals' personality. The school authorities should promote class participation and group discussion exposing them to different ideas pertaining to diverse cultures. This will enable the learner to broaden knowledge of the different societies and thus, prepare them to be empowered in all walks of their life.

Whatever be the drawbacks of the educational system it cannot be denied that education serves as an important agent of socio-economic development. In countries like India, education has been used as a tool to improve the conditions of the deprived and backward sections of society. This strategy is particularly widespread in the Third World and less developed countries. For instance, in the Indian Third Five Year Plan, document education has been described as the "most important single factor in achieving rapid economic development and technological progress and ensuring a social order founded on the value of freedom, social justice and equal opportunities. The report of the first Education Commission (1964-1966) makes even stronger assertion that for achieving change in grand scale, there is one and only one instrument that can be used - 'Education' (Kamat, 1985: 167). Therefore, to attain the goal of development what is needed is a revolution in education so as to set in motion the much desired social, economic and Cultural Revolution.

Education plays an important role in bringing social, economic, political and civil equality. It makes people aware of their rights and improves the grasp of their social, political and economic position in the social structures. It makes them more receptive to new ideas regarding health, nutrition, family planning, technology, consumption, marketing, environment and local and global political situation. Education empowers them in decision making processes both within and outside the family. Education plays an important role in achieving social justice and liberation of women, it orient and equips them with knowledge to reason and to fight against social injustice.

Pro-women movements can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial period. The period saw enlightened social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, M.G.Ranade, Mahatma Phule and his wife spearheading

against the social evils like Sati, widow remarriage, education, social justice and rights of women. After independence, the constitution of India provided safeguard for women in social, economic, political spheres. The constitution provides for equality before law (Art 14); prohibits discrimination on grounds of gender (Art 15) and provides equality of opportunity in matters of public employment (Art 16). The other rights provided are right to education (Art 21A), freedom of speech, expression, assembly, association, movement, residence and occupation (Art 19), Right against exploitation (Art 23). There are provisions of just and humane conditions of work, maternity relief, and wage for equal work (Art 42, 43). Art 46 provides for educational and economic interest of scheduled caste and scheduled tribes and other weaker sections like women (Bakshi, 2005: 16-90).

After independence the role of education as an agent of social change and economic development was given a serious attention. The first major step taken by leaders in the Nehruvian era was establishing a University Education Commission headed by Dr. Radhakrishnan. The following statement is quite revealing: *“The Commission believes that a well-ordered home helps to make well-ordered men. The mother who is inquiring and alert, well informed and familiar with subjects such as history and literature, and he who lives and works with her children in the home, will be the best teacher in the world of both character and intelligence”* (Desai and Thakkar, 2001: 48 – 49). The National Committee on Women Education 1959 was dissatisfied with the slow progress of women education which led to the setting up of National Council for Women Education in 1962 to look into this problem. Kothari Commission (1964-1966) stressed on the needs for equalization of educational opportunities. The National Policy of Education 1968 also stressed the importance of women education. The emphasis on women’s education was not only on grounds of social justice but also because it accelerates social transformation. The various programs and policies were formulated with the objective to educate women. Similarly, National Policy on Education 1986 and Ramamurthi Commission also led special emphasis on equalizing educational opportunities. The National Commission for Women was set up in 1992 to give women equal justice. The Commission emphasized on the need of women participation in social,

political and economic processes at all level in order to enlarge their access to education, health care, employment opportunities and legal awareness to their rights.

Taking cue from the provisions laid down for women, pro-women activists, educational experts and organizations can help women in Manipur assert their rights and demand for accessing entry in educational institutions. Greater literacy and educational achievements of Manipur women in particular can increase their ability to resist oppression, to organize politically, and to get a fairer deal. The redistributive effects can be important not only between different social groups or households, but also within the family; since there is evidence that better education particularly women education contributes to the reduction of gender-based inequalities. The following discussion will substantiate these views.

Education among women opens the possibility of unlimited exposure to new information and more importantly to new ways of thinking and new perspectives on existing information. Educated women are able to constructively express their talents and give direction to their aptitudes. This enables them to lead a life which is most fulfilling and satisfying. Education empowers women in all spheres of their lives. According to Siddique (1987), the attitude of women towards family planning is influenced by education. Education can enhance their knowledge about contraception thus giving them choice in spacing and number of children and release them from continuous child-rearing and child-bearing. Women thus have more control over how their time is spent and are able to participate more freely in productive work outside the home. Education among women leads to better hygiene, improved nutrition practices and greater effectiveness in caring for family health and seeking timely medical intervention, improved maternal competence lowers infant mortality.

According to Ginzberg (1966) educated women have considerable choice regarding their marriage, starting the family, the size of the family and to take decisions to control their fertility. They have freedom of choice about working outside home. Chiplunkar (1987) also share similar opinion and added that education is an agent of

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basic change in the status of women and envisages the interventionist role on the part of the National Educational System in the empowerment of women.

Illiterate women and women with a minimal education continue to be concentrated in low-paying, low-end occupations mostly in the informal sector which not only offers little security but also makes them vulnerable to exploitation by being denied rights, such as, minimum wages; equal pay for equal work; leave benefits etc. For illiterate women, there is very less occupational mobility due to restricted choices in the type of work they can get. On the other hand, education among women will help in drawing them away from the exploitative informal sector and give them more recognition for their work both at the household and national level. This will promote more and better economic opportunities and better income levels which in turn will lead to equality and empowerment of women. If women are in labour force, then even a small amount of education greatly increases their earnings. Education also helps women move out of agricultural labour into non- household manufacturing and service occupations in the modern industrial sector.

Self employment is a major sector of employment where poor women are concentrated. But in most cases the scale of operation is small and the consequent returns miniscule. If such poor women are educated, they would be in a position to take credit from banks or financial institutions which offer loans to this group of people. Such loans at present are not being fully utilised due to lack of knowledge among the women and insecurity felt by the lending institutions due to the illiteracy of the borrower. Hence, access to credit is one of the key elements in empowering women and in enabling them to participate in market opportunities (Sahay, 1998: 125).

Education of women will place them on an equal footing with men in decision-making positions in economic and political fields. Empowering women through education will lead to their greater participation in government and community institutions and better entrepreneurial opportunities. More women in parliament and cabinets, chief executive officers in major corporations, top administrators, managers and civil servants will quicken the pace of progress towards equality and empowerment.

As discussed on the various problems that hampers Manipur women to empower themselves beyond their conventional liberty; and details specified on the concepts of empowerment and education and its roles in empowering women, in the following chapters we shall discuss on the socio-economic and political activities of Manipur women, their educational attainments on various levels and the role of education in empowering them in all spheres.

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## Chapter *Two*

### *Mapping the Profile of Manipur Women*

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Manipur, the land of jewels' is in the extreme north-eastern border of India. This border state is isolated from the rest of the country and even from its neighbouring states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam (Bhattacharyya, 2006: 3). It lies between 23° 85' N latitude and 25°86' N latitude and 93°03' E and 94°78' E longitude. It is bounded on the north by Nagaland; the north-east and south by Burma; on the south- west by Mizoram; and on the west and north-west by Assam. The boundary of Manipur forms part of the international boundary between India and Myanmar.

It has an area of 22,327 square kilometres with 1813 sq. km. of fertile valley in its centre. What is generally called the valley is in reality a plateau; its height above the sea level varies at different points but may be taken to be about 2,500 ft. The hill ranges are higher on the north and gradually diminish in height as they reach the southern part of Manipur. The hills of Manipur are offshoots of the Himalayas. The Himalayas, forming the northern boundary of India, come to the north-eastern extremity of Assam. From here, ranges of hills emerge from the Himalayas and proceed in the south-westerly direction and then in the southern direction from the boundary wall of India, separating the country from Burma now Myanmar. These range of hills while proceeding from the Himalayas diverge just to the north of Manipur and converge again just to the south, thus enclosing the valley of Manipur (Ansari, 1991: 15).

It is a small state but mesmerizes the people with its scenic beauty; rich natural resources, aesthetic of arts, heterogeneous culture, unique flora- fauna, and beautiful Loktak lake that provides livelihood to a large number of people. To the south of lake is Keibul Lamjao, the great floating swap, famous for its brow- antlered deer known as

Sangai found only in Manipur. In the hill, we have Shiroy (lily flower) valley and Khangkui cave and other caves in Ukhrul and Tamenglong districts. The main rivers of Manipur are Iril, in the east and Irang, Barak, and Maku in the Western hills. Of late many researchers showed successive interests in the significant role played by the women of different organizations in political and socio-economic aspects. There are also some to whom Manipur is known for its numerous insurgent groups.

The state has salubrious climatic conditions. The evergreen scenic beauty and large fields gives an enchanted scene. The soil of Manipur is fertile. Captain Pemberton writing in the third decade of the nineteenth century said, “.....the fertility of the soil is so great that the crops generally prove most abundant” (Pemberton, 1935: 36). The bountiful crops and the pleasant climate helped the people rise in the rungs of culture (Singh, 1999: 4).

### **Demographic Profile of Manipur**

The population of the state stood at 2,388,634 persons in 2001. This represents merely 0.22 percent of the total population of India which is about 1,027 million persons. Manipur ranks at twenty fourth positions among the states and the Union Territories in India in order of population size. Out of the total population of 2,388,634 in the state, male population is 1,207,338 while female population is 1,181,296. In 1991, the population of the state was found to be 1,837,149 persons which means that the population of the state was growing at 30.02 percent during 1991-2001 as against a growth rate of 29.29 percent during 1981-1991. The growth rate for India during the same period was 21.34 percent for 1991-2001 and 23.86 percent for 1981-1991 (Census of India 2001). Out of the state population, more than two-thirds are settled in the plains while the hills are inhabited by 29 tribes such as the Nagas, Kukis, and allied tribal groups. Imphal, the capital of Manipur is located in the valley. The population density calculated on different areas give a figure of 107 persons per square kilometre in 2001 for the state. However, when compared to the density reported for all India, the density of Manipur is low. The density figure for all India is 324 persons per square kilometre in 2001.

## Sex Ratio

Manipur women have favourable sex ratio in the state, 978 as against the national average of 933, although there has been a little improvement in the sex ratio of Manipur from 958 in 1991 to 978 in 2001. There is high percentage of female labour force of 40.51% as compared to the national average of 15.93%. Female literacy rate is 59.70% which is again above the national average of 53.67%, male literacy rate is 77.87% which is also above the national average of 75.2% (Census of India 2001).

## Social Profile of Manipur

The state of Manipur is inhabited by various ethnic communities having their own distinctive culture, social order and polity. In broad terms, the people of Manipur are divided into two groups such as – a) Valley people and b) Hill people. The people are predominantly of Mongolian race who speaks Tibeto- Burman languages (Kabui, 1991: 19). Meitei community dominates in demography as far as people settled in the valleys are concerned.

On the other hand, there are 29 recognised tribes in the hills of Manipur. The people living in the hills of Manipur belong to various tribes and they may be broadly divided into three groups viz: a) Naga group, b) Old Kuki group, and c) New Kuki group.

The Nagas from the state of Manipur are: *Mao, Tangkhul, Zaliangrong, Maram, Poumei, Thangal, Tarao, Chiru, Anal, Moyon, Monsang Lamkang, Chothe, Maring, Kharam and Koireng*. The *Mao*, the *Poumei*, the *Maram* and the *Thangal* live in the northern sub- division of Mao and Sadar Hills bordering Nagaland. They are time and again referred to as quasi – *Angami* tribes due to their close resemblance with the *Angami* tribe in Nagaland, in terms of physical appearance, language, clothes, customs, etc. The *Tangkhuls* live in the Ukhrul district bordering to Myanmar. The *Zaliangrong* lives in the Tamenglong Sub- division in the western Hills of Manipur. According to the Population Census of India (1991), the Government of India (GOI) listed the above mentioned Naga

groups as Scheduled tribes (ST). *Angami* and *Sema* are also recognised as ST in Manipur state.

The second group i.e. Old *Kuki* group also consists of several tribes like that of the first group. They are as follows: *Maring, Anal, Monsang, Lamkang, Moyon*. This group inhabit the Tengnoupal district in the south- west adjoining Myanmar.

The third group is the New Kuki group or is also known as Kuki- Chin group. The tribes belonging to this group are *Aimol, Chothe, Chiru, Kom, Purum, Gangte, Paite, Simte, Thadou, Vaiphei, Hmar, Zou, Ralte* and any *Mizo* like *Lushai* etc. (Ghosh and Ghosh, 1997: 4). This group lives in the Sadar hills, Jiribum sub-division, Churachandpur and Tengnoupal districts of Manipur. They are also found settled in groups in various other places like Sekmai in north, Ukhrul districts and so forth.

There are also the Brahmins (the representatives of Hinduism), the *pangals* (the Manipuri Muslims), and there are also small pockets of people belonging to the traditional pre-Hindu faith, a small percentage of Muslims and even smaller percentage of people belonging to the Punjabi and Marwari communities. The Punjabi and Marwari communities originally came into the state for the purpose of trade and commerce, but later on settled down here. This category of people is called the *Mayang* (meaning non-Mongoloid or mainland Indians, or outsiders).

The economy of the people of Manipur state is basically agrarian. About 70 percent of the people are engaged in agriculture for their livelihood (Rural Women Upliftment Society Report, 2004). Both men and women play an important role in the socio-economic activities of the state. Women also work as important agents to promote socio-economic and cultural development of the state. In the field of political activities, women collectively stand for social justice.

The position of women in Manipur when compared with the women of other states in India is comparatively high. In this regard, S. K. Bhuyan observes. 'Manipur women have been enjoying a freedom which their sisters in India failed to attain. They were not confined to the four walls of their domestic life; they go freely for purposes of

petty trades mainly in the scale of products of their own hands. They weave fine durable textures where colours are assembled in the most attractive manner. At the same time Manipuri women have shown their gallantry valour in desperate and critical situations' (Khomjinba, 1954: 5). Mrs. Grimwood also expressed her view, 'the Manipuris do not shut up their women as is the custom in the most parts of India. And they are much more enlightened and intelligent in consequence' (Mrs. Grimwood, 1975: 58 - 59).

Women in Manipur, irrespective of their class and status, perform all the domestic works at home and are responsible for the maintenance of the family. They educate the children in matters relating to the social norms, values, customary laws, etc. They also contribute to the growth of the family income by engaging in handicraft, agriculture, small-scale industries and selling the products of skills. Like the women in states, Manipur women are employed in professions like medical, engineering, legal service, administration, teaching, professions in active services, technical, clerical, police and the many other ministerial jobs. There are many responsible that oblige women for making women to take up jobs in various public and private sectors, main factors being education, socio-economic development, and constitutional provisions.

### **Social position of Manipur Women**

The social position of Manipur women in and outside the family is embedded in history. Manipur was an independent princely state till 1949, when it finally merged into the Indian Union. Though the state is small in size, it has a remarkably rich and distinctive culture and social system. All the male adults had to serve the King in the palace for 10 days out of 40 days. This system was known as '*lallup system*' (free labour performed for the state) (Devi, Shanti, Maimom, 2001: 3). Moreover, male members very often accompanied the King in the warfare against the neighbouring chieftains and rulers. As a result, women had to bear the social responsibilities in the absence of the male warriors. Thus, Manipur women have inherited these social responsibilities and this trait is manifested in different forms even in today's metamorphosed society.

In Manipur, every household possess some acre of land which is the main source of its subsistence. The essential necessities of Meiteis in terms of food and cloth are produced in their own land. Agriculture and cottage industry are the two important means of their livelihood. Weaving is done in almost every house. Interestingly, the qualification of a bride was assessed by the quality of cloth she could weave. Handloom weaving was the most important craft of the state practised by almost every housewife. Hudson states, 'Every girl knew how to weave and was given a loom as part of her dowry. Nearly every housewife was capable of weaving all the clothes needed by her family (Hudson, 1908: 27). Every parent likes an ideal bride to be their daughter-in-law. An ideal bride is expected to be polite, submissive and a girl of good moral character. In short, behaviour and character are the important criteria taken into account while selecting a companion. Nowadays, the qualification of a bride is mostly assess by the educational attainment and profession of the companion and have become important personal qualities that carry great weightage in the marriage market.

The women in Manipur are very hard working. All the domestic works in the family are performed by the women irrespective of their class and status. Even on the young deserves adulation school and college going girls considering they are also not spared from doing household chores. However, a small percentage of the class belonging to urban well-to-do families are free from the domestic responsibilities such as cooking, fetching water, kitchen gardening, cleaning the house etc. In addition to the taxing demands at home working women have discharge their duties in their work place too.

In the family, women play the role of an educator and the primary teacher who imparts social norms, values, laws etc. to their own children and younger members of the family. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru rightly pointed out the significance of women's education. He opined that if education is given to women then it would lead to education of home, society and the world at large (Shanthi, 1998: 76). Healthy growth of the physical and mental capabilities of children is in the hands of the mother. Manipur women are increasingly aware of the value of education and its beneficial contributions in the family and for social upliftment. Consequently, not only boys but also girls are being sent to schools and colleges. Parents are sacrificing much to support their children



studying not only within the state but also in other states and cities such as Shillong, Guwahati, Chennai, Mumbai and mostly in the capital of India, New Delhi. These metropolises and other large cities provide better and quality education compared to the education in their native state Manipur. Thus we see large scale migration for the purposes of education and employment. These students belong not only to the well off families but also belong to the poorer families, petty business families, etc.

