Meitei Women And Culture of Manipur

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Introduction
The concept of Culture is developed by beliefs, faith, practices, customs, way to live, language, food habits, etc. The Cultural growth gave identity to the societies. Through the generation it has been noted that women are the one who carry the culture to generation to generation at different forms and at different level. Women of Manipur has come under the influences of cultures at various times and contributed to the growth of civilization. Women in Manipur seem to enjoy greater mobility and visibility than women of other communities in the country. According to census 2011, the sex ratio of Manipur is 987 against all India with 940. Looking at the literacy rate women of Manipur is much higher with 59.70 than the national level 54.28. Thus, it is often cited to portray a picture of equity between men and women in the region and has given rise to the presumption that discrimination against women is not a major concern in the area however, the region under the shadow of conflicts has witnessed a resurgence of patriarchal values, norms which have brought after women of other communities in the country.

Meitei Women of Manipur in Pre-Hindu period
Manipur presents a unique cultural, ethnic, linguistics and religious profile of India. Before the advent of Hinduism following the event of oath taking known as Nongkhrang Iruppa in 1724 A.D during the reign of King Pamheiba, the Meiteis professed their traditional Sanamahi religion. While the Sanamahi, (the traditional God) trait prevailed over majority of the people in the valley of Manipur particularly among the Meitei.

Looking at the conditions of Meitei women in Manipur, there was a reflection of high status seen among women in pre-Hindu period. During the pre-Hindu period, though the patriarchal concept was there, women status was equally better with counterpart men. In 1715, during the Garib Niwaz (Pamheiba), in Manipur there used to have four kinds of court over and above the king court (Kuchu) which is the highest. The courts were: (i) Courts concerning religious matters, (ii) Court concerning secular matters, (iii) Court for females, (iv) Military courts. (Singh, 1978).Women had their own courtship (no.iii) where the women related issues and family matters were resolved at the Maharani court. Only women who are in courtship took the decisions, if in case, they could not solve the matter then only the matter was being referred to King.

In pre-Hindu period society, women played a major role in religion. This role is evident from the dominance of women in the goddess cult and in ‘Umang Lai Haraona’, umang ‘forest’ lai ‘diety’ haraoba ‘to please’ (a festival for worshipping Pre-Hindu deities). In this role of priestess is considered much more important than that of the priest (Parrot, 1980). It was also seen that not only were women who believed to have the power to communicate with spirits and supernatural beings, but women were so central that when a priest performed the rituals of Lai Haraoba the priest usually dressed himself as a priestess. The concept of purity and impurity was not seen much before. So women perform all the deities’ duties.

In earlier Meitei society, the title used by women, the first one refers to clans and the later family names or linage. In a patriarchal society, the women’s family name or surname is lost at marriage, as the social norms require them to adopt the name of husband after marriage. It’s mentioned that the retention of the family name after marriage is one of the rights of being a male i.e., only men have real names. But in Meitei custom, after the marriage woman does not have to lose her family name. eg. Miss Naorem, Rani Devi marries Mr. Irom Shanta Singh, then her name would be Naorem Ningol Irom ongbi Rani ‘Naorem (menaing-Rani married to Irom’ where Irom is the family name of the husband). It was also seen to have been the Meitei custom for husbands and wives to address one another using their respective personal names.

Women played a very important role, with their participation going away beyond managing economics of the house. When the male head of a family is killed or imprisoned, the mother has to fill in the gap caused by the patriarch’s absence. She has to work to bring up the children. It is a necessity that cannot be overlooked. In the old days, since Manipur was often at war to keep off invaders and protect its borders, the number of families with women as the heads was comparatively high. This resulted in women coming out of the house to earn livelihood. Internal trade was carried on essentially by women in the various open bazaars (market) in the valley. In the market all selling and buying are done by women.
And a great number of markets were established during the period of Meidingu Senbi Khagembha (1592-1652) in different places. The women from different places come to this market and all the essential commodities are made available here. The power of the market women of Manipur were demonstrated on various occasions. The first Nupi Lan-1904 (Women War) as well as Nupi Lan of 1939 are glaring example. It is not only an economic centre but also a political centre as well. In order to developed trade with the people from the hill, a Hao Keithel (Tribal market) was developed at Imphal. The most important bazaar in the valley was the Khwairamand Bazar or Sana Keithel at Imphal. The women’s market of Manipur is the only market of women in the north-east region of India and probably could be the only in the world.

