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Research Article



Women in the Politics: Meitei Women of Manipur

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Abstract

Meitei society is a patriarchal society with strong matrimonial practice. In every aspect of life women played a major role. Most of the deities of Meitei community are female goddess which exhibits the importance of women. In the aspects of economic, social, cultural and even in politics the Meitei women play prominent role in form of symbolic mother. Nevertheless, women's political contribution had not been fully express. Either it may be during the course of agitation or aftermath of agitation the decision and direction was often taken by the male folk who are behind them. Indeed, Manipuri women mainly Meitei women are brave and often indulge in activism for better society. When the world began the feminist movement, Meitei women are in the verse of transformation from the family responsibility to more social responsibility. In the anal of Manipur history, Meitei women are active in social movement, economic, politics and safeguard of the nation, yet their political participation remains relatively. Despite this the Meitei women continued to contribute in movements of safeguarding territorial integrity, human rights protections, movement against Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958, movement for Inner Line Permit System, removal of Protected Area Permit, against the intoxicant and drug abuses and empowering women during ethnic conflict. Meitei women continued to make contribution in the discourse of Manipur politics without desirable political representation.

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INTRODUCTION

Meitei are inhabited at Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram (Meitei, n.d.)^[1] in India and inhabited at Myanmar and Bangladesh (Khelen, 2008)^[2]. Meitei society in Manipur is a patriarchal society with strong matrimonial practice. It can be seen from the political dominance by man and economic dominance by the women. From time immemorial women have full control over the market and food supplies (Huidrom Dasu, Personal Communication 12th February, 2026). In every aspect of life women have played a major role be in social, political, education, sports, economics, etc. (Telem Ibeyaima, Personal Communication 11th January, 2026). Meitei women are active in every aspects of life. They have contributed immensely to the state of Manipur.

Manipur uniquely prides herself of her own indigenous women's enduring socio-economic roles and their inseparable historic experiences significantly with the state's wider political exigencies from time to time, which have always been a fascination to the observer of alien societies (Sudhir, 2012, p. 152)^[4]. Manipur's women stage an uprising in the year 1904 against the 'Lallup System' of Manipur, freeing the Meitei male folk from the clutch of British as first *Nupi Lan*. This was then followed by the second wave of Meitei women's uprising in 1939 as second *Nupi Lan* against the export of rice grain from Manipur.

Sensing the important role of women in Manipur society Hijam Irabot founded Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (Sanajaoba, n.d.)^[3], and several other women's organisation comes up. Women initiated two *Nupi Lan* (women's agitation) movements of 1904 and 1939, Nisha Band an anti-liquor movements the Meira Paibi. Despite all this still women political participation in the decision making level is still low. Nevertheless, in religious practice of Meitei community the female goddess took the important role. Further, in the aspects of economic, social, cultural and even in politics the Meitei women plays prominent role in form of symbolic mother.

The Meitei women are politically active and had contributed immensely. But coming the role taken as a decision making part it is minimal. Despite active participation, the decision and direction was often guided by the male folk. Meitei women are brave and often indulge in every form of movement for betterment of the society. This exhibited for not requirement of women empowerment movement in Manipur.

Women of Meitei society have been evolving from ceremonial status to responsive role in society. Unlike other community even the matrimonial society did not carries the weigh that had carried by the Meitei women. The role of women in Meitei society is multi-dimensional ranging from household chores to kid raising and responsible member of the society. The issue and question of empowerment of women in Meitei society have taken to another turn.

From time immemorial if a woman is elope for several time still counted as pure and honorable other society. Having this status women enjoyed immense status. But if look on how far the decisions of the Meitei society are taken by women is still a matter of concern. Despite this high status woman political participation is still very low. Yet women position in Manipur

is seem to be on the verse of transformation from the family responsibility to more political and social responsibility.

The Meitei society always encourages the active participation of women in every aspects of life. History of Nupi Lan, Nisha Band, Meira Paibi, women sport personality, women's role in social gathering are the examples of women engagement in social, economic, politics sphere, and safeguard of the nation, yet their political participation remains relatively low.