Women, both in the valleys and the hills, enjoyed a great deal of freedom and held a high distinctive position in social, religious and political life. The history of the Manipur has proved that they can take important roles in any conflict situation, for example, *Nupilal* (Women Uprising) 1904 and 1939 where women fought against British Colonial rulers. Women continue to participate in all the important social events. Various organizations are being formed to protect women's rights, to fend them from social evils and to uplift their economic status. One can proudly say that renowned women groups like *Meira-paibies* (torch bearing women), *Naga Women Union*, *Kuki Women Association*, to name a few, have been doing commendable works for the society in protecting atrocities against women, protection of human rights against armed personnel, acting as Human Rights Protector keeping night vigil camps in the localities.

As mentioned earlier, people in the hill areas follow Christian religion. The marriage within the same clan is a taboo. The clan or sub-group is composed of families, that is, groups of agnatic kin. It occupies a definite portion of the village, and is strictly exogamous. The clans are believed to be descended from a common ancestry by whose name, in many cases, the clan is known (Padma Shri Dr. S .S Shashi, 1994: 17). Clan exogamy within and outside the village is the usual norm. Practise of incest and marriage within the clan is a serious crime not only to the clan but also to the whole village; as such the practice is extremely rare (Horam, 1977: 80). Should such a marriage take place, the village exiles the couple according to the decision of the village court as it is believed that some dreadful calamity beyond description would happen to the village (Shimray, 1985: 177). In marriage, women in the hill areas of Manipur enjoy a considerable amount of freedom to choose their partners. They were not bound by any constraints of social

inferiority. They were free to make their decisions. They traditionally married within their own tribes.

Nagas practice rule of exogamy, a practice that is still common today. They follow the nuclear family system and joint family system is absent. Nuclear family consists of husband, wife and the immature unmarried offspring. Unlike the common practice in conservative Hindu society where the bride's family pay dowry to the groom's family in marriage, the practice is quite the reverse here. Men traditionally pay dowry to the family of the bride at the time of marriage in the form of livestock, cash and kinds. In Meitei society, it is believed that the concept of dowry has its source in '*Leisemlon Ariba Puya*' which mentioned the giving of '*Aoonpot*' as early as 15,000 B.C. (Mangang, 1988: 66). *Aoonpot* is the form of gift given by their parents to their daughters at the time of marriages. The literal meaning of dowry is the free gift or, presentation only of essential things necessary for livelihood. This practice is different from most parts of India, where the bride's family usually pays dowry.

Among Mao Nagas the union of young couples are either of their choice or family arrangement. In the case of arranged marriage, the actual marriage takes place after family negotiation and consent from both parties. There is mutual understanding of gifts from both sides, but no demands for dowry or bride price from either side. After the marriage the couple lives with the husband's parents but build a house as soon as possible and they move away. Monogamy is the existing practice. Divorce is not uncommon. By custom, a widow can remarry; and to retain the property of the husband, she either marries the brother or near relative of the deceased. In the Tangkhul Naga society, there was a latent form of bride price which had to be paid in consideration for marriage. However, an adverse impact on the status of Tangkhul Naga women was the right given to the deceased husband's younger brother to marry the widow. In the case of Zaliangrong Naga society, it is customary that the bride's price must be paid before the actual marriage ceremony takes place. Divorce is permissible provided the witnesses and the elders give their approval. A widow is permitted to re-marry, but loses her claim over her children and does not get any share from the property of her husband unless her children decide to stay with her than with their uncle (Zehol, 1998: 38, 23, 44,).

Meitei society is a patriarchal society. Marriage system of the meiteis is varied and elaborate. In the early days, the system of both polygamy and polyandry was practised. But with the introduction of patrilineal society, the system of polyandry discontinued but polygamy continued to exist. In spite of all these there was still heritage of polyandry in the meitei society (Singh, Birachandra, 1987: 108). Again there are many different forms of nuptial relations among men and women besides customary marriage practices. Among the meiteis, marriages are settled by the guardians but very often an understanding is reached between a boy and a girl before the formal consent of the guardian (Roy, 1973: 17). To become a husband and a wife, the proper ritual which solemnises the tie is known as *Luhongba* (marriage) (Singh, Birachandra, 1987: 118). Divorce between a wife and a husband and remarriage of widows were freely allowed in their society as is permissible in the hill. In the traditional meitei society, there were different styles of becoming a husband and a wife. They were, *Haina-shingnaba* (go between), *Chenba* (elopement), and *Chingba* (kidnapping).

Family structure in Manipur can be broadly classified into two viz: joint or extended family and Nuclear family. With the change in time, the traditional joint family structure has changed to nuclear family particularly in urban areas. Patriarchal system exists in the hills too, men are the sole bread winner of the family and only the male members of the family can inherit ancestral property. However, there are some exceptional cases where landed property is imparted to the daughter as a marriage gift. Naga society does not have a rigid social hierarchical structures based on caste such as in Hindu society. “The mother plays the main role in running the households. Indeed the position of Naga women is far from being inferior. The majority of domestic affairs are in her hands. All their life they enjoy a considerable freedom. They participate freely in singing and dancing during festivals and entertaining the guests. Most marriages are love marriages. The young chose their partners and then marriage negotiations are conducted through an elderly lady. A girl is free to choose her life partner and there is rarely any pressure upon her in this matter. The wife is consulted by her husband in all domestic affairs. She helps him in making decisions, performs domestic duties and shares household responsibilities with him” (Horam, 1977: 62).

Whereas, women belonging to other parts of India are victimised and subjugated and have no share of rights in household decision making. Due to the stringent patriarchal society, women do not have any say in socio- economic and political domain. Women are considered as weaker sex, inferior to men, looked down upon despite of the exalted position given to them in some of India's religious texts. Women are measured to 'worship' their husbands by conformity and submissive behaviour inside and outside as well. Manipur society is more or less an egalitarian system. There is a sense of equality based on community participation irrespective of sex and in social, cultural and religious matters; all participate in their own right. "Many women in more civilised parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga hills, their high status and their free and happy life; and if you measure the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as 'savages'" (Haimendorf: 1939). However, Verrier Elwin would rather comment that the tribal woman is in herself exactly the same as any other woman, with the same position, love and fears, the same devotion to the home, to husband and children, the same faults and the same virtues (Zehol, 1998: 1). Thus, in tribal society, the status of women is generally measured in her "freedom of choice", types of taboos, role in the family and clan, role in household work and customary status (Shimray, 2004: 1701).

It may be noted that in any society where women contribute to economy of their family, their position both socially as well as economically has to be superior to those society where women do not contribute. In this regard, Manipur women are seen to hold a relatively high social position. This is evident from the unrestricted freedom of occupation that they enjoy unlike the case of the mainstream India. Allen in 1905 observed that the women of Manipur are capable, who at all stages of their career are allowed the fullest liberty (Allen, 1905: 47). Regarding the social status of Manipur, women enjoy more freedom than in other parts of India and they are not the only major economic contributors but also have considerable voice in social and political domain in the state. Associated with the high social status of women is the absence of child marriage, female foeticide, *purdah* system in Manipur society. These practices are otherwise widely prevalent in many parts of the country (Lokendro, 1998: 48). The

women, however, are victims of polygamy and other forms of male oppression in the family.

In the religious domain, women participated in the ritual and festivals of *Lai Haraoba* (merry-making of gods) in return for favours from gods. This is perhaps the most authentic Meitei cultural practice among all the traditional Meitei festivals which is closely preserved till today. In this festival, the priestesses known as *Maibis* took up the main role in conducting the ritual. A woman could only be selected as a priestess when she had a call from the deity or when a demon possessed her. McCulloch said that “a woman who had such call was marked out by her incoherent language and trembling she had gone through before the ordination” (W. McCulloch, 1859: 20 - 21). After passing her novitiate she became one of the bodies and practiced with the rest on the credulity of the people. *Maibis* do not get married. They settle separately from their families. They devote themselves to worshipping their Meitei gods. These *Maibis* not only perform important rituals but also play the role of a physician curing people and prescribing a remedy for their sickness. They act as the mediator between the people and the spirits (W. McCulloch, 1859: 20 - 21).

The role of the *Maibis* gives an important insight into the status of Meitei women in Manipur. That women could become priestesses in society raises an interesting question which leads us to see the social structure in a larger framework. This question arises because the Meitei society was not only organized around the male line but had also been transformed due to women’s major role in the socio-cultural and economy of the society which gave them self-reliance and independence. Many ordinary women also enjoyed equal space with men in the rituals of any religious festivals. Worship of gods and goddesses was considered to be the duty of women since time immemorial. For them (married and unmarried) dancing gracefully in front of their gods in the rituals festivals of the society was thought to be a matter of honour and pride. Besides, women also participated in the domestic rituals of the family.

Today, many women have come up in the forefront representing the women of Manipur in various aspects. Manipur has given the Country and the world brilliant sports

women like *Kunjarani Devi*, the weight lifter, *Mary Kom*, the boxer, *G. Anita*, the mountaineer, *Surajalata*, the Indian team's Hockey captain and *Madhu* and *Sunita* the national cycling champions to name a few. The state also boasts of the only all women's market in the world known as *Ima Keithel* in the economic front. *Irom Sharmila Chanu's* courageous act of "fast unto death" against Armed Forces Special Power Act with attitude continues for almost a decade. She continues to fight even today to liberate the people from the draconian AFSPA. Her act of bravery has sensitised and awakened the Government of India and even garnered worldwide attention. After looking at the social status and roles assigned to the women of Manipur and their handicaps and achievements, now we will look at the role played by them in the economic fabric of Manipur.

### **Participation of Manipur Women in Economic Activities**

Manipur is essentially an agricultural state. About 70% of the population engaged in agriculture (Rural Women Upliftment Society Report, 2004). Thus, from the time of seed- sowing till harvesting women are actively engaged in agriculture. Womenfolk mostly do seed sowing, weeding and harvesting. There is harmony and cooperation among them. During the time of farming, often women form teams and extend voluntary help to each other in paddy fields by rotation. It is a non-monetary labour unit in production. There also exists a woman team that work as contract labour on other's field, in this case the money earned is spent on the family and sometimes saved to feast after the long tiring and strenuous works. On the other hand, the jobs more arduous are taken over by men.

The two *Nupi Lal* movements in 1904 and 1939 led to many reforms in the trade policy and administration of the British government in Manipur. In fact, the *Nupi Lal* started as a rice agitation, against the then policy of the then existing government. And in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, men folk had to join the military force compulsorily for the state which was engaged in frequent wars with enemies. The large participation of men folk in war led to the need of women to take part in agriculture as well as in controlling the market economy. The present '*Khwairamband Bazar*' at Imphal, run by women, was set up in 1950. This also witnesses the importance and role of Manipur women in the

economy of the state. Consequently, having held the active roles in the market, they also got a golden opportunity in forming a collective body force (Okram, 2001).

Most of the household works, except the hard ones, were performed by the women. Meitei women made crucial economic contributions and they were the mainstay of the family (Brown, 2001: 76; Sircar, 1984: 224). Besides the household works and care for the family, Meitei women contributed much to the earning and economic welfare of the family. They helped the males in agriculture, made all the clothes required for the family and also for sale, did embroidery work, earned extra income by working as wage labourers and also took part in trade and marketing. *Sanakeithel*, a major market in the heart of the Imphal town, is the centre of activities of these women engaged in buying and selling of various goods. The whole market is managed by women. Hence, Hudson (1908: 23) further states that, “the women hold a high and free position in Manipur, all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them”. The popular notion that men are the head of the family and so are the sole bread winner of the family is misconstrued as proved by active participation of women of Manipur in contributing to the family enormously and supplementing economy of the state. Thus, the women of Manipur state have a different version to share. Majority of the women in Manipur are the bread earners for their family.

Mostly, women are continuously engaged in the domestic spheres and also play an important role in the economic affairs as vegetable vendors and cloths merchants, sell or buy handicrafts, shawls and domestic animals, sell home-made foods such as dehydrated fruits, meat pickle, women traditional shawls and so on. These activities are more visible among the women of hill areas. Similarly, in the valley, there is an exclusive women’s market the *Ima- Keithel*. They are mostly women aged forty five to seventy or above actively engaging in their trades. Now-a-days, younger women aged around 25 to 30 also started to join the market as small traders. No males are allowed to own a shop here. The women vendors deal in different trades of their own choices. The important trades being clothes, fishes, poultry, vegetables, fruits, sweets, rice, items necessary for religious ceremonies etc. In the valley in Manipur almost every house has a loom. This is

a very important machine, traditionally; and it is given to daughters as a gift during their marriage. Therefore, women become both the producer and later the retailer.

In addition to the women vendors, there are many groups belonging to Muslim, tribal as well as meitei communities who brought commodities from distant places for sale in the market. Housewives also contribute financially in the maintenance of the family by growing vegetables in homestead land and selling them, by weaving, knitting, embroidery etc. Modern women even go to Tamu, a town in Myanmar, to Kathmandu, Nepal and other cities of India for transacting their business; women entrepreneurs are also coming up in large numbers.

One can also see the increase in the number of women both in the main markets of Imphal as well as in small markets at suitable places of the Imphal valley as well as in the hills of Manipur. The women of Manipur are hard working. They traded with various products of their agricultural field and industrial products. According to Capt. Dunn and Sir James Johnstone, "that all marketing is done by women, all work of buying and selling in public, and the carrying to and fro of the articles to be sold; whilst at home they are gainfully employed in weaving and spinning" (Dunn, 1886: 17; Johnstone, 1896: 134). Likewise, women in the hills would take their agricultural products and sell it to the valley people. Sometimes they would go door to door to sell their products. In Manipur especially in the valley every locality has its own market, and they are run by women. They deal with not only vegetables, fruits, fishes, and handloom products but also ran business to sell eatable things like meals, tea, pakora, etc. There are also women who give loans to the needy women in the market and earn daily interest and thereby add to their family income (Bimola Devi, 1996: 11).

The women of Manipur have shrewd entrepreneurial and marketing skills. Since independence, with the change in economic structure of the state, women are exploring other means to maintain their families. There are also some unemployed who are running weaving cooperative societies by employing young women and girls. They act as a link between the Government Funding agencies and the women weavers. Some educated women also have started their own business like establishing knitting, embroidery centres,



etc. by applying modern tools and techniques with the impact of globalization; self employed indigenous women weavers face a lot of problems in production and marketing. The rice of the thread and labour they put into doesn't allow the weavers to earn much profit. Many of these women now left their profession and became labourers. This led to a shift in business and market economy of the state. Many women are now engage in selling Moreh goods that comes from Burma. This resulted in to losing of traditional skills and its value of traditional production. Some others started unfair practices like selling of drugs, black cinema tickets, petrol by black, brewing of alcohols, engage in Moreh trades, smugglings, pan corner, sex workers, etc.

There is a high percentage of female workforce participation of 40.51% as compared to the National average of 15.28%. However, Women form the largest group of marginal workers. As per the census of India, 1991, female marginal workers constituted 57 percent. Men (38.45%) are outnumbering the women (18.58%) in the main workers. In the marginal workers section, it is the women (13.70%) that exceedingly outnumber the men (6.72%) (Census of India 2001).

Many women in the urban areas are now employed in the government as well as in the private sectors, thereby, earning equally as that of men or even more in some cases. However, despite the Manipur women holding a high and free position, as all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them, it is also sad to say that they as women in other parts of India are not free from exploitations in the work place. Women in India suffer discrimination in all spheres of life, and at all levels. The economic discrimination they endure reinforces other discriminations and perpetuates their low status. In India, the invisibility of women in the economy is pervasive because of historical, traditional and cultural reasons. Women's reproductive and productive work, both so essential for caring, nurturing, household maintenance and income earning, are intertwined and indistinguishable in the minds of men as well as women. Within the household, men rule and women obey across religious and cultural divides. The question of recognition for women's labour does not even arise. The basic reason for this lack of recognition is that women's 'reproductive' and nurturing role is taken for granted as their primary responsibility (Human Development in South Asia 2000: 56).

Differences in wage earning between men and women continue to exist in spite of the legislation enacted for “equal pay for equal work”. It is also found that women are predominantly employed in consumption linked services and not in production linked industrial occupations. They are concentrated in unskilled, low status, low prestige, dead end jobs such as midwives, clerks, police, teachers, unskilled office workers, nurses etc. Thus we can see that Manipur women are huddled at the lowest occupational structure of the modern sector and the male continue to dominate the top echelons. They still stand far below in the power equation in relation to the men in the sphere of economy.