Meitei women of Manipur after Hinduism

At the beginning of 18th century, Hinduism entered to Manipur during the reign of Gharib Niwaz (1709-1748). The fact is Vaishnavism practiced by Meiteis in Manipur consequently became a peculiarly Manipuri Vaishnavism in form, adopting aspects of olden culture and modified by it. Further, since Vaishnavism represented a more progressive ideology, it had attracted the attention of many people though it certainly did not grow unopposed. He destroyed many traditional La is (Local Dieties) and also burnt many books on ancient literature. The event is still remembered today as the 'Puya Meithaba'. Along with it Garibniwaz took up a numbers of measures to spread Vaishnavism in Manipur. He ordered to discontinue all the ceremonies and rituals of the old Meitei faith and they were substituted by the Hindu ceremonies and rituals. With the advice of the Santidas Mahanta, the king destroyed the image of Sanamahi, the greatest deities of Umanglais (family) of the Meiteis.

Some of the points are highlighted below about cultures, rituals and customs that are affecting directly and indirectly the women status of Manipuri Meitei in Manipur society.

1. Marriage

Meitei marriage system is very ancient and is believed to have started before 300-400 B.C. Now this tradition has been followed with certain modification of Hindu religion. ‘Luhongba’-It is a formal marriage ceremony. Formal rituals are made elaborately at the residence of the bride. Ancestral deity, local deities, sanamahi are worshipped on this day. Both the bride and groom are ritually sanctified on this day. In the marriage there is a ritual called kainya dhan piba (giving away our daughter), only men (father, brother, uncle or relatives) will perform it where any women (mother, sister or relatives) will not be allowed to perform the duty. In a meitei society, women take the back seat in every public functions like marriage, feasts at home or even at death. There is a concept called ahalna phamen phamgadabani (elderly will take the main front seat for any functions) unfortunately, this ahal (elderly) does not include the elderly women.

Meitei family is patriarchal and patrilocal. Newly married couple usually live with the groom’s parents. As a tradition, sons inherit their parent’s property equally while girls inherit nothing. When a girl marries, she gets some property in the name of awunpot, which literally means ‘gifts given at the time of marriage’. Unmarried and divorcees (women) are allowed to have a piece of land in their natal home to construct a house to stay. Avoidance relationship is also maintained only between the elder brother-in-law and the bride. So, bride is not supposed to say or call directly and cannot even touch him by mistake. This practice shows kind of discrimination and oppression towards the bride.

On the marriage day, the husband dines before his wife and she is made to dine from the left-outs of his husband's plate. The pattern has been changed by taking a spoon of food from the used plate and to continue the dinner from her plate. However, the underlying theme is that woman remains subjugated and but remain male chauvinism.

The life of a daughter-in-law (mou) starts the very day a woman attains "mou-hood". She has to get up early in the morning; no matter it is summer or winter. She is also expected to do all the household chores just to please her husband and in-laws whether she is capable of doing it or not. It is kind of obligatory. It is a kind of oppression and another form of domestic violence towards women.

The condition of a working woman / "mou" is even worst whether she is contributing her energy to the economy of the family. No matter what position she holds in the workplace but in the family and society, she remains as "mou". She is still expected to carry on all kinds of household chores even after a tiring day's work outside and expected to give all her earned money otherwise she will be called as lazy mou and blame her in each of her step. At the same time she is constantly under vigil and attacked at every minor mistake she commits and in-laws will be happy gossiping about the mou to neighbours, locality and relatives. She is subjected to the filthiest, dirtiest verbal abuses and even sometimes heinous physical abuse. She still has to endure all the pain and carry on with her duties.

It is seen that the wife is not allowed to eat with her husband by sharing the same curry or any other
eatables. At the same time women’s left out cannot be eaten by husband. During her menstrual cycle of 5 days, she is not allowed to enter to kitchen, prepare food and even touch utensils. She cannot even touch her husband’s food items. During this period she is not allowed to do any puja. In other times, she is equally prevented from the mentioned activities unless she has taken a bath. All these activities, if conducted, are treated as desecration. This concept of purity and impurity is mainly influenced by the ideology of Hinduism. In other words, the 'untouchable' still prevails in our Meitei society in a disguised form.

It is quite prevailed that being a male should not collect a phanek (wrapper round worn by women) from the clothes line that shows the men’s chauvinism. There has been a mixed of religion and other social institutions. When a woman is suppressed by the custom, the act is being prejudiced and the reason put forward is mostly on the man's fate. In other words, her breaking of the defined tradition will lead to the husband's ill luck.

2. Child birth
The concept of purity and impurity especially to women are seen mainly at child birth. If a child is born in a family, then instead of sharing the good news, it will spread to all the clans that there is yum mangpa, (impure of houses), where the particular clan will not do any form of puja for 12 days. Once the baby is born, mother will also not be allowed to enter to kitchen and other places of house for almost 45 days. But there won’t be any restriction in food. According to Universal immunization programme, it is said that there should be exclusive breast feeding upto 6 months. But in Manipur, the culture of first feeding (chak-umba) is still prevailing that if the child is baby girl, chak-umba will do after completion of three months, but for boys it will be held after five months. It shows that since childhood girls are often neglected by the social norms. Among the meitei society, son preference is strongly seen, if a mother happens to have two girl children, parents, in-laws, and relatives will pressure the mother to go for another baby preferring son.

