

Status of Women in Manipur after Statehood

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INTRODUCTION

In Manipur, a small state of India on the North East bordering Myanmar, the women here were placed in high esteem and given the status symbol of Mother or “Ema”. Like in other parts of the world and India, women empowerment in this small state has fast emerged as a slogan and issue especially after its gaining of statehood in 1972. Empowerment of women recognizing their contribution, helping them to fight their fear, feeling out inadequacy and inferiority and promoting self-respect and self-dignity, to make them economically independent and self-reliant, reducing the burden of work primarily, especially at the homefront. Women were on par with males in all areas of life during the Vedic era of Indian history, and they were the pinnacle of intellectual and spiritual achievement because they had access to learning. Women have a highly distinct role in many facets of culture, literature, economy and religion in this mountainous area of India’s easternmost corner, in contrast to other South East Asian countries. Feminism was definitely present in traditional Manipuri culture, where women were encouraged to be economically independent and to contribute to the development of social and political collective energies.

ROLE OF WOMEN:-

In Manipur, women play a significant role not only in economic development but also in social, political and religious life. As handlooms and handicrafts being the innate artistic skill for the Manipuri women, they successfully have taken up these occupations as income generating activities. Manipur has witnessed the successful role of collective women’s power in the past and also in the present day, women’s role in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of Manipur is significant. Women dominate the markets in the urban and rural area. Their unique role in the market will be known if one visits Khwairamband Bazar at the heart of Imphal. They are also greatly involved in the agricultural related activities. They are artistic and reactive which they prove in the field of handloom and handicrafts and dance. Their dominance in the field of sports is also commendable. One significant observation that we find today in Manipur is the rise in number of women entrepreneurs and women self-help groups. The numbers of working women in different sectors are increasing. Manipuri women have thus contributed universally in the socio-economic transformation and upliftment of the society. Politically, women in Manipur have been participating through different political parties and as independent candidates in

several elections. The contributions of women folks in the making of political history of Manipur is accepted throughout the ages and across various political communities. But unfortunately, the reality is quite different. The society is patriarchal and women have no much say in the political decision-making process. There still exists quite a gap between the goal enunciated in the Constitution, Legislation, policies, plans, programmes and related mechanisms on the one hand and situational reality of the status of women in Manipur on the other.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN:-

Socio-economic status of women plays a very important role in both individual and community life as women constitute half of the society. In Manipur, from the historic period, women have been an important part of the society, and they occupy a unique space in the society. The Manipuri society is patrilineal as well as patriarchal. However, social status of Manipuri women in the society is considered quite high as compared with that of women belonging to other patriarchal societies of India. The Manipuri women provide active and indispensable service towards the affairs of the family and society. The high social and economic status of women in Meitei

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society was frequently remarked upon by British colonial officers.

A distinct features of Manipuri women is their predominance in economic activity. The prominent economic role of women has its historical roots in the Lallup system of ancient Manipur, where the men folk were obliged to serve the king in times of need, for instance, as state forces in times of war or by rendering free labour in road construction, digging and clearing riverbeds or any other service for the king, for which they were not paid, and which left the women to feed themselves in their husbands or men folks prolonged absence. In modern times, women in Manipur have been taking a great role in both the organized as well as unorganized sectors. Many women are able to hold important government jobs on equal par with men while some are engaged in the area of handloom and handicrafts like silk-rearing, weaving, embroidery, pottery, etc. while others are running small shops, hotels, snacks stall to support their family.

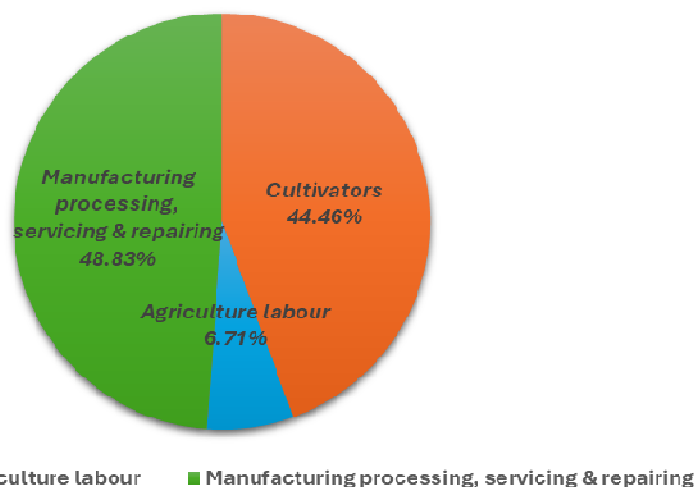
The world's largest and century-old-all women run market "Ima Keithel" or the "Mothers Market" located in Manipur's capital Imphal, and other smaller-all-women markets functioning in different parts of the state boost economic activities to a large extent. The market which has a history of over 500

years, has around 3,615 licensed women vendors registered with the Imphal Municipal Corporation. Since the British period the Ima Keithel has not remained only a simple market place on trading hub, but developed as an apex centre for campaign on various societal issues and against anti-social activities. Manipur women wearing their traditional attire operate their shops and stalls and occasionally organize various traditional festivals and events. The Ima Keithel located at Khwairamband Bazar is the only market solely run by women and well known all over the world.