### **Participation of Manipur Women in Political Activities**

Women of Manipur had played a very significant role in the political landscape of society. Even in myth and legends the *Lairembies* (female deity) occupy a prominent and respectable place. Unlike women in other parts of India, they are found to be independent, courageous, assertive and react effectively against any wrong doings of the ruling authority. These qualities of women may be traced back even to the mythological figures like *Emoinu* (Goddess of Wealth), *Phouibi* (Goddess of Paddy), *Ereima* (Goddess of water), etc. and legendary figures like Thoibi, Tonu Laijinglembi, Pidonu etc. Thoibi, was a princess of Moirang, she exercised her own decision and chose Khamba as her life partner against her father and brother’s wishes. The same may be said of Tonu Laijinglembi and Pidonu in different roles but exercising their own rights and decisions. We may also mention some of the historical women figures like Queen Linthoingambi, and Queen Gomti Devi, etc. who had asserted their authority in times of crisis in order to protect and defend the interest of the state.

In the political sphere of the early Pre-Hindu society, royal women enjoyed considerable freedom. Ranging from the first Queen Laisana, King Pakhangba’s wife, she was a member of the council of ministers (*Mantries*) in ancient Manipur 33 A.D. She headed the women’s court called ‘*Patcha*’ where all women related cases were taken up and settled. Women were seen as having a certain amount of freedom and play important roles both in the domestic and the public life. For instance, Queen Lingthoingambi wore the royal male dress and the turban in the absence of her husband, King Meidingu

Ningthoukhomba, who reigned in Manipur from 1432-1467 AD. The Tangkhuls (*Tangkuls* are the sub-clan of the Nagas tribes of Manipur) of the hills led by their chief asserted their independence and launched an attack in the absence of the King who went for an expedition to Alka. In retaliation, the Queen instructed other women of the palace to put on male dresses. Imitating the voice of the King, she fought courageously and won over the Tangkhuls (Oinam, 1967: 228; *Cheitharol Kumbaba*: 19). Another example can be cited of Queen Gomti Devi who also showed the high political strategy in controlling the Maharaja in the political administration of the state including succession to the throne. She took revenge against Maharaja Garibniwaz (her husband) for killing her former husband (Bimola Devi, 2001: 114).

Besides the royal ladies, in political sphere, the influence of common women in the administration cannot be ignored. It was customary for the women folk to gather in groups and present their grievances before the King. Even death sentences were reprieved if women pleaded on behalf of the accused. "In Raja days a criminal sentenced to death was occasionally reprieved if a sufficient number of women appeared to intercede for him" (Chaki, 1984: 26). The judicial system of the past also indicated the important role women played in the formal political realm and in the formal structure of the women's court (Kunjeshwor Devi, 2008). In short, women in Manipuri traditional society equally shared with men in the affairs of the state politics.

In the traditional society, inter-village *head hunting* was very common in the Naga society. Naga women had an important role in Naga warfare. However, it is taboo for the women to touch the weapons and gear associated with head hunting like spears, shields and knives. They cannot be head hunters but can be hunted. When men had to wage wars, they took responsibilities for the supply of provisions to the fighting men. Those successful warriors who were able to bring back the enemy head earned honour and such acts of bravery commanded higher social respect in the village. They played an important role in saving the lives of men. In the Tangkhul Naga society, there were these group of women known as '*phukreila*' meaning 'peace-makers' or 'Torch bearers' who volunteered to act as mediator as the ambassadors of peace between the warring villages. Nobody could lay their hands on them. They were highly respected for their neutrality

and to boldly enter the battle field and intervened in the Naga inter-village head hunting war (Shimray, 1985: 43).

Similarly, among the Mao Naga society, if *nolu* (women ambassadors) come in between with leafs or clothes and wave, the war has to stop immediately. Even the heads of killed men in the battle are carried to the respective village by women ambassadors. In the case of Zaliangrong Naga society, *demi* (women) were given adequate protection since they were considered to be weaker than men. They were free from danger and physical tortures even during the time of inter village feuds. Torturing and killing of women and children were considered to be an act of cowardice. Therefore to protect them from any harm, the Zaliangrong Naga warriors would give a warning yell before they attack the village of their enemy (Zehol, 1998: 40, 43). They carried the authority to stop the violence and if anyone dared to raise a weapon after that, he was ostracised. It is the *phukreila*, *demi* and *nolu* cultural traditions that provide the legitimizing social framework for the Naga women peace activism.

### **Political Participation during the Colonial Period (1891-1947)**

The Anglo- Manipuri war of 1891 marked the end of sovereign and independent existence of the Manipur forever. It was the beginning of the British rule in Manipur, as a part of the British - Indian administration, and after 1947, as a state of the Indian Union. The first popular uprising was the event of 1904, popularly known as First *Nupi Lal* (Women's Uprising). It was against the British orders of punitive punishment, to rebuild the new state bungalow which was burnt down by some unidentified miscreants purchased by the government from Mr. Mitchell, the executive engineer and occupied by Mr. Nuttal and Dunlop (Lokendra Singh, 1998: 76). Though the uprising was for a short span, the result and it created on the British Administration far outweigh the time period. "The intensity of the backlash forced the political agent to rescind the rebuilding orders" (N. Joykumar Singh, 1982).

The next outstanding events in the colonial history of Manipur was the "Women's Agitation of 1939" more popularly known as the second *Nupi Lal*. The agitation, which

started for a ban in export of rice from Manipur, suddenly, took the form of anti-monarchical and anti-imperialist uprising (Brara, 2006). It marked a very important event in the History of Manipur and on empowerment of Manipur women.

Women continue to participate in all the important events by taking up various roles both at the individual level as well as in groups. In 1931 there was another woman called Rani Gaidinliu, who fought against the British Government. After the death of Jadonang, she took the leadership of the Zaliangrong people in fighting against the oppressive policies of the British in Manipur/India. She was successful in uniting Zaliangrong people trying to develop a common traditional religion called '*Heraka*'. She, very successfully, was able to block the advance of Christianity in the hill areas of Manipur, especially in the Tamenglong area (Ghosh and Ghosh, 1997: 10). Rani Gaidinliu was the leader of the socio-political and religious movement of the Zaliangrongs.

### **Women's Political Participation in the Post-Colonial Period**

India's independence heralded a sea of change at all levels in all parts of the country. Women's participation in the political domain became more significant. In 1954 and 1959, women played an active part in demand for responsible government in Manipur. In 1960, women formed Assembly Demand Committee to press the central government to grant responsible government in Manipur. Women's participation in 'Statehood Demand Movement' was very significant in late 60's. After statehood in 1973, when the Manipur Peoples Party led government was toppled due to defection in the party, women were first to agitate against it and shouted slogans of 'anti-defections'.

Unfortunately, the present state of affairs in Manipur is characterized by a high degree of social, economic and political instability. The instability is dominated by fragmentation and fractionalization of the polity and society. The innumerable participants, each espousing its own cause, have complicated the political and economic scenario of the state. The 1980s and early part of 1990s have presented the most common features of inter ethnic clashes and undertones of insurgency activities. Counter-

insurgency operations have resulted in gross violation of Human Rights, rape, torture, missing persons at an alarming rate, etc. In Manipur it is everything worst that you can imagine of. Today, Manipur state is in shambles. To counter these threats the women of Manipur have taken up the lead and responsibility again in the form of *Meira Paibi* (Torch Bearing Women) in the valley and numerous *Naga Women's Union Manipur* and *Kuki Mothers' Association*.

*Meira Paibi* got its name as an organisation about two decades ago, but the organization has a long history known by another name of '*Nisha Bandh Uprising*' that began around the mid 1970's. *Nisha Bandh* was against the sale and consumption of intoxicants, particularly liquor. In the year 1991-1992, their efforts (then transformed into the *Meira Paibi* movement) finally paid off. The then government of Manipur led by Manipur Peoples Party of R.K. Ranbirsana (Banerjee, 2002: 19) passed the prohibition order on the sale and consumption of liquor. Manipur was declared a dry state till today

*Meira Paibi* uprising can be taken as the logical outcome of the rise of insurgency and counter- insurgency policy in the state. To counter the menace arising out of this dialectic, the *Meira Paibi* Movement spread far and wide. The members started spending nights outside the comforts of their homes, patrolling the streets and guarding their locality against drunkenness, drug abuses and struggle to fight against the excesses committed by the security forces against their excesses during the counter insurgency combing operations. They took up the "*meira*", an improvised bamboo torch, and it became the symbol of their movement, and thus the name "*Meira Paibi Uprising*". To spend the night the women needed a proper place to rest or stay. This led to the construction of improvised shed, now popularly known as *Meira Shang*. Today, all the localities have *Meira Paibi* organizations, and almost all every locality has their own *Meira Shang*.

The *Meira* at the first glance may appear just another source of light in the dark. But if one looks deeper, it has a significant meaning of its own. Holding up the lighted *Meira*, the *Meira Paibis* (plural of Paibi) feel confident to face any untoward incidents. It gives them a sense of security. The women draw strength and inspiration from the *Meira*

and so it is sacred to them. It gives them the courage necessary to face and protect themselves and others in the face of adversaries. It is a reminder of the sacred oath they took, to fight injustice. And above all the *Meira* is the mascot of solidarity inside their *Meira Paibi* group as well as among other *Meira Paibi* groups all over the state (Bannerjee 2002, p.20). However, unlike the Naga Women's Organizations, *Meira Paibis* have no apex organization.

Among the Nagas, the women are organised around their tribal affiliation and membership is open to all adult women of the tribe. Naga Mother Association (NMA) and Naga Women Union Manipur (NWUM) are the apex organisations of the entire Naga tribal Women's Organisations in Nagaland and Manipur. Several of the most active women's organisations in Nagaland and Manipur emerged as a direct response to women's mobilization against atrocities by the security forces, especially the systematic use of rape and sexual violence against the women. For example, Tangkhul Shanao Long (Tangkhul Women's Organization) emerged in Ukhrul (Manipur) in response to public outrage at human rights violations and particularly incidents of rape. TSL in 1974 demanded an impartial inquiry into the atrocities by the paramilitary forces and mobilized a mass hunger strike to demand justice (Manchanda, 2004: 24).

NWUM was formed in 1994 as a fall out of the awareness raising campaign of the Beijing Women's Conference. Although each of the 15 Naga tribes in Manipur have their own women's organisation, it felt the need for a common forum that would instil among the Naga women of Manipur an awareness of the unity of the women of all the Naga tribes. NWUM has been clearly focused on the issue of asserting women's rights reflecting the concerns of the professional women who are its core office bearer. In its first General Assembly in 1994, it reaffirmed its founding principles- to affirm the rights and dignity of Naga women promote traditional values and improve the living standard of Naga society. The resolutions passed by the General Assembly were more assertive- safeguarding rights on marriage and divorce, equal right to property and inheritance and above all women's right to be included in the village administration (Raisunriang, 2001: 19). NWUM has been in the forefront of the campaign to have the ceasefire extended to

all Naga areas and in building an awareness of the unity of the Naga people through public rallies, seminars and workshops.

The Kuki civil societies, like the Kuki Mothers Association also have done a great man's service to remove the sense of violence and conflict between the insurgents and the public (Kamei, 2006, *The Sangai express*). The Naga women and the Kuki women are the guardians in their respective tribes. They played a pivotal role during Naga-Kuki clashes, where barbarism got unleashed in its naked proportions in the name of ethnic cleansing. The issue of bitter Naga-Kuki conflict has been sought to be resolved through non-violent means by creating awareness and mutual understanding by mothers' associations. To bring awareness they have undertaken peace campaigns by conducting seminars in different localities with the support of Fraternal Green Cross and Legal Education and Aid Society (Brara, April 26, 2006). The women of Manipur not only fight against the social injustice collectively but also has shown bravery in the individual level. In a remarkable display of determination and will power in the protest against the excesses of security forces, Irom Sharmila Chanu, a young woman undertook fast unto death for almost a decade (since November 2, 2000) and she is force-fed. She refused to take bail and is still languishing in jail demanding lifting of the Armed Forces Special Power Acts (AFSPA, 1958).

The socio-cultural and political tradition of Manipur has legitimized the women of Manipur in whatever task that they may take up. The legitimacy is based much more on social and moral approval, than on legal sanctions. However, the need of the hour is to reinforce women's active participation in all spheres. Education not only enhances knowledge but also enables to cope with the day-to-day women's issues. After looking at the various handicaps and strengths possessed by Manipur women in the social, economic and political spheres of society, in the subsequent chapters we will look at the educational profile of the Manipur women and the impact it has made on them.



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Women's education has always been an enigma in this country for several reasons. Despite best efforts by social reformers, Government of India, policy makers, committees, and many other non-governmental organisations, women's education is a big question even today. In the year 1901 the status of women's education was deplorable since it was less than 1% (.69%). In 1981 women's literacy was 24.83%. The 1991 census reports indicate that literacy among women is 39% (Chandrasekeran, 1998: 74). A century has gone and in spite of best efforts India has not been able to balance the literacy rate among men (75.26%) and women (53.67%) (Census of India, 2001).

Indian women are as capable as any women in any part of the world. But unlike women in many Western Countries, Indian women are denied equal opportunities for working with men in many spheres of life. Constitutionally, Indian women have been granted equal rights with men, but practically speaking, they are kept much behind men in various life activities. Hence, the women should be given equal rights with men everywhere according to their special interests and legitimate demands. Education plays the role as a means for human resource development for sensitising one's perceptions, awareness and for motivating and changing one's behaviour to suit the rising needs, demands and opportunities for survival, growth and development. Education awakens the ignorant minds and equips people to demand one's rights and thus it is essential for all. It is a key to making women self-reliant and giving them the confidence to pursue their goals and aspirations. Education of women is indispensable for the sustainable development of the society. Every society has a system of imparting education to women in some form or the other.

After theorising and conceptualising education in the first chapter, in this chapter we will look at the educational status of Manipur women from ancient to the present time.

Without getting into the tedious debate of education from various theoretical perspectives, we will focus on the positive aspects of education as being the medium of empowerment and emancipation, especially of women.

### **Women's Education during Pre- British period**

If truth be told, the rights enjoyed by the present day modern women are sparse compared to that of their Vedic counterparts, where there was no discrimination between sexes and women enjoyed equal educational opportunities (Dr. Sharma and Dr. K. Sharma , 2002: 51) . They were allowed to participate in the educational discipline, to enter the order of Brahmacharya and to pass through the Upanayana ceremony. In fact education was allowed for women not as an opportunity, but as an obligation.

However in the post-Vedic period that is after 300 B.C. The position of women underwent a drastic deterioration. The degradation of women lasted till the beginning of the twentieth century. Reasons might be that the ruling Aryans were busy in war and for that there was need for more men which resulted in greater preference for sons (Tara Ali Baig, 1976: 6). The other reason might be ancestor worship. As the men gained supremacy by virtue of the status, the women were made inferior class and degraded (Rajawat, 2005: 28). A multitude of derogatory attributes were ascribed to them. They were denied access to educational opportunity. They were no more allowed to pursue Vedic studies. Due to absence of education, the women were deceived to be fit for nothing. Since the girls were not educated, early marriages became common. The purdah system crept into royal families and Sati was also revived. Thus women were burdened with cumulative injustices and subjected to gross discrimination in all spheres (Pandit, 1997: 12).

In the case of women of Manipur, they have a distinct place in the socio-cultural, religious and economic life of the society. However, in spite of this, the door of education was not open to them during the Pre-British period. The traditional society assigned women only domestic duties. Parents were mostly responsible for the education of their daughters at home. Most of the girls were trained by their mothers in weaving,

embroidery and household chores like cooking, nursing the family members and caregiving their younger siblings (Devi, Jamini, 1989: 98). Their main work was not confined to the home alone. They are not confined behind the purdah. While their male folk were attending *Lallup* (free labour performed for the state) at the king's palace, women did business in the market, tending the cows, did manual work in the field, etc. Even today, *Ima* (women) market in Manipur is exclusively run by women. This implicates their ability, courage and training they had. They are known for their hard work.

The Manipur women belonging to aristocratic families received education. But their education was not of formal type. Tutors were engaged to train girls in their own household in fine arts, music and dancing, and for imparting the knowledge of 3 Rs i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic (Lyndem and Kumar De, 2004: 243). Thus, in the field of fine-arts, dance and music too, the contribution of women is significant as they acquire training in their girlhood days.

In the hills among the ethnic group, the traditional education was imparted through the village *Morungs* or the dormitories in the form of training in martial arts and warfare, handicrafts, creative arts, custom and traditions, morality and discipline (J. P. Mills, 1980: 47- 51). *Morung* played significant role in the social, educational, cultural and religious life of the Nagas. Anand argues, "The Morung plays vital role in preparing younger generations for posts in the village council. The Morung is the club, the public school, the military training centre, the hostel for boys and meeting place for village elders. It is as well the centre for the social, religious and political activities. In short, it is the fulcrum of the village democracies" (Anand, 1967: 91-92). There was certainly an organised commune of women in the form of "Girl's Dormitory" housed by a respectable family in the village community. This dormitory system afforded the natural growth of leadership amongst women in the village. It is here, where the girls lived together, sat together, sang together, learned together all the arts of weaving, spinning, handicrafts, singing, dancing, processing, dancing etc. The ones, who could develop their talents and ingenuity to the fullest, naturally become the accepted leaders and they command respect and honour in the society (Thekho, 1998: 2). The talents developed because the elder peer groups could enforce strict discipline to the younger peer groups in the dormitory.