3. Puberty
Rituals of adolescence for boys and girls are seen. For boys Nokun thangba/Lokun thangba (Wearing of sacred threads): This ceremony (both traditional and religious) is compulsorily done for boys before marriage. This ceremony is also done by the bamons (brahmans). This is also called Laiming Louba (taking the name of God). After this ceremony, according to the tradition, boys should follow the code of conduct as a male in the society. For girls Laiming Louba: When a girl attains the age of menstruation but before the menstruation starts, the mother will take her to the temple or will do the puja at home. This is mainly done for fertility and health. After this ceremony, girls should follow the code of conduct as a woman in the society. In most of the houses girls who have attained menstruation will not be allowed for doing puja and entering to kitchen. The physiological changes occurring among the girls are not taken as their becoming of maturity rather they are treated as impurity. Thus, girls always remain the center of subordinate and inferiority. If a girl falls sick, girls do not want to go to government hospital because of the gossip within the neighbours and society at large. Sometimes it creates problems in health seeking behaviour especially among the girls. If a girl is taken to government hospital with their family members which is far off, neighbours will suspect her that she must have undergone something like abortion. Thus the girls prefer going to private hospital which is nearby and easily accessible. Thus they are physically, emotionally and culturally deprived (Devi, 2010).

4. Death
Before 1724 i.e., during the reign of Garib Newaz, Meiteis used to bury the dead bodies. But after Hindunisation, Meiteis started cremating them. (T.C Hudson, 1908). If a family member died (father or mother), women are not allowed to light the pyre. All the clans will be announced as impure till yumsengba (cleaning of house with holy puja). In fact, there are two important ceremonies that are performed after the death of a person. They are asti sanchey/ laihun and sorat/lanna thouram. They are briefly explained below:

- On the sixth day of death, a ceremony called asti is performed. On the twelveth day, i.e., on the previous day of sorat, a small ceremony named 'yumsengba' (cleaning of the house with holy puja) is carried out. It is performed by a bomon (Brahmin). On the thirteen or fourteenth day (for aged people) the sorat is performed. Throughout the process or sorat, women play a very important role in showing the pain and sorrow for the demise. Relatives from near and dear ones keep visiting the deceased family; the women of the family will attain the visitors by lamenting for the whole 13-14 days till the sorat is performed. During the asti and sorat, there will be puja where all relatives will attribute flowers and money to the deceased photos. In this puja all the menfolk (more than 40-50 depending) will be allowed to do the attribute first followed by women folk including the elderly women at the end. This culture again shows the different discrimination against women of all ages.
5. Dress
It is generally believed that, the dress worn by the Meitei men were the kind of dress worn by the king of Manipur when he ascended the throne. Regarding female dress, it is said that phanek mayek naibi, the strip colour phanek with plain edge which was used by panthoibi is being followed by Meitei women till now. This phanek was actually used by the queen when she ascended the throne along with the King. Today, this phanek is seen worn by Meitei women. Meitei women started wearing shirts from the second week of October, 1779, when Maha Rasa Lila started dance in Manipur. Because of the advance in civilization, besides phanek women started wearing shirts, skirts, jeans, sarees and salwar kameez where the male counterpart wear shirt and pant. Unfortunately women do not enjoy the taste of different types of dresses because their dresses are being discussed, discarded and restricted to wear by different insurgency organizations. In recent trend, in schools and colleges girls are not allowed to wear skirts so they have to compulsorily change their skirts into phanek. Regarding ornaments, most of the ornaments worn by the ancestors cannot be seen today. However, as far as the dress and ornaments are concerned, most of them are seen in the traditional and religious occasions like Lai Haraoba festivals that are worn by women only. Women are the one who save the culture and at the same time this culture is again giving a very different picture in the status of women in the society.

6. Language
Language is such an influential force in shaping a society; it is obvious that those who have the power and strength will have their meaning in a privileged and in an advantageous position. Most of the abusive language is directed at female sexual behaviour that indicates the inferior position of women in the society.

Conclusion
From the above discussion, it can be concluded that we all need to give a serious thought to this and focus our concern towards women empowerment as women have an active part socially, culturally, politically in all spheres. So it is therefore we cannot blame only males for the oppression caused to women but also the women themselves. At the same time the role of the male to make sure that the wife has an equal voice within the family and society at large. Let us not forget that a female is no lesser a human being but just our male dominated society over the years having amazingly projected that to be the case, so we all need to fight this gender inequality in customs and cultures especially in Meitei society.

References