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## ROLE OF MANIPURI MUSLIM WOMEN IN AGRARIAN ECONOMY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*An agrarian system is associated with agricultural production and trade. The Indian economy, since ancient times, was mainly dependent on agriculture. Revenues collected from various agricultural products were used to manage infrastructure development, defense, territorial expansions, etc. Since ancient time Manipur has been inhabited by various ethnic groups and agriculture was the main occupation of the people. The Manipuri Muslims or the Meitei Pangal is one of the important communities of the State. They also actively participated in political related issues for the welfare of the people since the medieval period. They settled in Manipur since 17th century and adopted the Meitei way of life, traditional method of earning their livelihood and performed various occupations. They were well known for their involvement in socio-economic and political life of the state. Agriculture was not only a way of life but also a means of livelihood of this community. The agriculture practices like transplanting, weeding, reaping and basking of paddy are mainly managed by the womenfolk. They also played a crucial role in meeting household needs by preparing food, caring for children and elderly family members, maintaining kitchen gardens, engaging in weaving and spinning, and undertaking the rearing of cattle and poultry. The paper attempts to present a particular configuration of the agricultural practices and its economy of the Manipuri Muslim that prevailed in Manipur from the early times to the colonial period.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Agriculture, Assignment, Civilization, Community, Economy, Grant, Revenue, Urbanization.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Manipur is a small state of India situated in the northeastern part of the country. It shares an international boundary of about 398 km with Myanmar to the east and southeast. Manipur is broadly divided into hills and valleys, covering an area of approximately 22,327 sq. km. The state forms part of the eastern extension of the Himalayan ranges. The valley lies at an elevation of about 790 metres above sea level, while the surrounding hills generally range between 1,500 and 1,800 metres in elevation. Since time immemorial, Manipur has been inhabited by various ethnic groups, each with its own distinct language, culture, customs, traditions, and food habits. Although some tribal communities also inhabit the valley areas, the Meiteis, Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslim), and people from various other communities from the rest of the country mainly reside in the valley. The hill areas of Manipur are predominantly inhabited by people belonging to various tribal communities.

Women of Manipur hold a distinctive and remarkable place among women across the world. They are known for their courage and active participation in society. Throughout the history of Manipur, women have taken on various roles and shaped social, economic, cultural, and political landscape of the state. Since the early phase of the Ningthouja dynasty, women have been treated on par with men in every walk of life. The women of the royal family, like the men, were provided education. Women also learned music and dance. Girls generally married at a relatively mature age and enjoyed considerable autonomy in choosing their husbands, with the approval and consent of their parents. However, the women from the time of her birth to the time of her death lived within a patriarchal society with a remarkable sense of agency within the society. They participated in public fairs, festival and religious rituals and participated social movements. More or less, the Manipuri Muslim women were second to none in the above-mentioned privileges.

Manipuri Muslim women have played an important role in the socio-economic and cultural activities since historical period. They also actively participated in many political related issues for the welfare of the people. They even launched agitation against the state administrators. They took care of their own families and other household works. They made significant contributions to the economic life of society through their involvement in activities such as spinning, weaving, and trade, including the buying and selling of goods in public spaces. In the

agricultural sector, they played an important role in various stages of agricultural production. Their labour constituted an essential component of agricultural activities and contributed substantially to the economic well-being and livelihood of their families.

## 2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The paper examines the role of Manipuri Muslim women in the agrarian economy, to study the trend of agriculture practice, productivity, production and their contribution in the state economy during the historical period. Study of this type involves a systematic examination of the historical sources. An attempt has also been made to analyse the role of Manipuri Muslim women in agricultural practice. Primary and Secondary data collected from Agricultural census, population census, Economic Census, Periodical reports published by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, etc. are used for deep analysis.

## 3. DISCUSSION

The agrarian system comprises the institutional, economic, socio-organizational, and ethical frameworks operating within the agricultural sector and rural areas that are oriented toward the higher-level economic and social system. An agrarian economy, in turn, is a rural-based economy that includes the production, consumption, trade, and sale of agricultural commodities, such as plants and livestock. In this sense, an agrarian economy refers to an economy—or the economic structure and conditions of economic life—where a majority share of individuals' income is derived from agriculture. These defining features originate in agriculture and its outputs. Given that, in an agrarian society, the primary source of livelihood is the cultivation of land through agriculture and farming, the people of Manipur also relied entirely on agriculture and its related activities to sustain their livelihoods. Agriculture is therefore viewed both as a way of life and as a means of livelihood. Accordingly, the agrarian situation has consistently manifested itself in religious festivals, literature, customs, ceremonies, songs, dances, and even languages.

It is said that agriculture was first practiced by the Egyptians in between 10,000 BCE to 4,000 BCE. Agrarian society was preceded by hunting and gathering. Agriculture was the means of transition from nomadic to settled life which can be referred to as the starting of village life. It took place because some crops were deliberately planted, and people began to settle permanently near it to protect the

crops, which also led to the development of the village community. By establishing domestication, families and larger groups were able to form communities which are said to be the first step in the formation of the village community. Thus, agrarian society was developed in various parts of the world as far back as 10,000 years, and it still exists. This is the most common form of the socio-economic organization since then.

In an agricultural society, their economy or livelihood is based on producing and maintaining crops and farmland through agriculture. Their primary source of livelihood is the cultivation of land through agriculture and farming. Agriculture increased the density of the population and allowed the accumulation of excess products used for further utilization or to sell or exchange for other necessities. It also created food surpluses, which is how the process of trade, commerce, and urbanization started. Agrarian societies formed a hierarchical social order that included rulers, nobles, soldiers, peasants, laborers, etc. These are also the characteristic features of a feudal society. Their social hierarchy was based on land ownership because their source of income and wealth depended solely upon the land. Thus, the term agrarian system has been coined to conceptualize this complex system.