Trained under such rigorous discipline, the girls are ushered into the real world of the responsibilities they had to own up in the life with their husbands, their- in- laws and their children.

The dormitory system or “*Morung*” is conspicuously absent today. However, vestigial practices of Morung can be traced back to the informal gatherings of young boys and girls at “*Tokhu*” (Mao language) which is a circular structure built by huge stones. Here, folk songs, story telling and dances are composed and learnt and competitions are held. They also discuss issues of social importance. It is here most participants select their spouse by learning each other’s personalities, capabilities and skills. Thus in the traditional society, despite the absence of literacy, the social and moral fibre of the people sustained the society (Devi, Shanti, 2001: 9).

### **Women’s Education during British Period**

Towards the end of nineteenth century, the position of Indian women in the society improved a lot. The social reform movements launched by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1779-1833) and his Brahma Samaj, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820- 1971) and Arya Samaj among the Hindus and similar movements in other communities to improve the status of women led to the enactment of several laws: Sati abolition in 1829, banning child marriage, permitting remarriage of widows. The recognition of equal right of women to education was recognized against all conservative opposition, the pernicious practice of purdah began to diminish, particularly among Hindus. The East India Company attached no importance to women education (Mathur, 1973: 6-7). There was not even a single government school for women. Only a few girls managed to find a place in boy’s school with great difficulty. Christian missionaries and some institution were privately running a few schools for girls. The Roman Catholic Mission was also participating actively in this movement. Glancing at the education of women from 1857 to 1902, the Indian Education Commission declared that women’s education was in deplorably backward state and that it should be improved scientifically as much as possible. Subsequently, the Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Parsi Community and Christians set up many colleges. In 1902, women education assumed the form of a movement. Guardians, too, were



becoming conscious about the need to educate their daughters (Harichandan, 1999: 70-71).

Between 1917 and 1947, women education grew rapidly. In 1915 the National Council of Women was established. The Government of India in its resolution on October 1, 1919 reiterated the policy on women's education in the following words "*The education of girls need more financial fostering than that of boys, primarily education must mainly be free. Scholarship and studentships must be given lavishly; grant-in-aid must be calculated more generously and greater expensiveness of secondary education has to be practically recognized*" (Pandit, 1997: 12). In 1927, the first All India Women Conference took place. Women took active part in the movement of independence. The change became evident when a number of women made their mark by becoming ministers, under-secretaries and deputy speakers of Provincial Legislation when Congress Government was formed in 1936. Elite women (like Sorojini Naidu, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Durgabhai Deshmukh) who joined the freedom struggle were not imbued with the desire to emancipate but were committed to feminine roles.

In Manipur, English educational system was introduced by the British and brought social changes in the twentieth century. But, it made little progress during the colonial period as female education in those days was not encouraged. Yet, a primary school for girls was first established at Imphal in 1899, and 12 girls got enrolled in the same year (Mangoljao, 1989: 18). Referring to the education of women, Hudson thus remarks 'the education of women cannot be said to have made equal progress although it was hoped, not without reason in a state like Manipur where women hold such an important position in the economic activity of the state, the efforts to establish a good institution for the daughters of the higher classes would have been attended with more success that would have been the case' (Hudson 2003 (1908): 24, 25). However, girl's enrolment gradually increased and reached 53 by 1900 despite its poor enrolment at the initial stage. But later no girl student came to school due to the rumour that as soon as the girls were satisfactorily taught to read, write and speak English; they were to be shipped off to England (Ghosh and Ghosh, 1997: 36). Moreover, to be a good housewife, the

qualifications that were required for a girl could be acquired from her mother and other elder members of the family. Besides, the girls were of great help in the household activities. So, the guardians felt no necessity of sending their daughters to schools.

A Christian missionary, William Pettigrew, Maharaja Churachand Singh and Major Woods were few pioneers who have contributed immensely on female education in the state of Manipur (Devi, Jamini, 1989: 97). They realised the need for women's education and they strongly advocated the introduction of women education for the welfare of the society. Thus women again started going to school. In the succeeding years the number of girl schools increased gradually and established 3 primary lower schools in 1931-42. In 1934-35, a private school for girls was established in the name of Princess Tamphasana (now the Tamphasana Girl's Higher Secondary School). According to the census of 1941 the number of literate female in Manipur was 5% (Devi, Jamini, 1989: 97).

Despite the ardent efforts by the pioneers, education of Girls and women in Manipur was completely neglected. This was due to the ignorance of the people regarding the value of women's education, low income of the parents, and utility of girls at home for helping their mothers in their household work.

### **Women's Education in the Contemporary Period after Independence**

It is only after the constitution of independent India guaranteed equal rights for women not only in legal, social, political spheres but educational also. Education panel of the Planning Commission at its meeting held in July 1957, reviewed that "suitable committee should be appointed to go into various aspects of the questions relating to the nature of education for girls at the elementary, secondary and adult stages and to examine whether the present system was helping them to lead a happy and more useful life". The Government of India in the Ministry of Education accordingly set up the National Committee of Women education in 1959. The resolution on the National Policy on Education stresses the importance of women education in these words, "the education of

girls should receive emphasis not only on grounds of social justice but also because it accelerates social transformation.”

The United Nations declaration on the elimination of discrimination against women (1967) took note of the great contribution made by women to social, political, economic and cultural life and the part they play in the family and particularly in the rearing up of children and recommended the following, Article 9 of the declaration states “All appropriate means shall be taken to ensure to girls and women, married or unmarried, equal rights with men in educating at all levels and in particular:-

- a) Equal conditions of access to and study in educational institutions of all types, including universities and vocational, technical and professional schools,
- b) The same choice of curriculum, the same examinations, teaching staffs with qualification of the same standards and school premises and equipments of the same quality, whether institutions are co-educational or not,
- c) Equal opportunities to benefit from scholarship and other study grants,
- d) Equal opportunities for access to programs of continuing education, including adult literacy programme, and
- e) Access to educational information to help in ensuing the health and well being of families.

After India attained independence, education made rapid progress in Manipur. New hopes and aspirations emerged and new avenues for women were opened declaring equality of both sexes. The Constitution of India guarantees for free and compulsory education to all children below the age of fourteen irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex and creed. The impact of the promulgation of free and compulsory education gave an impetus to the progress of women’s education in Manipur and in other states of India.

Various measures were taken up to improve women’s education in order to raise the status of women in the society. The University Education Commission (1948- 49) made certain recommendations regarding women’s education. But the most development in the field of women’s education, after independence was the setting up of a National Committee for Women’s Education in 1958 under the Chairpersonship of Smt.

Durgabhai Deshmukh and this made tremendous impact on the progress of women's education in Manipur. The Committee suggested the creation of a National Council for Women's Education for guidance, leadership and advice (Harichandan, 1999: 71). As recommended by the Committee, the Government of Manipur set up the State Council for Women's education in 1967 (Devi, Jamini, 1989: 98).

As already pointed out, Manipur literacy rate was only 5% in the year 1941. During the same period the literacy of entire India was 16.67% with 24.90% amongst males and 7.30% amongst females. That means literacy of Manipur was much lower than India, even lower than female literacy. During 1951, literacy of Manipur rose to 11.40% while that of India was 16.67% and female literacy was 7.93%. Rate of literacy was much better but still lower than Indian average. Literacy rate of Manipur thereafter continued to rise matching the increase in various educational facilities. In the year 1971, the literacy rate of Manipur was 32.91% marginally higher than India rate of 29.45% standing 14<sup>th</sup> among the state of India. Between 1971 and 1981 rise of literacy in Manipur was 27.59% taking the figure of Manipur to 41.39% while literacy rate of India was 36.17%. Female literacy of Manipur during 1981 was 29.06% and decadal rise of female literacy in Manipur between 1971 and 1981 was as high as 31.80% which clearly indicates not only men but women of Manipur availed various facilities to take up education with interest (Ghosh and Ghosh, 1997: 39). This trend certainly has social impact particularly in a state where women hold high positions in almost all operations productions, economy, industry, agriculture and so on, and with rise in literacy they could share power equation in relation to the men.

### **Trends of Literacy in Manipur**

From the historical, social and economic reason, education of girls has lagged behind considerably in Manipur. Women in Manipur started receiving education since 1899. But the percentage of literacy was then very low. However, with the changing of times, there was progress in development of women's education in the state since 1951. It has shown progress from 2.40% in 1951 to 59.70% in 2001. Male literacy trends too, have shown progress from 20.80% in 1951 to 77.87% in 2001.

**Table No. 3.1: Literacy Rate and Percentage of Decadal Growth Rate In Manipur**

Year	Total Population	Literacy rate			Percentage of Decadal growth rate	
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1981	14,20,953	53.29	29.06	41.3	33.1	31.80
1991	18,37,149	74.6	47.6	59.9	30.45	28.41
2001	23,88,634	77.87	59.70	68.87	28.66	31.43

Source: Census of India 2001, Manipur, Series 14, Provisional Population Totals, Paper 1 of 2001, p.13

Note: Literacy rate is the percentage of literate to population aged 7 years and above.

From the statistics, the literacy rate of Manipur (68.87%) in 2001 is higher than the national average of 64.84%. Moreover, the female literacy rate is 59.70% which is above the national-average of 53.67%, while male literacy rate is 77.87% which is also above the national average of 75.26%. The progress of female literacy is a sure sign of emancipation of Manipur women. Even though there is no yawning gap in the literacy rate between female and male, there is a disparity between the rates of literacy for male and female with the female literacy rates being below those for males in all the decades. In Manipur, slow progress of female education may be due to poverty or lack of economic sustenance, negligence of giving education to the girls in the beginning, preference of boys over girls, early marriage, and inadequate school facilities for girls, girls required for household works, prejudices against girls' education, although the parents are not poor etc.

## Girls'/ Women's Institutions in Manipur 1990-1991 to 2000-2001

Table 3.2 shows the Number of Women's Institutions in Manipur in different stages

Year	Unive rsity	Colleges for General Education		Colleges for Professional & other Education		High/higher Secondary Schools		Middle/ Jr. High/ Senior Basic Schools		J.B./U.J.B./ Primary School	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1991-92	1	27	2	32	1	430	54	637	16	3020	56
1992-93	1	27	2	32	1	444	53	632	20	2966	63
1993-94	1	43	7	35	1	453	54	680	22	2942	89
1994-95	2	43	7	37	1	474	51	718	20	2877	63
1995-96	2	43	7	37	1	488	51	515	20	2484	63
1996-97	2	43	7	36	1	503	53	538	19	2366	148
1997-98	2	44	7	36	1	523	53	586	25	2399	148
1998-99	2	43	7	39	1	526	56	606	25	2408	163
1999-2000	2	52	6	12	-	549	56	710	20	2409	163
2000-2001	2	23+	2+	3+	-	558	56	764	20	2408	163
2001-2002 (P)	2	-	-	-	-	603	56	776	20	2410	163

+ - only Government colleges

Source

1. Directorate of Education (S), Government of Manipur
2. Directorate of Education (U), Government of Manipur
3. Manipur University, Canchipur
4. Central Agricultural University, Iroisemba

The figures in Table 3.2 shows the ups and downs of the number of institutions in Manipur particularly of the number in all type of institutions for girls/women has remained more or less static. As the figure above shows the number of Universities is very less, therefore, the number of seats and opportunities to the girls is not very high. Where the number of general colleges for male has almost doubled from 27 to 52, the number of colleges for girls remained only around seven. The number of professional and other educational colleges has seen a rise in case of colleges for men whereas there is only one professional college for girls. In high/higher secondary schools the number of schools for girls has not increased much, it remains around 56. In middle and junior high schools, the number of schools for girls is very less, around 20, whereas for boys it is more than 600 and in fact it has reached to 776 during 2001-2002. In primary schools,

though the number of schools for boys have come down from 3020 (1991-92) to 2410 (2001-02), and it has increased for girls from 56 (1991-92) to 163 (2001-02), the gap between number of schools for girls and boys remain very high. The causes of this unevenness of number of institutions may be due to the conversion of the school as co-education, improper functioning etc. Besides, imparting higher education to girls is not considered essential as they are going to reside in the husband's house. As a result the number of girls going for higher education is less than the boys. However, with education emerging as an important enterprise in the private sector in recent years the number of recognized colleges shot up to 25 in 2001 in which 2 are recognized College for Girls.

## Female Teachers

**Table 3.3:** Number of Female Teachers in Different categories of Institutions (1990-2002)

Year		1990-91	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02
Primary Schools	F	2579	3488	3377	3299	3226	2947	3020	3272	3383	3480	3562	3502
	%	23	31	31	31	30	32	33	35	36	35	36	36
Middle/Junior High Schools	F	1745	2186	2261	2349	2495	2038	2093	2330	2573	2843	2970	2916
	%	26	32	32	33	33	34	34	35	38	37	37	37
High/Higher Secondary Schools	F	2540	3122	3443	3374	3487	3464	3767	3788	4131	4179	4587	4570
	%	33	34	35	36	36	36	36	37	38	38	38	38
Colleges for General education	F	346	346	346	760	760	902	1009	1087	1087	1078	543	-
	%	31	31	31	34	34	35	37	38	38	38	38	-
Colleges for Professionals and other education	F	62	64	65	99	100	102	142	142	135	72	8	-
	%	25	25	25	22	22	22	26	26	23	25	28	-
Universities	F	13	15	19	22	30	32	31	36	31	30	30	33
	%	10	10	12	12	15	16	16	16	16	16	16	18

- means not available  
% female teachers

Source:

1. Directorate of Education (S), Government of Manipur
2. Directorate of Education (U), Government of Manipur
3. Manipur University, Canchipur
4. Central Agricultural University, Iroisemba

From the Table 3.3 we can see that in all the various level of the schools, there has been stability in the increment of the schools. The number of female teachers has not crossed 50% in all these years. There has been a steady increase in the number of female teachers in primary schools from 23% (1990-1991) to 36% (2001-2002), and 26% (1990-1991) to 37% (2001-2002) in the Medium/Junior High schools. In the high/Higher Secondary Schools, the percentage of female teachers, it is found that every year percentages have been increased, however, the percentage of it remained stagnant for four years consecutively i.e. 38% (1998-99 to 2001-2002). Female teachers in the college of education and Universities have also increased in numbers but are much below their male counterparts. The reason could either be due to the patriarchal family system that girls have certain parameter to attain higher educational degree to qualify for the lecturer and professor posts or due to the state male- chauvinism. There are also significant imbalances of the percentage of female teachers in both the colleges for general education (38% in 2000-01) and colleges for professional and other education (28% in 2000-01). From the given figures above, it can be drawn that not many girls are encouraged to take up the professionals courses, therefore there are not many women excelling in this field. There are also other reasons in reducing the number of female teachers in the higher educational level. The recent spate of controversial teacher appointments through examinations – or, sometimes, no examination at all – leave a whole lot of unanswered questions, a bad precedent, as well as a very bad taste in the mouth. A recent report also stated that in spite of the questionable recruitment, the schools are said to be still around 2000 teachers short (T.Vunglallian: 14-12-2006). The mentioned information implies government corruption and lack of transparency in administration in the whole process of adverse education in the society. The, Hill areas are the most affected places. Regardless of the number of teachers, some schools and colleges remained unattended; and despite their absence at work place they withdraw salaries from the Government exchequer. We must also consider the prevailing



phenomenon of absentee teachers and 'putting-out' jobs to proxy teachers in government schools. Regrettably, teaching as a profession does not attract qualified and committed people, especially at the school level where few in-service incentives are provided. The qualified teachers find work either in the state capitals, or in better developed regions outside the state.

The state government should look into the matter to increase the number of female teachers in the higher educational level too because female teachers act as role models to other girls studying in various institutions and inspire them to perform better and excel in their respective fields. Female teachers in schools and colleges help the girl students to identify them which are not the case with male teachers. Thus, we can see that women teachers play a significant role in education of girls and impact their achievements in life. Their absence in various institutions works as an impediment to provide proper role models to the girl students.

### **Surge in Enrolment**

With the increase in literacy rate of the state, the enrolment of students also increases. However, figures in Census 2001 as shown in table 3.4 reveal the imbalance in students' enrolment for different standards in the schools and enrolment of women in Higher education Census 2001 figures.