Despite minimal political participation in decision making level, the Meitei women continued to contribute in movements of safeguarding territorial integrity, human rights protections, movement against Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958, movement for Inner Line Permit System, removal of Protected Area Permit, against the intoxicant and drug abuses and empowerment of women.

During each and every ethnic conflict occurs in Manipur the women are often at forefront to pacify the conflicting community for amicable solution. Meitei women continued to make contribution in the discourse of Manipur politics without desirable political representation. Several laws have come up for the protection of women from any form of discrimination, alienation and subjugation. With the prevailing consciousness level of Meitei women, it would be an eye opening for the other women in world to be learned from the Meitei women.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ningombam Rojibala (2022)^[5] article, 'Meetei Women in the Political Sphere of Manipur' stated that, "History has its testimony to the active participation of Meetei women during social and political crises in the conflict-ridden society of Manipur. The historic events of *Nupi lal* (women's war) 1904 and 1939 during the British colonial period of Manipur and the nude protest by a group of Meetei women at the western gate of Kangla in 2004 are worth mentioning. Such an active engagement of Meetei women in the political sphere of society, which is considered to be the world of men, makes them appear to challenge the delineation of the two worlds—'ghar and bahir', the home and the world—delineated for women and men, respectively. While it would be facile to judge the status of Meetei women based on their ostensibly visible appearances, there is no simple answer to the question of whether they are/are not bound by the boundaries of the home and the world. This article investigates the nature of Meetei women's engagement in the political sphere to see if their actions are in strict adherence to feminist political ideologies".

Bit Irom (n.d.)^[6] article, "Manipuri Women in Political and Sporting Activities" stated that, "There are quite differences for the Manipuri women in the field of political arena and sporting activities. There is limited participation of Manipuri women in state politics that only one woman MLA is seen in the 60 member state assembly which indicated that the women empowerment in Manipur is still nil in politics. Wahengbam Leima Devi, the lone woman lawmaker in the state assembly has become the first women cabinet minister in the state. She is now holding the charge of Loktak Development Authority and Directorate of Information and Public Relations. She is

enjoying cold comfort with burning heart in the Okram Ibobi led council of ministries”.

Ningthoujam Krishnakumari Devi (n.d.) [7]. “Politics of Gender Representation in Manipur with Special Reference to Meitei Women” stated that, The contribution of women folks in the making of political history of the Meitei community and Manipur as a whole is accepted throughout the ages and across various political communities. However, mere idolism or symbolism of womanhood while wrapping and restricting women under patriarchy rules make little sense unless they are made parallel partnership of political responsibility and ownership alongside their male folks. Numbers of unfavorable and discouraging family and social norms restrict Meitei women to mere and mute voters in the state. In fact, keeping aside the political obligations their political rights and shares are unheard and unseen; Meitei women still remain incapable to escape from the same old political walls like other communities at par. The truth is explicitly manifested by the fact that only four women could become MLA’s in the State Assembly from 1972 to 2007. And none of the four women could see a woman colleague in the same term. These women members were either widows of powerful political leaders or heir of particularly rich and powerful families. The first woman MLA was elected in 1990 followed by another one in the 1991 by election and one each in the 2002 and 2007 State Assembly elections. No wonder, the state never had a woman member of the Parliament since its inception. But, the story of the voting turnouts of women folks in all the assembly elections was different. Women outnumbered the male folks and indeed identified their franchise power well ahead of their male folks. For example, in the 2002 general election the ratio of male and female voters were 48.7% and 51.3% respectively. However, a positive signal had emerged since the Union Cabinet’s amendment in favour of thirty three percent reservation policy for women in the grassroots political participation. The thesis is an attempt to find out a close answer to the problem of marginalization of Meitei women while trying to analyze and examine the underlying socio-economic, cultural and political problems of the tormented state. The study had tried and linked all the possible angles that directly or indirectly connected to the concept of gender politics and the problem of equality of gender representation. As modern democracy foresees gender equality as par to the greatest cause of freedom, each political problem of existence, growth and inheritance of women folks must be dealt under the modern democratic paradigm”.

RESEARCH GAP

All the scholar and researcher had define there is a minimal political representation of women but none has stated about of the reason for women low political participation in decision making level. This paper will try to hunt out the reason behind the poor political representation of women in Manipur politics.