Manipuri women form a large part of Manipur's economic workforce. They are not only politically aware but equally participate in trade and commerce which is praiseworthy. In comparison to the rest of India, Manipuri women work at a comparatively high rate. Women make up 42.59 percent of Manipur's workforce. The main female workers accounted for 60.88 percent of the female workers, while marginal workers accounted for 39.12 percent.

According to 2011 census, 44.46 percent of female workers are cultivators, 6.71 percent are agricultural laborers, and 48.83 percent work in manufacturing, processing, domestic and other services as depicted in figure 2.

Figure 2: Percentage of women involved in different sectors in Manipur 2011 Census Report



The labour force participation rates per 1000) for people aged 15 to 59 years conducted by the National Sample Survey (NSS) and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) of the National Sample Survey (NSS) for rural and urban areas of Manipur during 2018-19 revealed that the percentage of working male and female were 77.3 percent and 26.8 percent in rural and 73.9 percent and 29.8 percent in urban areas,

respectively. Despite women's proactive engagement in the economy, polity and society, this data revealed that the number of working males was significantly higher than females, implying that female-based disadvantages also exist in Manipur. Women are actively participating in the entrepreneurial activities of the society nowadays. Most of the micro and small-scale industries are dominated by women. By

involving in entrepreneurship, women make themselves economically independent and they no longer need to beg money from their fathers, husbands or any other head of the household. Economic conditions of both the family and society got better. Women owns about 44 percent of total businesses, which is about 2.5 times the national average. Besides education and higher literacy rates among Manipuri women, the state's societal structure, geopolitics and historical background has supported emergence of female entrepreneurs who are in turn providing employment to a large number of young people.

Women owned business and enterprises are focused towards traditional, agricultural and food products with high demand in local market or handloom and traditional fabrics. However, new entrepreneurs are merging external market ideas with local businesses and bringing in value added agricultural and food processing products and modern designs to ethnic textiles and crafts. In addition, the emergence of self-help groups among women has been popular, and they participate in the production of various daily consumable items, which aids in the state's economic efficiency by substituting import products. Self-help groups (SHGs) play a vital role in providing training and revenue generation avenues for the women folk, mostly working from home in the cottage industry segment. Here in the Ima Keithel, women from all over Manipur sell different things ranging from vegetables, fruits, flowers, pottery items, clothes and many other essential goods for daily uses.

Since time immemorial Manipur enjoys a distinct place in the handloom sector with lakhs of looms in the State. One of the special features of the industry is that women are the only weavers. The association and participation of Manipur women in the social reforms movement and uprooting social evils from the society is also quite notable. A movement called Nisha-Bandh and a women association called Meira Paibis, which exists in every locality are worth mentioning. These two movements are important bodies established by women to fight against drug abuse and alcohol for Manipur.

POLITICAL STATUS OF WOMEN:-

In the political field, Manipuri women have been taking a very important role in the society. During the ancient Manipuri period, women had contributed in the administration of the Kingdom. It has been found that in 33 A.D., there existed a women's court in Manipur called "Pacha" where women related cases were taken up and settled. This court was headed by the Chief Queen "Laisana", who was also a member of the Council of Ministers. There are also several

evidences of women's involvement in politics in earlier times where women showed their valor in the administration of the kingdom/state. The first Nupilal, 1904 and the second Nupilal, 1939 are glaring examples of Manipuri women's collective revolt against the political injustices and inhuman religious dramas during the colonial rule. The two movements really have redefined the potential of Manipuri women and their contributions to socio-political reformation.

After the accession of Manipur to the Indian Union, the women community once again energized their role in the struggle for restoration of democracy and fought against the undemocratic Advisory Council (1952-53), the Territorial Council, and finally fought for the movement for statehood. But as in the rest of India, the percentage of women in decision-making positions, as elected representatives Legislature and in Parliament and as officers in bureaucracy are quite low as compared to men, despite the strength of women in collective action. Politically, women in Manipur have been participating through different political parties and as independent candidates in several elections but there is an imbalanced representation of women in politics. Most of the time, women usually take part in elections mostly as voters and election campaigners but their number as elected representatives of the people are very low. Manipur has had less than 10 women legislators and a women MP in over five decades of electoral politics since 1972. But in the recently concluded Assembly Election of 2022, the success of five women candidates have shredded a new light in the electoral history of the State, which is quite encouraging but majority of women in the State are still fighting socio-cultural barriers and challenges of gender inequality despite their immense contribution to the growth of the State.