**Table No. 3.4:** Gross enrolment ratio of Students in the schools by standard, 2000- 2001

Class I- XII	Total	Girls	Boys
Total	487080	47.60	52.39
I- V	285580	48.09	51.90
VI- VIII	121200	46.98	53.10
IX- X	64680	47.47	52.52
XI- XII	15620	43.98	56.01

Source: Directorate of Education (S), Government of Manipur

As shown in table no. 3.4, the enrolment ratio of girls in all standards is considerably far from satisfactory but there are no major discrepancies between the enrolment of boys and girls. The table also shows that there is fluctuation of enrolments in all schools at all standards. It is more disturbing to see the enrolment ratio of girls in the higher secondary level (XI- XII), because the higher the educational attainment of girls the better the position of women is in all spheres of life. There are several reasons that stop girls to pursue further education: early marriage, shortage of education facilities, no changes in job preference, lack of information, dearth of higher institutions and specialized learning led to seek admission outside the state, and personal desires etc. The Kothari Commission on Education (1964-1966) recommended that the proportion of women's enrolment should be raised to 33% and the National Policy on Education (1986) states: "...Wider women's access to vocational, technical and professional education at all levels, breaking gender stereotypes" (Rao, 2000: 184, 185). However, in spite of the expansion of opportunities through the government policies for girls' education in India, the enrolment of girl students has not improved much in Manipur. Women in Manipur have low higher educational attainment.

**Table No. 3.5:** Enrolment of women according to faculty and stage, 2000-2001

	Total	Girls	Percentage
<b>(A) General education</b>	32197	14594	45.32
Arts	18218	9051	49.68
Science	12261	4971	40.54
Commerce	1718	572	33.29
<b>(B) Professional Stream</b>	2564	864	33.69
Education	416	261	62.74
Engineering/ Technical	630	127	20.15
Medical	142	43	30.28
Agriculture	212	91	42.92
Veterinary science	80	27	33.75
Law	930	278	29.89
Others	152	37	24.34

Source: Statistical abstract, India, 2002

As shown in table no. 3.5, women are not encouraged to take science, commerce or other professional course. In terms of percentage, the largest number of women's enrolment is in the subject of arts and humanities with 49.68 percent in arts (general education) and 62.74 percent in education (professional stream). This shows that most of the women are mainly into "female oriented" courses and these do not equip the women students to enter professions which have high percentage and provide better salary, status and advancement in career. The higher intensity of boys in all the educational attainments gives the scenario of gender disparity in the case of higher education. Due to lack of higher educational and professional institutions in the state, a large number of students go outside the state for attaining higher education. For reasons financial or otherwise, the parents usually give their sons the first priority when it comes to the matter of pursuing further studies outside the state. Another major factor that gives soaring gender disparity in the higher education level is also due to the job scenario. There has been general ban on any kind of government jobs in the state for the last 4-5 years. Manipur has not been able to provide adequate work to its vast army of educated young people. Thus, gender equality in education becomes a far cry.

## Dropout

**Table No.3.6:** Dropout rates of all categories of students in classes- I-V, I-VII and I-X (1993-1994 and 2004-2005)

Year	Classes- I-V			Classes-I-VIII			Classes-I-X		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1993-1994	64.78	64.99	64.88	70.79	70.51	70.66	73.03	72.80	72.93
2004-2005	29.71	32.74	31.18	34.47	30.91	32.80	46.04	39.58	43.02

Source:

1. Education in India 1993-1994, Vol.1 (S) Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development
2. Educational Statistics 2004-2005, Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development.

In Manipur, gender disparity in respect of mean years of schooling is significant vis-à-vis school dropouts ('East India Human Development Report' *National Council of Applied Economic Research*, 2004: 104). It is quiet apparent that the percentage of enrolment in all educational attainment is lower than that of boys. Even though there is absence of wide yawning gap of gender disparity, Manipur suffers from significant drop-out rates among the boys and girls in various school education levels especially in the higher education level. Table 3.6 showed that in a decade (1993-1994 to 2004-2005) the drop - out rates of both boys and girls in all classes has declined significantly. The drop-out rates of girls from classes' I-VII (30.91) and I-X (39.58) is lower than the drop-out rates of boys (34.47 and 46.04 respectively) in 2004-2005. From this we can draw that the parents as well as individuals (girls) have started to realise the importance of girls' education in today's modern world and thus heading the women to empower in all walks of their life. Nonetheless, the high percentage of drop - out rates continues to disturb their personality growth, hampering valuable contributions for the socio-economic development in the society. It is a serious issue and therefore, stern efforts should be made to identify the cause and bring solution to at the earliest.

There are two major factors for the cause of high drop-outs rates in educational institutions: social backgrounds and social constraints; indifferent attitude of the parents, preference of son over girl child, financial crisis, poverty, school distance, lack of infrastructure, dearth of trained teachers, traditional social norms and beliefs, and Gender Ideology. Poverty and gender ideology are considered to be major factors because it is difficult for the poor family to educate the child and bear the cost of food, books and uniforms. In the case of girl child, gender ideology is the main problem of high drop-out rates among the girls in the primary level as they are required to take care of their siblings at the tender age and render helping hand in the household activities. Albeit provisions made by the Indian Constitution which guarantees for free and compulsory education to all children below the age of fourteen (Article 21A), this has been ineffective as shown conspicuously from the above statistics. Additionally, the wide spread of drug among young girls and boys also leads to large number of school dropouts. Not ruling out the fact that implementation of Mid-day meal scheme in various areas of Manipur to increase

the enrolment in the primary level has been a failure mainly in hill areas. Firstly, there is huge misappropriation of funds in the name of the mid-day meals by the officials. Secondly, both in the valley as well as in the hills, there is no concept of mid-day meals. People eat their meals in the morning and then go to their work place, and then come back by 3 or 4 p.m. and eat their dinner. Hence, the meal is not in the mid-day. Therefore, the Planning Commission needs to understand the cultural differences in the state and formulate the plans accordingly.

In spite of the policy taken up by the Government of India and various organizations for the improvement of education to many girls and women are left behind and do not access proper education. One can take a note on the promises of National Policy on Education, 1986, *“The system will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the new values through redesigned curricula, text books, the training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women’s studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged taking up active programmes to further women’s development”* (National Policy on Education 1986: 6). The educational attainment of women of Manipur remains far from satisfactory in all streams and at all levels of education. The lower enrolment of girls in schools has been one of the major problems of our educational system. The problem is particularly worrying as women constitute half of the population of the society and are highly responsible to meet the needs of the family. Thus, unless girls could gain access to school and remain in the system for a sufficiently long period of time it would be difficult for them to avail of the benefits of higher education or improve their vocational skills necessary for their personal and socio-economic development.

Besides, education, in Manipur is in a dismal state because of so many internal disturbances and conflicts, such as frequent bandhs and blockades which result in too few working days, non-completion of courses affect the students to lose number of academic years. Today Manipur students are spread far and wide all over the country. The parents are selling their paddy fields to educate their children in good schools outside the state.

Given the circumstances, it is considered an obvious choice to prefer their son than their daughter. However, the discrimination is not that stark. As explained above that the educational status of women in all educational attainments is far from satisfactory as half of the women population in Manipur are still illiterate. Yet, we shall discuss in the next chapter the role of education on Manipur women as education is the means of emancipation of women leading to their empowerment.

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In the last chapter, we analysed the educational status of Manipur women. We saw that the educational attainments are poor compared to the male counterparts, but at the same time we noticed that it is still better than all India average and many states. In this chapter we will look at the role of education and analyse how it has helped in emancipation and empowerment of Manipur women. Women constitute half of the Country's population (Rao, 2000: 210). In the development process of the country, women are equally responsible for the sustainable development. Despite the contributions offered by the women in the family, society and nation, sadly and unfortunately, their "invincible" works are neither acknowledged nor recognised. Even today, women continue to be confined in the traditional roles rather than being fostered to discover their potentialities for themselves and social welfare. Women are deprived of their fundamental rights especially in the field of education, which is considered one of the most important instruments to empower the marginalised group such as women in the society.

Inequality persistently creeps into the society. Women face seclusion in almost all spheres. Education, an important indicator for the development of the country is still not accessible to most women. As mentioned in the preceding chapters, women are given the subordinate status in the society and are not encouraged to expose outside the family. An individual's role in the society is determined by the social structure, the existent cultural norms and the value system of the society. Laxmi Menon (1999: 6) states in her article '*Emancipation of Women*' that there is no specific role for men but there is one definitely for women. The idea of doing the same kind of work without assigning a role is not unusual in primitive societies. Work is done according to circumstances and convenience. The idea of woman for the home, man for the world is a feudal concept which should have disappeared long ago. In spite of the many government policies and programmes to encourage women education, it has failed to educate half the population of women which confers less hope for sustainable development.

However, the situation is changing gradually. The position of women in the society is not static thing but continually changes with the changing needs of the time. Women have been identified as key agents of sustainable development and women's equality and empowerment are seen as central to a holistic approach towards establishing new patterns and process of development. Women are key aspect of all social development programmes and hence, a number of programmes have been initiated by the Indian Government for the empowerment of women. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution of India, in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Indian Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognised as the central issue in determining the status of women.

Education, especially among women, is the cornerstone for social development to improve the prospects of general welfare of society. Women's education aims at economic independence and self reliance. Their education should be in a positive direction through which women achieve self respect and self confidence. Education creates such confidence that they can excel even in masculine jobs (Bharthi, 1999: 74). It helps women to discover their abilities, talents, capacities, etc. Education empowers women to achieve many social, economic and political dreams which are denied to them customarily. Education, actually accord women certain advantages in areas where they have traditionally lacked access or differential rights.

The importance of education for empowerment of women is undeniable. However, in India female literacy rate is as low as 39.42 per cent as compared to 63.86 per cent of men and education remains the catalyst towards empowering women particularly in rural India (Kumar, 2007: 2). This low level of literacy not only has a negative impact on women's lives but also on their families and on the country's economic development and prosperity. Notwithstanding the educational status of women being far from satisfactory, it has been increasingly realised that nothing is more central to sustainable development than the empowerment of women through education. Women's education increases their control over resources and livelihood. Women today are empowered to a certain extent;

they are gradually coming out of the tradition-bound and getting exposed to the outside world as per to the need of the hour. This is more prevalent in the urban society. Women in rural India are also empowering to some extent with gradual progress of upward mobility but the progress is comparably slow, owing to socio-cultural and economic factors. Educated women today are capable of stating equal position with their counterparts. They have proved their capabilities by achieving various positions in numerous jobs be it be public or private sectors. Women often outperform men in their respective fields. They are beginning to receive due recognition for their contribution and sacrifices in the family, society and national and international level.

Today, women's empowerment has become a growing concern both at the national and international levels considering the subjugated and the disadvantaged position and status of women in the society. In India too, the concerned Government departments, numerous women groups, NGO's and International agencies are taking initiatives to expose the cause of women. They have formulated many policies and programs that aim to enhance women's confidence, their rights, financial freedom and improve their inter-personal relations, leadership qualities, general management abilities etc. Without women's representation and recognition in all aspects, nation will continue to lie under developed. Therefore, for the effective sustainable development of the country, women in the world and India in particular must be empowered through education. It is through education that women can exercise their power developing confidence to participate in social, economic and political realms in effective and efficient manner thus contributing to the nation's sustainable development. It is significant to note that the National Policy of Education (1986, 1992) has recognized not only the need of empowering women but also the role of education in bringing about social change as new social orders will enhance gender equality. The National Policy of Education states: *"Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be well conceived edge in favour of women. The national system will play a positive intervention role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision-*

*makers and administrators and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering.” (Vashistha, 1999: 78 - 79).*

In Manipur, due to modern education, there has been tremendous change in the position and status of Manipur women. There is a great change in their lifestyles and socio-economic condition. They started rethinking on the old social norms which affects their position. Therefore, education to women is very important to raise the position and status of women in the society. No doubt, many initiatives for women’s education have been taken up in recent times at national, regional and even global levels. For instances, Mahila Samakhya Programme is one, where literacy is taken up as a response to the need felt and articulated by women themselves, rather than as a predetermined programme input. Since its inception in 1989, the Mahila Samakhya Programme – an initiative led by the Ministry of Human Resource Development – has empowered Indian women through employment and education about their rights.

In 1991 Lok Jumbish (movement of people) was launched in Rajasthan where 80 per cent women were illiterate. The condensed courses of education and Vocational Training for adult women started in 1958 and recast in 1975 by the Central Social Welfare Board (CSNB) also provide new vistas of employment through continuing vocational training for women and girls who are drop-outs. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan recognizes the need for special efforts to bring out-of-school girls, especially from disadvantaged sections, to school. But the disparity in the level of education between male and female is still a worldwide phenomenon. Despite intensive efforts to improve literacy levels, it has been low. In India, literacy rate of women rose from 18.3 percent in 1951 census to 54.16 percent in 2001 census while male literacy rate in 2001 was 75.85 percent. In Manipur state, female literacy rate has progressed from 2.36% in 1951 to 59.70% in 2001. Male literacy trends too, have progressed from 20.77% in 1951 to 77.87% in 2001.

The Manipur women have a distinct place in the socio-cultural, religious and the economic life of the society. Yet, formal education was not encouraged during the pre-

British period. Gradually, during the British regime, the importance of education was felt by scholars, Maharajas and most importantly the Christian Missionaries who viewed the importance of women education and established girl's school. Thus, women started receiving education in 1898-99 only. Today, women have carved a niche in the education arena. Many girls have topped in various educational institutions. The number of working women has also increased generating income for the family. They started thinking critically of the traditional beliefs and practices that restraints them from their liberty of enjoying their rights. They begun to participate in the public platform and exercise the freedom of expression. They started participating in the decision-making in the family and locality concerns and also at higher political level like the parliamentary and Legislative Assembly and in the local bodies.

In Manipur, one can comprehend from the details mentioned in the second chapter about the extent of women's contribution and influence in the society, economic and political affairs. Manipur women from time immemorial have been performing important roles in the society – in the context of economy of the state, critical social issues and political sphere which is somewhat unconstitutional but cultural that flows down from the ancient bravery, patronage of culture, dedication, hard work and sense of responsibility. As a matter of fact they have been cultivated with the sense of responsibility and strong determination. However, despite the fact that Manipur women enjoyed better position in all spheres as compared with women in other states of India, surprisingly Manipur women do not widely participate in top-notch decision making. This policy of non- interference in decision making has contributed positively towards preserving the customs, traditions, ways of life and cultural patterns of the communities (Okram, 2005 and Chinu, 2005: 60). In the Indian Constitution, provisions were made to protect the customary practices and the laws of the communities. But it seems that customary laws are more operational and powerful than the Indian Penal Code, as seen in the present society of Manipur. Although the Constitution grants many provisions of customary laws which promotes gender equity and ensures that the rights are maintained, customary laws cannot yet be regarded as gender sensitive.

As a result, Manipur women need to be empowered through education so as to break through their traditional roles and customary laws that affect their image and restricts them from participating in the decision making in socio-economic and political matters. Through empowerment, it is necessary to cull out women's potentialities and confidence so as to enable them to make informed choices and take decisions in matters that affect their life and a means to access the material and symbolic resources available in the society. This is facilitated by raising awareness about their rights and responsibilities as citizens and socio-economic, educational and political opportunities available for their development, and by actively engaging themselves in community affairs both at the individual and collective levels.

### **Role of Education in Social Empowerment**

As discussed in chapter two, the Manipur women are taking a crucial role in social movements, political affairs, economic development and religio-cultural affairs through ages. Women occupy a very important position in the social structure and social system of the Manipur state. The nature of society changes according to time and situation, hence the role and position of women also changes accordingly. The process of modernization and democratization has given equal rights and opportunities to the women of the state. The traditional customary laws and forces of modernization and democratization have always interacted resulting in change in the position, rights and role of women.

On the other hand, when we delve into the lives of Manipur women; numerous obstacles come in their way to empowerment which restrains them from improving their social status. As long as women are left behind in the process of decision-making, it would be hard to get the democratic process started. Therefore, Chandra (1997: 395) expresses, the primary challenge facing women today, is to increase their participation in social, economic and political spheres so that they get hold of the situation and become actively involved in the process of decision-making. Hence, their participation would help in enhancing the process of empowerment and it would also give women the desired self-respect and social dignity.

Despite equitable position held by the Manipur women, as mentioned, they are also not immune to the unequal distribution of power between male and females. The patriarchal system works in favour of the males and women face discrimination and suppression at the hands of male members of family and kins. Due to the patriarchal social structure, polygamy once common among the well-to-do section of the population has today penetrated even among the lower orders that victimised Manipur women in the form of physical atrocities, psycho-disturbances and emotionally feeble. Polygamy has torn apart the relationships within the family members as well as affects self-esteem in the society. Although, patriarchal system in Manipur society is not as rigid as in other parts of India, women in Manipur are also not exempted from being considered too as the weaker sex and inferior than men. As a result, we find that there is lack of participation of Manipur women in decision- making in socio-economic and political issues.