Patrilineal in Form and Matrilineal in Practice of Meitei Society

Family name of Meitei society is taken from the father side. Once a women married then the women is known by the men’s

identity and all the offspring are given the title of father. After marriage women are destine to live at men’s house till she died. Father is a bread earner and mother took the responsibility of raising the kids. Nevertheless there is has several household wherein both the husband and wife earn and raise their offspring collectively.

In a family if their new born baby is male or female matter least both sons and daughter are treated equally. Male head of the family took the decision of family in consultation with their respective life partner and even included all the female folk of the family. In time of marriage it is entirely the mother, sisters, aunts and grandmother that took the final decision. The women have liberty to choose life partner.

The social gathering like Thabal Chongba, Leikai Chak Chanaba, Leikai Singyen, Sumang Lila, Eshei Nongmai, Epom, etc. all are mainly organised by the female of Meitei society. This exhibit the strong women status and role in Meitei society. These practices have passed down when the state of Manipur enter the phase of political turmoil. Once the role played for social service now turn to the political service to be render by the women folk of Meitei. Thus in this way Meitei women political activism became more prominent and loud. Beginning from Nupi Lan to Meira Paibi Meitei women had taken the responsibility that men folk are hard to take.

Meitei Women and Politics

Meitei women by virtue of culture are allowed and welcome to take initiatives in every field; this can be better understood from the following argument.

1. Ambiguity in Power:

The women folk are mainly mean for foot soldier. They are general work for political agenda rather than the role of decision making.

2. Low Representation:

Women are hyper active and prominent when it comes to public protest. In terms of election contesting often remark as unwise for women folk. Women are not fated to fully indulge in the politics, rather they belief that they are the vanguard. If anything wrongful is going to occur then the women folk will appear to resolve the issues.

3. Meant for Propagation not for Representation:

Meitei women occupies a unique position in the society more complex paradoxical position of tension diffusion, problem solver, vanguard of peace, mediator, facilitator, etc. within the patriarchal limitations.

4. Best Suited For Cultural Preservation and Economic Activism Than Political Decision Maker:

Meitei women prioritize their role in preserving culture and fostering community solidarity over holding political power. Further, they belief to act as economic backbone, indulge in community welfare and correcting the wrong doing of anyone rather than becoming political leader. Furthermore, they belief even all the political leader respected them so they think it is not necessary to become a political leader.

Women from the Paradigm of Politics in Ethnic Conflict and Armed Violence

It was the women who often come forward for voluntary assistance in any form of ethnic conflict. The rest of community in recent time have started imitating the working pattern of Meitei women in the wake of ethnic violence. The ethnic clash of 1993 Meitei and Muslim and Naga and Kuki none of the other ethnic community women folk have come forward to diffuse the tension or assist in the clashes (Meira Paibi Anonymous, Personal Communication, 15th March 2026). The recent ethnic clash of Kuki-Meitei of 2023 and Naga-Kuki of 2026 several women folk come forward holding stick and torch in hand trying to provide maximum assistance to their respective ethnic.

The women are not behind in handling the security forces during the time of ethnic clash and clashes with the security forces. The women often bloc the security forces to carried out their duties. The blockade of security forces are justified by the claim that the security forces is sided with the Suspension of Operation signatory Kuki base Armed insurgent groups. Mainly the Naga and Meitei women folk are disturbing the free movement and duty performance of the Assam Rifles and central security forces. While the women folk of Kuki community obstruct and not welcome the state forces for being bias. Whether the state or central security force is working under the specific orders or on bias may require other research.

CONCLUSION

Meitei women are essentially strong and determinant political actors often playing the role of third eye of the democratic set up of Manipur. They are the crucial forces for economic, justice, culture, political, peace and empowerment. Meitei women are politically very active be it election campaign or protest. They often acted as a resilience of community level activism. They carry strong social, political and economic voice which gave them the positions of carrying the role model of delivering justice. They may be regarded as a champion of managing economic enterprises, household, preserving culture, decision maker of the political wheel, influencer of political outcome, guardian of human rights, and ombudsman of governance.

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