HEALTH STATUS OF WOMEN:-

Women's health covers morality, morbidity, nutritional status and reproductive health. Linked to these are environmental degradation, violence and occupational hazards, all of which have implications on women's health. Most of the Health Sectors in Manipur, District Hospitals and Health Sub-Centres are far below the required standard. Moreover, the present political scenario and conflict situations make doctors and health workers to excuse themselves of not going to rural remote areas or hilly places. Apart from this problem, in Manipur, the private run Health Institutions are becoming more popular day by day whereas Government run Hospitals and Centres are decreasing its standard even at the heart of the Capital City, Imphal. In Manipur, the incidence of

Reproductive Trait Infection and Sexually Transmitted Diseases among women remains high and the spread of HIV infection is increasing at an alarming rate. During illness, fewer women than men seek and receive treatment. There is a gender asymmetry in the utilization of health services. Early and forced marriages, young motherhood continues and malnutrition, anaemia and higher morbidity persist. As a result, young adolescent girls who discontinue their education and vocational training are denied information about their bodies, thereby constituting a life cycle of deprivation and discrimination resulting in a continuum of health-related vulnerabilities for women and young girls.

In and around conflict situation, women's health suffers too because they are targeted both by State and non-State actors. There have been several rape cases, and have also given rise to many women-headed household due to the death of their male family members. Often many of the widows resort to drinking liquor, taking drugs or even forced into prostitution to earn their livelihood. The risk of getting infected with HIV and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases are greatly increased among them. In the hill areas of Manipur, women suffer the most due to the imposition AFSPA. Illegal taxes taken by the armed groups cause yet another problem for them since it causes price rise and many of the women folk are not able to afford essential medicines. Many women do not have access to health care facility, even pre-natal and post-natal care, etc.

WOMEN IN SPORTS:-

Sports in Manipur dates to the time of ancient history. The rise of Manipuri women in Indian sports has been phenomenal. From weightlifting to hockey, boxing to football, Manipur has provided the finest sporting talents to the nation over several years. The state of Manipur has produced several great women sportspersons- boxers like Mary Kom, L Sarita Devi, weightlifters like N. Kunjarani Devi, S Mirabai Chanu and Khumukcham Sanjita Chanu, hockey players like Tingongleima Chanu, footballers like Ng. Bala Devi, L. Ashalata Devi etc. The often forgotten northeastern state of India, Manipur is shining bright on India's map for being at the forefront of producing world class champions, of which majority of them are women. In the state of Manipur, women dominate sports over men. The Khel Ratna Award has been conferred upon three sportspersons so far from Manipur, and all of them are women. They are MC Mary Kom (Boxing), N. Kunjarani Devi (Weightlifting), and Saikhom Mirabai Chanu (Weightlifting). And also among the 20 Arjuna Awardees from the state of Manipur, 15 are women.

So, sports is an institution that truly empowers women in Manipur.

WOMEN AND EDUCATION:-

Women's education has been strongly associated with economic growth and social welfare, including specifically life expectancy, infant mortality, fertility, nutritional and health status of member of the family, family planning and other aspect of family welfare. Education imparted to women in ancient Manipur was informal in character and parents were responsible for the education of their daughters at home. Most of the girls were trained by their mothers in weaving and embroidery. However, with the introduction of British colonial rule in 1891, female education in the modern line was started under the patron and efforts of the then rulers of Manipur. Higher education in Manipur developed in the last part of the 20th century with the establishment of Dhanamanjuri College with two women students on the roll. Since then, Manipuri women have not looked back and have started participating in education and even trying to reach the highest rungs of their career in different realms.

During the post-Independence era, the educational status of women's education took a drastic change. The impact of the promulgation of free and compulsory education gave an input to the development of women education in Manipur as elsewhere in India. There was an appreciable increase in the enrolment of girls in the schools. The progress was more accelerated, particularly after the Five Year Plan onwards. Various measures were taken up to improve women education, which were considered as indispensable for raising the status of women in the society. The setting up of "National Committee for Girls Education" in 1959 under the chairmanship of Smt. Durgabai Deshmukh gave a tremendous impact on the development of women education in Manipur.

Within the state, educational growth in the valley and hill districts have improved significantly in recent years, its credit goes to the English education imparted by the Christian Missionaries for many years, the state has been persistently disturbed by the conflicts, strikes, blockades, etc. throughout the academic year, hampering the academic calendar. According to the Census and Economic Information Centre (CEIC), the rate of girl dropout from school in Manipur in 2005 was 39.090 percent, in 2010 it was 44.790 percent and in 2011, it was 70.25 per cent. It is rapidly growing in every following year.

CONCLUSION:-

In summary, Manipuri women are the backbone that supports the state's social and economic cohesion and helps it achieve self-sufficiency. Manipur's women

make significant contributions to improve the standard of living for their families by working for pay, whether as skilled or unskilled, starting their own businesses, or joining Self-Help Groups. Women still encounter several challenges in accomplishing their objectives, nevertheless, and the solutions offered are insufficient to overcome these limitations. Programs for the development of women's skills and human resources are still in their infancy and need to be given priority in order to produce more fruitful and revolutionary outcomes. Despite financial and livelihood independence, contemporary Manipuri women are still somehow subjected to the strict scrutiny of social expectations and obligations which they have to confront everyday. The socio-political feminist front and women rights groups have been relentless running gender rights advocacy campaigns but are often met with disdain from the deeply rooted patriarchal mindset of the society. To improve the status of women in the society, the mindset of the people needs to change first. The society needs to remember that women are the backbone of development of our civilization.

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