Women are not only engaged in the domestic works but are as well burdened with the economic assignments. In this modern day, it is unfortunate to know that Manipur women, both educated and uneducated, have not been able to escape from the socially constructed traditional roles. Manipur women may actively participate in the socio-economic and political spheres; however, as the state is a male dominated society, they continue to suffer from oppression, exploitation and subordination in the society. The root cause of women's oppression is patriarchy, which has snatched legitimate powers from women, making them totally defenceless and powerless. Hence, women need to be empowered for undoing the injustice meted out to them. This can be made more effective through education. Empowerment through education enable women to be conscious of their oppression and thus enable women to control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice

In the present-day era, nations have changed the attitudes towards the importance of education especially the Manipur Mothers. With the attainment of modern education their traditional role of housewife and bread earner as a helping partner of the husband has undergone a change. Chandrasekeran (Shanthi, 1998: 73) from Durkhemien perspective, states that education is one of the basic needs of men and women. It has two functions –one, to preserve the cultural traditions and values of the past, and two, to

create new values and new goals – so that the process of social change is smooth and orderly. A peaceful non-violent social revolution can be brought about through education and therefore, education is a powerful instrument for bringing about social change, which is the major hope not only for this country but also for establishing a better social order all over the world. In this context, women's education is so crucial for any global development.

Manipur women are becoming socially visible. Apart from their household maintenance; they educate their children teaching them social values, and social norms. Mothers assist the children in their home assignments. Education has been given primary importance. The practice of giving preference to the sons over the daughters for getting education is being done away with in recent years. The important issue now is the 'capabilities' and not on gender. The decision-making process in the family is also affected by the changed values of the educated women and this changes the nature of the broader social aspects of family life. Women are likely to be consulted more often than before. Also, the education of the women has been termed as an important determinant of child mortality. As reported by the East India Human Development Report (2004: 108), Manipur has the lowest infant mortality rate among the North Eastern states. The infant mortality rate of Manipur is 25% less than all India infant mortality rate 68% (2001) (Yojana, p.4). The Manipur educated mothers are able to break the tradition bound by illness and adopt alternative methods of child care. Further more they tend to be more capable to attend to demanding attention for her children and her knowledge of available medical facility would apparently be better than that of her illiterate counterparts (Dr. Lalit Pukhrambam). Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has correctly pointed out that if education is given to women then it would lead to the education of home, society and the world at large. Great social reformers have given foremost importance to female literacy for the simple reason that the mother is the primary teacher of the child. Healthy growth of the physical and mental capabilities of children is in the hands of the mother (Shanthi, 1998: 76). The female literacy is quite high as compared to all India literacy rate. According to 2001 census, male literacy is 77.87 per cent and female literacy rate is 59.78 per cent. Manipur educated women are engaged in occupations like doctors, nurses, teachers in



schools and colleges, bureaucrats, clerks, researchers, lawyers, judges, writers, artists and journalists. Forerunners among them are the sports persons like Kunjarani, Mary Kom and many others at the national and international level.

Naga society practices patrilineal system, where family lineage is traced through the male predecessor. Property is also inherited in the male line and it is always a son who succeeds his father as the head of the clan or lineage. Daughters cannot hold these positions; neither could they inherit immovable properties. In recent years some parents have started giving immovable properties such as land and house to their daughters but they are not part of the ancestral property which has been passed down from the male line. They are instead, properties bought and acquired by the parents themselves and gifted their daughters in good faith. But the matter is stringent amid the Kuki tribes. For instance, it is impossible to inherit property in absence of a son for any mother. The widow has to follow the commands of the male inheritor who then has the custody of the children as well as the property along with the pension of her husband (Brara, 2006: 22). The Naga Women's Union as well as the Kuki Women are fighting hard to amend their customary laws, since they feel these laws are oppressive tools to victimize women without justification by the male patriarchs of their society. (Brara, 2005: 93).

There are many educated women who are beyond marriageable age and yet not married. They are professionals and very well established in different professions who are finding it difficult to adjust with the unchanging norms of their society. To perform the role of ideal daughter-in-law is not manageable to them. And also, it is difficult for the parents to find a suitable husband for the educated women because men feel intimidated if the women are more educated than they are. Therefore, many educated women remain single their entire life inviting unwanted scorn from the society. Brara (2005: 90) states, "It is this group of educated women who have now started struggling with patriarchal notions and demanding in their own way for an egalitarian society and have started to take up the mantle of bringing forth women's issues in the forefront in the Manipur society".

We can also find various social activities for the community wellbeing assist by numerous fellowships, churches and Students' Union, Welfare Associations of different communities in Delhi and in several other places where students are populated but there is no organisation/Union for women alone. Students believe working side by side for the better community upliftment. In such cases, Fellowships and churches are managed by the students themselves along with educated elders and Pastor as the head of it. In Manipur, since almost half of the population follows Christian religion; students not only concentrate on their academic pursuit but become a member in their respective community Churches to enrich their spiritual life as a Christian. These social gathering gives them a very good platform to develop and display their potentialities in diverse grounds and expand exposure of other's lives. Apex students' bodies are run by qualified students. Each tenure i.e, 1 year, the executives are elected by the house themselves. It consists of both qualified educated boys and girls. Students, government employees, private sectors workers, and those friends preparing for central exams not only update the young upcoming students about the job opportunities and details of admissions in different institutions back home but also facilitate them in seeking jobs and assisting in admissions in the metropolitan cities. Not only this, they accommodate outstation guests irrespective of their states, siblings, relatives and belonging to same community in their rented places. The Students' body organises "Fresher's Day" to welcome the newcomers in the cities annually. Students with good and excellent performance in their matriculation and Secondary or any higher examinations are felicitated with word of deep appreciation and encouragement to all. Group of scholars including women organise 'career counselling' for the fresh students in the city.

There is also a platform where the students contribute in various forms of writings about informing global current affairs, exercising their intellectual skills by sharing their valuable thoughts on issues like tradition, modernity, education, socio-economic and political aspects in the quarterly newsletter of different Students Union, such as Eastern Quarterly by Manipur Research Forum and Magazines by Naga Research Scholars, Delhi. There are also many scholars whose papers have been published in reputed journals, magazines and including books under good publication house. Thus, although educated men and women of Manipur in the cities are far from home, they are not self-

centred in terms of rendering help; they perform their respective duties but are also receptive to assist the aid-seekers in all circumstances. They impart education through writings by enhancing the knowledge of readers with great enthusiasm. Students' body along with the elders also does great social services at times of untimely death within their respective communities by making all the necessary arrangements like organising funeral service, financing flight tickets of the corpse and the companion of the deceased to their native place. Also sick patients not only from Delhi but from home admitted in the city hospitals for treatment are paid visit and offered financial assistance as per the need by the respective students' body, fellowships, and individuals also. Therefore, through different kinds of social gatherings, social activities, social services and community participation, there is amplification of community belongingness and firm social cohesion among the different regions, communities or of the whole state.

- Manipur, known for its influential women movements during the British period continue to represent in different forms in the early 1970s fighting against common cause by a collective conscious group of the elderly Manipur women encompasses different localities. Among the meiteis there are *Meira Paibis* (the torch bearing women). They hold *mashaals* and roam in the locality to keep a watch on drunkards and drug abusers. They make a human wall in cases where innocent local youths are forcibly being taken away by the Armed Forces in the name of insurgents. They are the only one who can dare to warn and scold the people in under ground movement for their accesses. Everybody is cautious of them. *Meira Paibis* dare to get *lathi* charged, to sit for hunger strikes and even go to jail for a right cause. So are the women's groups in the hills. The Naga Mother's Association and the Kuki Women's Association are the guardians of their respective tribe. They played a pivotal role during Naga-Kuki clashes, where barbarism got unleashed in its naked proportions in the name of ethnic cleansing. It was at that moment that NMA and Kuki women went long stretches in the hills to meet their respective underground outfits to tell them to stop killing each other. Manipur women groups are the watchdogs of their society. Another organisation worth mentioning is the *Tangkhul Shanao Long* (All Tangkhul Women's Association). This Women's group was honored with the award given by the Indian Federation of Small and Medium News Papers in September 1995 for their courage and struggle in bringing peace and

development in Manipur state (Brara, 2006). Brara (2002) also points out in her article '*Women's role in Human rights and peace in the North East*' that these women have such tremendous organizational skills, which cannot be compared with any other group in the world. Most of these women are also competent self-employed weavers, traders, farmers and a few handfuls are educated also.

Since the various women's groups wield enormous influence in their communities, almost all the organizations, political parties and underground organizations try to get their support including the Governor, and urges the *Meira Paibis* to play the role of peace makers (The Sangai Express, 2001: 1). Similarly, women's groups in the hills are called to be peace-maker in time of social conflicts and tensions. But unlike the women's groups in the valley, women are mostly Christians and their activities are bound by Church rules. The Church has strong influence in almost all walks of life in the hills. The influence of the tribal custom is equally strong. Traditionally, women are treated as inferior in the tribal society. Only recently some women's groups like Naga Women's Union have started challenging the traditional roles for women in the society.

However, we should not forget that they are also 'soft targets'. They are marginalised in all spheres of life especially in education and an overwhelming societal rule hovering around her telling her that no matter what, her husband and household comes first. Brara states that most of the *Meira Paibis* are naïve and innocent. They work on their instincts. Therefore, whoever can trigger their motherly emotions can get them on their side. This kind of instinctive reaction comes in the way of their role as watchdogs. That is the reason why, in spite of such a strong body, there are no leaders among them – leaders of reckoning, not only of the *Meira Paibis* but also a leader of the whole society (Brara, 2005: 85).

Some human rights groups argue that these women's groups' have not raised gender-related issues because: "probably there are more pressing and important public issues," (*Macha Leima* (A Voluntary Women's Organisations, Manipur) 2002). This discourse is very typically patriarchal, where women's problems and inequity are always considered not important enough compared to other society problems and thus, left for

resolution at some later stage, after 'the more pressing and important public' issues are resolved. Brara also make a similar argument in a report (Banerjee, 2002). She said that the first *Nupi Lals* struggles were against the colonial rule. These *Nupi lals* fought for the rights of the meiteis. They were not aware of gender issues. The *Meira Paibis* followed the *Nupi Lals*. Members of *Meira Paibis* created a movement to fight against social evils. Therefore, they do not address gender discriminations and all inequalities are pushed under the carpet. These women are reluctant to rock the social norms of the society. They do not have any policy, or any ideology against domestic violence, polygamous liaisons and other male generated violence, which are prevalent in our societies. Neither do they address women's issues. Brara (2005: 86) argues that they are the organizations comprising only of women but not necessarily for women. There have been cases where men 'caught misbehaving' with a woman have been forced to marry her, despite being already married (Rajkumari, 2003). *Meira Paibis* according to the social norms made the victim to believe that she is given justice by marriage to the perpetrator of the crime, and made to live as 'second' wife and count for nothing. In yet another incident, when the undergrounds imposed restrictions on the dress code, Manipur has witnessed a ban on clothes such as salwar and sari and ordered that traditional meitei dress the '*phanek*' (wrap around) be worn by school girls and school teachers as part of the compulsory dress code so as to preserve their cultural identity. One girl not paying heed to it went about in salwar-kameez and some men taunted her in the public. The local *Meira Paibis* reacted to it by scolding the girl as to why she simply could not obey and wear the traditional dress (Brara, 2005: 87). *Meira Paibis* predominant role in our society is to see that peace and social order is maintained. They are yet to adopt the role of challenging the social customs which are loaded with gender biases and fight for an egalitarian social set-up. The social norms are upheld even when they are not women- friendly.

Taking all these into consideration, it cannot be said that Manipur women are adequately empowered. The empowerment of women, in patriarchal culture, is the first major issue we need to consider as it is the root cause of several problems in the family and society. *Meira Paibis* has been in the forefront fighting for the social justice despite the whole truth that her whole life is 'oriented towards marriage and domestic duties; the strings of customs, social opinions and attitude'. However, *Meira Paibis* have not

questioned the power of patriarchy, questions of certain traditional beliefs and social norms which suppress the rights and the freedom of women. Therefore, *Meira Paibis* need to regroup and think beyond maintaining social norms. It is time that they be agents of change and instruments of women liberation. Women empowerment can be realized only by women themselves with education and growing awareness. The empowerment of women can be measured from the importance given to women's education. Empowerment is a process by which women gain control over resources, challenge the idea of patriarchy and hence, participate in leadership, decision-making processes. Within the area of education a creative tension emerged between women's experiential knowledge and formal systems of knowledge. Access to information and literacy become part of women's attempt at redistributing power. Simultaneously, education got infused with or broadened its objectives to one that would: enhance the self-image of women, encourage women to become active participants in the process of change, build collective and alternative visions of their lived environment, question inequality and injustice and help women develop the skills to assert themselves.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for educated women to take part in this movement in order to fight against the social norms that which are not gender-friendly and introduce new traditional roles to keep pace and the equal power relation as that of men.

### **Role of Education in Economic Empowerment**

It is note worthy that women in Manipur play a critical role in economy and trade in the state. Women also control large proportions of trade in the state's essential commodities. The market places are central to women's community life and organizing activities. Women of Manipur have their own spaces in the central market famously known as the *Ima Keithel*. The women's market is the lifeline of Manipur's economy. However it is not only a place for daily business transaction but a hub for these women where they pool resources for major social, political and economic of the states that they partake. Most of the *Meira Paibis* (torch bearers) are the same women vendors of this market and their role in the economic, social and political matters of the state are incredible. The market have

led many of the mass movements, which characterize the history of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Manipur. Women's hold over economy has been a major contributory factor in their ability to function as agents of change in society.

However, what is unfortunate is that despite such vitality of Manipur women, the brunt of all misfortunes and hardships are borne by them. They have not been given their due recognition for all that they are worth which is why women of Manipur state are still suffering from inferior status and oppressions. Again to make matters grave, most men in Manipur accept that women should be home-bound and more often than not they misinterpret freedom of women. This often baffles the women of Manipur where on one hand they are restricted from being sociable and free and, on the other hand, they are obliged to go out and work to make both ends meet (Laishram, 2007).

**Table No. 4.1: Workforce Participation Rate, 2001**

	Rural	Urban	Combined
Male	50.07	45.17	48.91
Female	43.20	32.28	40.51
Total	46.72	38.71	44.79

Source: Population Census 2001; Office of the Register General, India

**Table No. 4.2: Distribution of workers (Main and Marginal) as percentage in Manipur, 2001**

		Percentage (2001)
Main Workers	Persons	28.50
	Male	38.45
	Female	18.58
Marginal Workers	Persons	10.22
	Male	6.72
	Female	13.70
Cultivators	Persons	17.87
	Male	20.92
	Female	13.62
Agricultural labourers	Persons	9.62
	Male	7.37
	female	12.74
Household industry	Persons	12.90
	Male	4.85
	Female	24.13
Total	Persons	38.71
	Male	45.17
	Female	32.28

Source: Census of India 2001, Manipur, Series 15, Provisional Population Totals, Paper 3 of 2001, Distribution of workers and non-workers, p.19

Shrinking opportunities and problems of unemployment shows increasing trend. Till the end of 2006 there are 5, 79,774 unemployed youths in the state out of which the female share is 1,60,110 (Directorate of Employment Exchange Manipur, 2007). Women are usually in a more disadvantaged position because of their low skill (technical) and low educational attainment. There are education differentials with female literacy at 59.70 percent and male literacy at 77.87 percent as per the 2001 census. The additional tasks women take up in the rising tide of unemployment is enormous. Maximum burden for sustaining the family is on women. This is evident in the *keithels* (Bazar). The table 4:1 shows high percentage of female workforce participation of 40.51% as compared to the National average of 15.28%. However, in table 4.2, women form the largest group of marginal workers. As per the census of India, 1991, female marginal workers constituted 57 percent. Men (38.45%) are outnumbering the women (18.58%) in the main workers. In the marginal workers section, it is the women (13.70%) that exceedingly outnumber the men (6.72%) (Census of India, 2001). In the cultivators sector, men (29.92%) are more than women (13.62%) while in the more labour intensive and less paid job of agricultural labourers women outnumber men. This indicates that women's works are more confined to meet the needs of the family whereas men engaged in the kind of job that maintains their prestige.



**Table 4.3: Percentages of State Government Employees by Gender and Grade in Manipur**

Year	Group A			Group B			Group C			Group D			Total		
	F	M	P	F	M	P	F	M	P	F	M	P	F	M	P
1995-96	9.77	90.23	100	4.69	95.31	100	19.84	80.16	100	5.82	94.18	100	13.54	86.46	100
1996-97	11.01	88.99	100	5.19	94.81	100	19.71	80.29	100	6.60	93.40	100	13.96	86.04	100
1997-98	11.18	88.82	100	5.05	94.95	100	19.86	80.14	100	6.91	93.09	100	14.15	85.85	100
1998-99	11.56	88.44	100	4.72	95.28	100	19.44	80.56	100	7.43	92.57	100	14.25	85.75	100
1999-00	13.03	86.97	100	7.05	92.95	100	20.79	79.21	100	9.53	90.47	100	15.79	84.21	100

Source: Directorate General of Employment and Training, Ministry of Labour Selected Socio- Economic Statistics, India

Note: Data for the years from 1995-96 to 1998-99 and 1999-2000 relates to 19 and 25 State Government Department respectively.

Table 4.3 clearly shows the dominance of men over women in the state in terms of jobs in the public sector. The figure makes us wonder where all the educated women have gone. Is it that in spite of their good/high qualifications they continue to accept the traditional role of women, and remain a house wife? Or are their husbands well settled that they do not find it necessary to work and earn anymore? Or are they not encouraged by their family members? Is it that the state government is male bigot and corrupted? However, it is also encouraging for women that in all the groups, the percentage of women are more in Group C with 20.79 in 1999-2000, followed by 13.03% (1999-2000) in group A which is the highest grade and label the highest officers in the state administrations. This shows that although there are few women in the Group A and Group B, women are represented in the white collar jobs and are achieving gradually. These few successful women can be an inspiration to many young self-motivated girls.

Many women in the urban areas are now employed in the government as well as in the private sectors, thereby, earning equally as that of men. It is disheartening to realize that majority of economically – active women work in the informal sector, whether self-employed or worker, women are exploited by everybody – from law enforcement authorities to petty moneylenders. They often work in the informal sector, for little or no wage, and are restricted to activities associated with their reproductive role. The cruellest

fact is that women not only work long hours, but many of them are not even considered to be working at all. There are also women employed in the formal sector, but are concentrated in unskilled and low-paid work in the industrial and service sectors, with little job security and few benefits. There are large wage differentials between men's and women's work, but these are larger in rural areas. For the majority of women engaged in paid economic activity, the fact that one is female means less pay than men for their work. Employing women has been a means of reducing costs and increasing profits. In urban and modern sectors, however, wage gaps are closing. Handloom products of Manipur have great demand all over the world. Unlike in many other parts of the country, this sector is mainly occupied by the women. These products are sold in the local market as well as exported to other places and the main place where the transactions of these products are done is the women market (*Ima Market*) in Imphal.

There are many constraints to the development of this industry like dependency on the outside markets for yarns, exploitation by the middlemen, low wages, lack of appropriate and improved equipment, decrease in the naturally available items due to environmental changes as wood, raw materials for handloom, and lack of capital for investments. Due to these constraints, women face several hardships to meet the challenges from their counterparts. Women are often termed as invisible worker with reference to their engagements in the domestic chores. Due to the unpaid economic activities women's work is not counted significant. An ILO (International Labour Organization) study estimated that the value of unpaid household work constitute 25-39% of the total gross national product in a developing country (Thomas *et al*, 2001: 125).

Educated women are represented in the tertiary sector also. Ironically, there are not many women occupying high position in white collar jobs as Director, Commission, or a Secretary. Women are either in the lower rank of the office hierarchy or in the economy which does not have much scope but is labour intensive (Brara, 2006: 22). Despite the Manipur women holding a high and free position as all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them, there are no big women

traders in the market and hardly any owners in the agricultural sectors of our economy. They still stand far below in the power equation in relation to the men.

Economic empowerment involves the ability of women to engage in income-generating activities which will give them a sustainable independent income. It is true that financial dependence is one of the key sources of the subordination of women. Today, due to the unemployment problem faced by many educated youths, women in particular, and due to the patriarch state government, many educated Manipur women are entering the market, employ in businesses such as selling of second hand clothes imported from neighbouring places, selling of Burma goods brought from Moreh by themselves, etc. Manipur women to a large extent takes their own decision to generate income of the family. On the way to national highway in Mao gate, or anywhere in Manipur it is envisaged that the majority shop owners are women of all ages. However, in other parts of north India, shops are mostly run by males alone (Sircar, 1984: 56). Although in Delhi city, many educated women including Manipur girls work in hospitality and management, aviation, BPOs and part-time jobs like salesgirls in show rooms, waitressing in restaurants, front-desk attendants, works in the corporate sectors, runs parlour, etc. due to the mobility of many vibrant youths belonging to small states in India in search of jobs so as sustain themselves and as well generate income to the family. Young girls and boys of Manipur earn while they learn. There are many cases where the young girls not only support their families by sending them some amount from their monthly salary but at the same time takes care of their siblings' expenses and on their education by staying together in a rent in the city away from home. Manipur women do not shy away from these economic activities in order to be economically independent and uplift the family status through financial support. Education not only helps women to gain knowledge but also provides the necessary courage and inner strength to face the challenges of life. It enables them to procure a job and supplement the income of the family and achieve social status. Economic independence paves way for the enjoyment of other freedoms.

There are also many educated women who studied in the Capital of India and are now employed in the country's premier institutions as lecturers, Research assistants, teaching in the private institutions, in banks, as air hostesses, receptionists in big hotels,

higher posts in the BPOs, journalists, etc. There are women who are in the non-governmental sectors working as the programme co-ordinators, programme officers, Manager and Directors of the organisations as well. Many of these educated youths work in the cities because of the dearth of job opportunities in their state, in addition to; corruption, extortion by undergrounds, bribery even for a petty post in the government job. Due to these reasons, parents also do not hesitate to send their educated daughters out of the state to seek brighter future for themselves. Many families are settled in metro cities due to employment in central government jobs. There are educated wives who are employed in the government sectors and some are in the private sectors. Education is widely perceived as an indicator of the status of women and even more importantly, as an agent for the empowerment of women by widening their knowledge and skills. It is this capability building aspect of education that appears to be consequence of women empowerment on indicators – economic participation and income earning capacity and participation in decision-making in politics and administration in the public sphere. Therefore, these educated women have been an inspiration for the young girls in the job scenario both in the government and private sectors.

There are some women who give loans to the needy women in the market and earn daily interest and thereby add to their family income. As a part of economic role educated housewives have cultured a traditional saving so called '*Marup*' in the form of money or material. Women contribute money weekly or monthly and received their money in turns (Chanu *et al* 2001: 125). Access to *Marup* is one of the key elements in empowering women and enabling them to participate in the market opportunities. The access to *Marup* has also reduced the problem of poverty as it enables the poor to enter the world of market. In the course of time, especially after Independence, with the change in economic structure of the state, women are exploring other means to maintain their families. There are some unemployed educated women who are running weaving cooperative societies by employing young women and girls. Prof. Bimola Devi states that there are some educated women who also have started their own business like establishing knitting, embroidery centres, etc. by applying modern tools and techniques with the impact of globalization, running an imported goods showroom on their own,

beauty parlours. Burgeoning women entrepreneurs employ girls in large numbers. There are some who manage girls and boys hostels and few other educated women running schools free of cost for the orphans. Also there are some educated women who run NGOs to empower the women through education, income generating facilities and health care programmes/campaigns. Income generating orientations are given by imparting vocational training like basketry, weaving, tailoring, knitting, needle works, pottery, plantation and other handicrafts etc.

Manipur State Commission for Women was established in the year 2006. The formation of the Commission is a laudable initiative of the state Government to help redress grievances of women. Ironically, the Chairperson, Dr. Sh. Jamini herself laments that the Commission is nothing but a 'Shame!' (Poknapham, 19<sup>th</sup> January, 2007). She lashes out the inactive authority delegated to her as a Chairperson, the inadequate provisions and infrastructure and their paralytic position without any legal authority, despite their enthusiasm and fervour to help solve the problems of Manipur. On the other hand, the Social Welfare Boards has done much for empowering women with regards to economy and other aspects. The Board works with various NGOs through various programs. It facilitates and strengthens the role of women through education and trainings, collective mobilization and awareness creation, income generating facilities and other support services. Some of the schemes include – hostel for girls and working women, assistance for education and training, assistance for economic empowerment, etc. The practice of self help group has traditionally known by the Meitei women as “*Marup* system” (micro financing) and for the tribal Christians through local church women’s group. In recent years many self help group have been formed, new trends of SHGs as per the norms and criteria of many financial institutions is a new economic movement in the state.

Some of the Manipur women struggling to make ends’ meet, have difficulty in availing loans and other financial assistance. Certain criteria and process of bank linkages are beyond their capacity. If such women are educated, they would be in a position to take credit from banks or financial institutions which offer loans to this group of people.

Such loans at present are not being fully utilised due to lack of knowledge among the women and insecurity felt by the lending institutions due to illiteracy of the borrower.

Hence, to empower the women economically, the government policy makers, planners, administrators and NGOs should formulate effective and feasible plans and programs to educate the illiterate Manipur women and empower them. The state government should give the educated women job opportunities without any prejudice. There is an urgent need to recognize women's contribution in economic development of our state and subsequently legalize their commendable roles and give them enough job opportunities for expansion.

### **Role of Education in Political Empowerment**

Since the early days, women have been playing an active role and have been empowered in the political affairs of the state and in the administration as well. Education helps in creating the awareness about the political and social issues of concern. Not that there have been many politicians, but women groups do have a say in many matters. This can be dated back to 1904 and 1939, when a very important event took place called the *Nupi Lal* (Women's war). It marked a very important event in the History of Manipur and on empowerment of Manipur women.

Since independence, the *Meira Paibi* women's movement is the unique response to the situation in Manipur brought on by conflict and militarization. The *Meira Paibis* began as a small group of women against the issue of alcoholism in 1975. Their role, however, expanded rapidly after 1980 when they campaigned for the release of a youth from the Army and against insurgency related violence. The *Meira Paibis* work to check excesses, random detention and harassment of men, especially youth at the hands of security personnel. The *Meira Paibis* have opposed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) consistently by public demonstrations, hunger fasts by individual members and protest meetings. One of them, Sharmila Chanu undertook "fast unto death" since September 2001 against this Act, and has become a symbol of non-violent resistance against the Armed Forces Act and the militarism it leads to. Sharmila was nominated to

the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize by Guwahati-based women's organisations, the North East Network, for her passionate desire for social reform and her work on the issues of women's empowerment, peace and Human rights, using non-violent methods (Buhril, 2007). Today she represents the voice of the thousands of voiceless people who are still braving the misuse of the "draconian law" in a state where the government's policy has been victimising the very people it tries to protect. The women's groups have systematically showed the abuse of this law, brought the plight of victims, taken up cases of rape by the Armed Forces and taken up issues at legal levels. These pro- women's movements that started with social issues, turned political and combines these issues according to the situation.

Another very important powerful women movement are the *Naga* and the *Kuki* Women's Movement. There are many examples where the Kuki Women's Union together with the Naga Women's Union, Manipur has played a crucial role during the Naga-Kuki clashes, where barbarism got unleashed in the name of the ethnic cleansing. Also during the ethnic clashes between Kuki and *Zomi* in Churachandpur District, the *Zomi* Mother's Association and Kuki Women's Union have been working for the people of both sides. They have distributed clothes and food during the conflicts. Women have played an important role in trying to get these communities together. An orphanage has been established by the Kuki Women's Union called *Sanga Muon* Inn for the children whose parents have been killed in the conflicts (Chinnu, 2005: 59). The present Naga Women's Organizations not only work hard to revitalize the social values but maximise the imposition of chauvinistic value systems in the society (Shimray, *Naga Women's Interventions*). Naga women organizations took the lead in social movements. Several women organizations have emerged right from the village level to form Naga women organization.

Today, the apex organizations like Naga Mother's Association (NMA), Naga Women's Union, Manipur (NWUM), etc are spearheading the various Naga women associations. The NMA with their theme "Shed no more Blood" have been actively involved in negotiating and mediating for peace and justice for the Nagas at the ongoing

factional clashes between two Naga insurgent groups. Their main objective is to serve as a channel of communication for Naga women's mutual interest and welfare; to eradicate social evil and exploitation; to promote active participation in the socio-political life of the Nagas and to maintain peaceful living; to create interest in the traditional socio-political life of the Nagas and maintain self identity, self-reliance and integrity. Also, the Naga women Associations have organized rallies and demonstrations for the withdrawal of the Armed Forces Special Power Act, conducted workshops on anti-drug trafficking, etc. Today, the NMA, NWUM are actively participating in the on-going cease-fire agreement between the Government of India and the Naga insurgents.

There are many students' union bodies/organizations of Manipur belonging to different communities in Delhi such as *Mao Students' Union Delhi*, *Tangkhul Katamnao Long*, *Kuki Students' Organisation*, *Naga Students' Union*, etc. Their main objective is to maintain social decorum amongst the communities and within communities in an 'alien' place. They actively participate in various protests on issues like Naga Sovereignty, displacement of the Kukis back home, sexual harassment, against AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Power Act), etc. The Student leaders submit Memorandum on the causes and negotiate with the Government of India for certain problems that are concerned with their social welfare back at home or in the cities. They also organise seminars and interactive meetings by inviting resource persons to orient the audience on topics that are of concern for the students' growth and knowledge. Education enables them to be aware and spread awareness of on-going socio-political issues in and around. Education channelize their potentials in the right direction them to empower themselves in decision making at the higher levels too. It is worth mentioning here that educated women are given space and place in the political realm. They actively participate in and help them in the decision making in the Students Body. Some of the students' organisations have young women candidates as the President or General Secretary of the union. There are cases where women leaders prove to be better than men in executing the institution. Thus, we can draw that because of education, the position of women is held high and is at par with their male counterparts in political spheres.



The women's associations are very strong and powerful bodies. But one also notices that empowerment of women; is inadequate in lieu of the tremendous works done by them. Manipur has hardly any women MLA's in the Legislative Assembly. The reasons are similar to that elsewhere and include lack of political consciousness and social restrictions where they do not have the necessary autonomy. Further, despite their activism, women continue to be dependent on their husbands for their political views. Gender inequality continues despite political activism (Devi Bimola, 2000: 11). Chankija (1990, p.24), a Naga woman had written: "Naga women are excluded from the decision-making processes both in the traditional and modern Naga society". They are excluded from the traditional village Councils and tribal parliament, and "they have not yet been accorded the respect due to them". Despite the Manipur women's active participation in politics for ages, they are not encouraged in decision making in the public life as far as political life is concerned. Patriarchal attitudes in the social and family spheres and women's lack of formal education and general awareness are among the biggest deterrents to women's political participation in India and Manipur in particular.

In fact, women empowerment is to give authority or power to women or to enhance courage and confidence to meet the global changes and needs. Thereby, participation of women in the decision making bodies is of paramount importance. In contemporary period, empowerment of women is a global concern. Education is the most effective means to enhance empowerment to women for political awareness; this awareness will enable women to elect their own political leaders who in turn will represent them in the top-notch law-making bodies.

### **Participation of Manipur Women in the Political Process**

The women of Manipur enjoyed universal adult franchise for the first time in 1948. In the pre-independence period, there was a strong demand from the people of Manipur to introduce democratic form of government in the state. In response to this demand, the Maharaja of Manipur framed the Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947 soon after India got independence. It was under this constitution, granting adult franchise was held in 1948. Under this constitutional act, both men and women who have attained the age of 21

years could exercise their franchise in electing the members of the Manipur State Assembly.

Women of Manipur have been participating in the political process of the state by casting their votes in every state election since 1952. Interestingly, by casting female voters always outnumbered the male voters in every election held up till 2002, wherein, out of 60 Assembly Constituencies, as much as 46 constituencies had large number of female voters in 2002. In 2000 and 2002 elections, female voters were 51.3% and 51.3% whereas male voters are 48.7% and 48.7% respectively (Election Report, Legislative Assembly Election, 2002).

In the parliamentary and Electoral College elections, from the year 1952 till 1998, only four women had contested - Ishwari Devi (1952), Lhingjaneng Gangte (1948), Anne Mangshatabam (1996) and Kim Gangte (1998). Out of these four women only Kim Gangte came out successfully and represented Manipur in the House of the People (Rural Women Upliftment Society Report (RWUS) 2004).

The number of women candidates contesting Assembly elections had also increased after Manipur attained its full fledged statehood in 1972. However, in the Assembly elections held in 1972, although no women candidate got elected in that year, the strength of women contestants increased in 1980 Assembly elections. There were eight women in both the hill and the valley constituencies. But the percentage of votes secured by them was not very high in both the valley and hills. Subsequently, the number of women candidates was reduced to five only in the 1984 Assembly elections and all four of these women candidates lost their security deposit.

Again in 1990 Assembly elections, out of seven women candidates contesting in both the hills and valley constituencies, only three women candidates lost their security deposit and one woman amongst them, Hangmila Shaiza (wife of former CM), was elected from Ukhrul Constituency. She was the first woman to be elected to the Legislative Assembly after Manipur attained statehood in 1972. In the by-election held in 1992 from the Oinam Constituency, after the death of the sitting MLA, K. Bira Singh's

wife, K. Apabi Devi was elected on the congress ticket. Thus the number of women members in the Legislative Assembly had increased into two.

In recent times, one Ms. Leima Devi was elected in 2000 Assembly Election (Election Result 2002). From the above Assembly election reports, it can be assumed that, till today, despite the number of female voters being higher than male voters, only three women candidates were elected and these women were the wives of MPs, MLAs or Ministers except for Kim Gangte (MP, 1998). No other common women are elected. Therefore, there should be growth of political consciousness among the women voters supporting the women candidates according to their 'capabilities' and irrespective of their political background.

**Table 1:1.** The few Manipur Women Representatives in the Legislative Assembly since Independence.

Name	Remarkd in the political History		Year	Background
Hangmila Shaiza	First women MLA	State Assembly	1990	Political family
K.Apabi Devi	First women minister of state	State assembly	1995	Political family
W.Leima Devi	First women cabinet minister	State assembly	2002	Political family
O.Landhoni Devi	First ever highest vote	State assembly	2007	Political family
Kim Gangte	First women MP	Lok sabha	1998	Non- political family

Source: L.Muhindro Singh, *Participation of Women in active politics in Manipur: A Question of Women Empowerment*. The Sangai Express, Imphal, Saturday, March 29, 2008

There is a lone woman MLA, O.Landhoni Devi, elected in 2007, in the entire 60 member Legislative Assembly. In short, there are very few women representatives in the Legislative Assembly in Manipur. These few woman representatives do not have enough strength to initiate the cause of women and therefore, there is a need to mobilize support groups and boost their confidence. Bhattacharya (2008: 26) states, "If there are more women in Parliament, interaction between men and women will happen much more in the public sphere. This is the democratic value that would probably be enhanced if we have more women members". Likewise, if more Manipur women represent in the legislatures

they will be there not just to raise women's issues but also to promote greater interaction between women's issues and the general public and between men and women.

## **Panchayati Raj**

In the four districts of Manipur-Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur there are local bodies, like Municipalities and Panchayats especially after the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992 and 1993. As such, 33% of the total seats were kept reserved for women. There are 7 Municipality Councils and 27 Nagar Panchayats (Small Town Committee). In 1995 election for Municipality/Nagar Panchayats, only 40 women out of 90 were elected in the Municipality Council and 66 women out of 190 were elected in the Nagar Panchayats.

These women were elected on the basis of reservation. Again in 1997, the Zilla Parishad and Gram Panchayat elections were held. 166 women were elected as Pradhan and 1557 as Gram Panchayat member and 16 as Zilla Parishad members were elected. In 2002 Zilla Parishad and Gram Panchayat elections, 23 women out of 61 were elected in the Zilla Parishad and 699 out of 1707 were elected in the Gram Panchayat (Dr. N. Vijaylakshmi Brara, 2001).

On the other hand, for the rural women in Manipur political participation is a far distant dream. There is no Panchayati Raj system and all the hill districts and the district autonomous council does not function properly. Although there are provisions for reservation of seats for women under the Village Authority Act, it has not been implemented. The Village Authority comprised of the chief and his councillors where membership is totally nil.

The prevailing political scenario is generally male – oriented and derives a Political philosophy that confines women and women's concerns to the private sphere of domesticity. Thus, political status of women remains low in spite of the participation of women in the local bodies, as a result of the reservation provided by the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts of the Constitution of India.

The representation of women in Panchayat, Zilla Parishad etc. could not break much ice as the women representations failed to overcome the corrupt political culture, thus diminishing their effectiveness in these institutions (Brara, 2005: 87). Manipur women cross 33% reservation in getting elected as leaders in the level of the local self-government. Nevertheless, these representations of women in Panchayat have not been able to break the patriarchal hegemonizing ideology, which encompasses the state machinery as well as the family. We should also not forget that, albeit their representations in the Panchayat, they are marginalised in all spheres of life, especially in education and gender ideology; looking after the husbands and family. Brara argues that *Meira Paibis* known for its strong organizations does not have any women leaders of reckoning in the Panchayat bodies (Brara, *The Manipur Experience*). Brara was also pessimistic about the future of the *Meira Paibis* because hardly any educated women are join the movement. In formal politics women are totally absent; Manipur women are not present in any apex legislative bodies (Banerjee, 2000).

Notwithstanding this fact, this constitutional provision has been exempted from the hill areas of Manipur on the ground that these districts have their own traditional system of local self- government, which are egalitarian in character. That there is a wide gap between the image projected and the facts on the ground is demonstrated by the traditional exclusion of women from these local bodies. The Naga Women's Union as well as the Kuki Women are fighting hard to amend their customary laws since it does not justify the women, although they feel that it helps in maintaining the identity of their different groups but need to change and amend along with the changing time.

Despite women being highly educated and occupying important positions, political parties and organisations are still dominated by men. Less than a handful of the women are in electoral politics. This reflects Manipur women's position in decision making at the top-notch level where they have no say. Women may have some influence in the family level but in most cases it is the man who takes the ultimate decision. At the village level also, women have no place in the traditional village council. The same is true for almost all the tribal communities in the Indian Subcontinent. This gives an

impression that there have been no efforts either by our government or by our men civil society members to empower the women in the political realm. Chandra (1997: 398) argues that empowerment could be a planning goal in the sense that the governmental support is extended to the voluntary sector as well, both in the field of implementation as well as in policy formation. Empowering women could, thus, be through economic intervention as well as through integrated intervention. The 1990s have new challenges to be faced. With the help of lessons learnt we have to march forward. With women in the roles of decision-making and implementation, significant change in public policy in favour of women is bound to follow'. Hence, the need of the hour to empower Manipur women is to provide necessary political education and proper orientation. Further political will on the part of administrators to contain male domination and enlarge avenues for the women just by negating gender weakness may help to a large extent in the empowerment of women. The following discussion will briefly look at the problems which women face in their path to empowerment.

### **Problems of Empowerment of Manipur Women**

Women face various obstacles and impediments in their way to get access to material resources and achieve dignified status, thus thwarting their empowerment. The phenomenon of women's empowerment has attracted massive attention in recent years. So much has been heard and so much have been done to uplift women socially, politically, economically and culturally all over the world. Women today, irrespective of their class, has been doing well in academics, topping the result-sheets everywhere; yet when it comes to counting people at the top of their profession women do not seem to be present particularly in Manipur State. If this is the situation, how far can the rest of women be given opportunities expected to measure up to the hopes and expectations that rest on them? There are numbers of factors that hold back women.

Manipur is a patriarchal society. This age-old patriarchal structure of the society has gradually led to gender inequality. Manipur women's lives are centred on domestic chores, unmistakably bound by their families. Marriage is the ultimate goal for women.

In many Indian states, she is denied the right to birth itself. Rajasthan has practiced female foeticide, female infanticide for generations if not centuries so have Punjab, Bihar, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. These are the millions missing women (cited by Professor Amartya Sen). This social evil practice is not only prevalent among the rich but even the poorest also are not free of the crime of female infanticide (Dhagamwar, 1996: 461). However, although in Manipur, male are given preferences than female in the field of education, Manipur is free from female foeticide, female infanticide and the custom of child marriage. But many women do marry at a young age in Manipur. Thus, marriage at the young age is the bane of a youth's life. It is another reason why the young girls are less educated and are less empowered.

The Indian girls in all castes, all religions are subjected to polygamy. The practice of Polygamy is common in Manipur society especially among the meiteis. It is the great prestige for Men in Manipur to have more than one wife (Brara, 2005: 91). Only, men folk have the freedom to practice polygamy whereas women are charged and judged with adultery if she is found to have extra-marital affairs with another man. Polygamy thus is an obstacle in women's empowerment.

The main hurdle in the empowerment in domestic as well as in political front is the customary laws. Naga society is patrilineal and male ascendancy is complete with them. The tradition of Naga society expects women to be 'obedient' and 'submissive'. Naga women perform the role of a wife, mother, child-bearer, food producer and household manager (Shimray, 2004: 1704). Naga women do not have the right to inherit parents' properties. Divorce compounds the miseries. Even in majority of the Kuki tribes if a woman does not have a son, inheritance by the wife and daughter are impossible. The widow has to follow the commands of the male inheritor who then has the custody of the children as well as the property along with the pension of her husband or else she is left in lurch (Chinu, 2005: 60). Naga customary laws are gender discriminatory and the Government is codifying these. Women are not represented to a large extent in their village *Ho Ho* (Councils) of their tribes and at district level. Thus, customary laws act as barriers to the empowerment of women.

There are also certain social restrictions and religious belief that hinders the empowerment of women. In the Christian religion, women are generally not encouraged to become a priest or the head of the Church. Women are considered incapable to handle the responsibilities of a leader in the church. Women are carriers of cultural symbols, and values and family rituals like *Mangba-Sengba* (pure-impure) are to be carried out by the daughter-in-law under strict supervision of the mother-in-law (Bimola Devi, p.10). Women bear the complete responsibility for all housework and childbearing and child care. By tradition women are prohibited to eat the things which are offered to family 'god' at the time of *Apokpa Khurumba* (Worship of family God). The right side of the meitei household is reserved for the son. Women are not allowed to get remarried through the socially recognised ritual process. Women should not hang their *Phaneks* (wrap around) in front of the house for drying in the sun because it is inauspicious for men etc. These social restrictions placed women at an inferior position and acknowledge women as subordinate to men.

Identity is another area where women are discriminated against. Women's identity and status is linked to that of her father/husband and her community/society exercises control over this. She has little independent status, autonomy or agency. There is need to enhance empowerment of women in different areas through education in the socio-economic and political aspects. Though women are not on the better platform in the society, Manipur women are playing different roles at their best. In general, women of different sections of the society have taken concerted effort to harmonize conflicts and social disorders in Manipur. From the discussion above, we can conclude that despite facing various handicaps and impediments the women of Manipur also have various achievements to boast of. As we saw there has been a significant change in the status of women in social, economic and political spheres of life. These changes can be attributed to the educational achievements attained by these women. Thus, we can see a direct link between education and empowerment of women.



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The present study has attempted to analyse the role of education in empowering Manipur women. The study pointed out that the Manipur women enjoy high distinctive position in socio-economic, religio-cultural and political life from time immemorial. However, due to the existence of patriarchal society, they are not free from the subordinate position in all aspects. But in the area of education although women's education is far from satisfactory, it is still better than all India average and many states. This proves that the position of women in the Manipur society is better than women in other parts of India. The study attempted to establish that education is an important factor which empowers women for emancipation. It helps to break down and break away from the traditional barriers and take up desired roles in the modern social, economic and political spheres of life.

The present study was divided into five chapters including Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter initiated the analysis of various problems and limitations faced by the people in the Manipur society, especially the problems of women that are the cause of concern. It establishes the fact that, women suffer from male-oriented social norms, gender discriminatory customary laws, social restrictions, unemployment, insurgencies, drugs addiction, degradation of moral values and so on. It was because of these limitations that power equation between male and female cannot be equated. Therefore, as there is a need to empower women, this chapter has tried to understand and conceptualise the term 'empowerment' and its concomitant determinants. The chapter also highlights on various programs and policies formulated by the Indian government for women's education since independence and end by conceptualising the term 'education' in Indian context and its positive role in empowering women in the social, economic and political spheres.

Following this the second chapter presents a general social profile of Manipur

women. It explains the social position of Manipur women, their economic activities and their participation in political activities. We have looked at how the social position of women in the family and outside the family has its roots in history; how women perform all the domestic works in the family irrespective of their class and status. The increasing awareness of the value of women education and its beneficial contributions in the family and for social upliftment is highlighted. We have discussed the important role played by many women organisations like *Meira Paibi*, *Naga Women Union* and *Kuki Women Association* during conflict situations and the achievements attained by individuals in various spheres like sports, economic front and political sphere. We have also looked at the marriage system, family structure and religious systems prevalent in Manipur among various communities. Nonetheless, it was found that women are not free from the chain of bondages in the patriarchal society.

Apart from this, second chapter discusses the economic activities of women. We have explained the active participation of two *Nupi Lals* movement against the and British administration in Manipur which led to the setting up of '*Khwairamband Bazar*' at Imphal in 1950. This chapter analyses on the various economic activities performed by the women since independence and established that they still stand far below in the power equation in relation to their male counterparts in this sphere. Subsequently, the chapter also discusses the participation of women in political activities during the Ancient Period to Post-Colonial period. Although, the socio-cultural, economic and political tradition of Manipur allows women to take up whatever task they want to, one common thread connecting them is patriarchy and male dominance which leads to the subordination of women and their exploitation and repression. Thus, we find that in spite of having a position better than women from other parts of India; they are still not free from male dominance and related social handicaps. Despite contributing immensely in all the spheres of life, Manipur women are still not empowered in the true sense, the primary cause being the lack of education and exposure to liberating and emancipating ideas from the outer world.

The third chapter specifically analyses the educational status of Manipur women.

It briefly outlines the progress of women education from Pre-British Period to the contemporary period. The chapter attempts at understanding the profile of women's education through data from government reports. The reports showed increased from 2.40% in 1951 to 59.70% in 2001. Male literacy rate too, have increased from 20.80% in 1951 to 77.87% in 2001. However, there is gap between the literacy rate between male and female. The importance of education in empowering women was realised only during the colonial rule, later taking up majority by the independent Indian Government. Thus we see increased emphasis towards educating women with the help of various policies and programs of the government. This chapter has analysed the reports of female literacy rate, Girls'/Women's Institutions, female teachers, enrolment and Dropout rates. All these indicators reveal various facets which help and hinder the empowerment of women through educational attainments.

The fourth chapter discusses the role of education in empowering women of Manipur. The chapter opens with a concise explanation on why women's contributions have failed to gain recognition, on one hand and how they have been identified as key agents of sustainable development because of education, on the other hand. Then it analyses the role of education in social empowerment. We have found that social status of women has improved due to their educational attainments. It has helped to break traditional handicaps and gain more respectability in the domain of family affairs. We have also found that with the realisation of the significance of education by the parents and government of India on girls' education, social change has taken place. Educated women today are climbing success ladders in all spheres. Further discussions were made on the role of various collective groups of women fighting for social justice, and sensitising people on women's issues and various activities performed by the students outside the state. Despite their active participation, it was found that women are 'soft targets', hence, more educated women need to challenge the social norms which are not gender friendly. Education helps not only to preserve the traditions but enables to introduce new social norms and values to co-opt with the needs of time.

Further we discussed on the role of education in economic empowerment. We

have looked at the critical role played by the women in economy and trade in the state. This chapter also explains the numerous brunts of all misfortunes and hardships borne by them due to their inferior position in the society. Further, the chapter highlights the various economic activities in which the educated women are engaged in within and outside the state at the present time. They have not only helped in generating family income but are also contributing tremendously to the economy of the state and nation through their active participation in the economic aspects. There are many who are economically independent. We have found that educated women though few in numbers also hold white collar jobs.

This chapter also discusses the role of education in political empowerment and elucidate on the participation of women in the political process including Panchayati Raj. We have found out that certain group of collective women are actively participating in the political aspects through their selfless services for the maintenance of peace in the society. They step out of the private domain proving their capabilities equivalent to their male counterparts. However, further discussion pointed out that Manipur has hardly produced any women MLA's in the Legislative Assembly. Though, they have crossed 33% reservation in getting elected as leaders in the local-self government, they are still marginalised in all sphere of life, especially in education and gender ideology. Thus, the chapter explains the different hurdles which come in the way of empowering Manipur women. Despite various handicaps and impediments, the women of Manipur also have various achievements to boast of.

In the end, we can conclude that women enjoy greater position than any women in other parts of India. However, one cannot relate their higher status with the term 'empowerment' because it holds deeper and more powerful meaning than just the 'superficial liberty' that they continue to enjoy. Empowerment is the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance. It means to be able to control self; self identity, self image, self dignity, and awareness of their rights, gain knowledge, able to access the available resources, decision making in socio-economic and political aspects both in the primary and higher level and thus, enjoy



equal footing with men. However, it can be drawn that Manipur women just enjoy the superficial social activities because there are still many unseen problems in the private as well as in the public spheres. The women's invisible suffering thus needs to be reconsidered.

Still women have a long way to go and achieve in life. Educated Manipur women are not free from numerous 'seen' and 'unseen' problems and therefore, the urgency to examine the underlying issues concerning women. It is essential to probe further to understand why despite women getting better education opportunities in Manipur society and enjoying high status in all spheres, they are not adequately empowered in socio-economic and political arenas. Manipur is a patriarchal society and so women are considered inferior to men and continue to hold subordinate position in the society. They fall into the trap of many evil social practices and male oriented social systems which aggravates the socio-economic problems and restrain Manipur women from pursuing higher education and become more empowered.

Traditional activities should continue in practice and should also be preserved but with the change of time, educated women should also challenge the social norms and values that are gender discriminatory and introduce new social norms in order to cope up with the present world. More of them should participate in sensitising the women issues by means of organising seminars, workshops, protests on women causes, etc. *Meira Paibi* is a very powerful women organisation for social justice led by women of 50 years and above with little or no formal education. Women issues in particular so far have not carved a niche in their fights. Therefore, more educated women participation is essential to substantiate and strengthen pro-women movements. Problems of women can be reduced and rights of women can be acquired if more women organisations comprising of educated women are formed for women, and civil society is encouraged to participate in women's issues and sensitize the society.

The disempowerment of women is not only because of the socio-economic, religio-cultural and political constraints but women themselves are also to be blamed to a

certain extent. It is not only the masculine power which is to be considered superior, but women in accord and in collective should also thrive in feminine power, be it in showing love, compassion or kindness. Therefore, women should collectively be committed for the cause of their objectives and their rights. This can help them achieve social justice in particular and they can be empowered on their own and not superficially empowered under the pressure of any elements. Women should not let their feminine traits be a stumbling block in the struggle for their rights. It should be used as a tool through education to empowerment, since in it, lies the mystery of feminine power i.e. love and power.

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