Agriculture is not only the source of food supply and raw material but also provides a large share of employment to the working population of the state. The state provided employment to 66.26 percent of the total main workers (engage in cultivation and agriculture labourer) of the state in 1961, 71.00 percent in 1971, 69.60 percent in 1981, 70.00 percent in 1991, and 49.69 per cent in 2001 Censuses respectively. (Census of India 1961-2001) Women in Manipur constituted a substantial and indispensable segment of the agricultural workforce. From the formative stages of Manipuri society, women played a vital role in its social and economic development. They are known for their bravery and patriotic zeal that stood in front for every social cause. According to R. Brown, the Manipuri women are very industrious and most of the work except the heaviest is performed by them, and they are the mainstay of the family. He further mentioned that all the marketing is done by women, all the work of buying and selling in public, and carrying to and fro of the articles to be sold, while at home they are busily employed in weaving and spinning. (Brown, 2001, p.76) Women hold most of the responsibility in the production of both market and non-market goods. But much of their contribution is still invisible in the sense that it is still not included in economic

calculations. (Sarda, 2010, p.1)

Manipuri women have been the backbone of the economic activities since time immemorial. They participate in every step of agricultural practices from the initial stage of sowing seeds to harvesting. Women are involved in all aspects of agriculture operations, from crop selection to land preparation, to seed selection, planting, weeding, pest control, harvesting, crop storage, handling, marketing, and processing. (Roma and Kanta, 2015, p.154) Apart from being an owner of the land, they were much involved in household activities, pisciculture (fish farming), weaving, spinning, rearing of poultry and cattle, etc. Also, they don the role of a seed keeper and its processing and preservation. They have been the both experts and producers of food, from seed to the kitchen. (Roma and Kanta, 2015, p.156) Menfolk of the society were mainly engaged for the serviced of the kingdom through Lalup System. According to this system all adult male member of the kingdom age between seventeen to sixty was obligated to serve the king by attending the office ten days in every forty days either war or other development activities of the country. Therefore, women of the kingdom were actively involved in other economic activities to run the family.

According to E.W. Dun "All the marketing is done by women and all the work of buying and selling in public, and the carrying to and fro of the articles to be sold; whilst at home they are busily employed in weaving and spinning. It would be difficult to find a more industrious woman in India than the Manipuri". (Dun, 1957, p.17) Thus the majority of women still continue to perform traditionally assigned gendered roles. (Kipgen, 2010, p.24) Agrarian economy of Manipur in the historical perspective is a topic which needs to discuss and analyze because it will clearly give an understanding of the Manipur society and its economic perspective. It will also give clear understanding of how the economy was fulfilled in the kingdom.

The Meitei Pangal (Manipuri Muslim) also settled in Manipur since 17th century and adopted the Meitei language as their mother tongue and now forms an integral part of the Manipuri society. Just like other communities of Manipur, Manipuri Muslims are also an important community in the State. When the Muslim got permanent residence in Manipur, they had emulated the Meitei way of life and adopted traditional method of earning their livelihood in the agrarian economy as the economy of Manipur was basically agrarian. (Ranjit, 2017, p.5767) A notable contribution of the community is the introduction of transplantation of paddy in

Manipuri agrarian economy.

According to the evidences of the puyas and other sources, Manipuri Muslims performed various occupations; they were assigned lands in lieu of their services. The economic condition of the Meitei-Pangal during the years following their initial settlement in Manipur was believed to be good. They enjoyed respects from the State as they were brave, honest and hardworking. Thus, this Muslim community was also able to benefit from the land distribution of the State under the traditional land tenural system as stated by R. Brown. The Pangals adopted most of the traditional cultivation systems of the Meiteis since there were hardly any imported tools available. But agricultural technology was improved with the introduction of 'transplanting' system of paddy cultivation introduced by Muslim peasants who were war captives. (G. Kamei, 1991, p.219)

The mode of cultivation, the planting and transplanting the rice is the same as that followed in Eastern Bengal. (Brown, R., 2001, p.87) Evidence relating to transplantation of paddy is found in the literature Pangal Thorakpa that when the Muslims were ongoing to transplant the paddy by pulling out the young plants for new plantation, the Meiteis wrongly thought that the Muslims were trying to escape. Because of this misunderstanding, the King seized all of them and deported them to the Kabow border. (Sanahal, 1985, p.22-25)

The Manipuri Muslim performed all kind of agricultural related activities. The task of supplying milk and dairy products to the royal household were assigned to the Shangomsumbamayum clan of the community. Likewise, the task of supplying royal vegetables was assigned to the Hawaiingkhohmayum clan of the community. According to the Nongshamei Puya, the Musalman people were talented in gardening work. (Bhogeshwar & Janab, 1973, p.45) Most of them had garden around their homes. The then kings acknowledged their expertise in gardening and even gave them their own Sagei names such as Hawai-Ingkhoh-Mayum. The kings appointed many Pangals to cultivate the royal lands. Muslims opened a garden called Ningthem Ingkhoh at Khomidok Heinou Khongnembi by a royal decree for cultivation of fruits and vegetables. (Sanahal, 1985, p.21)

The Keikhong Ingkhoh clan produced mustard seed, garlic, onion, etc. and supplied them to the King. (Manikchand, Sang Pannabagi Masil, p.52) In Apong Ingkhoh, one Pangal named Najra produced Chinese Muga which became the favourite product of the then King Paikhomba (1666-97 CE). (Sanahal,

1985, p.46) Thus, Pangals played a vital role in the developmental works of the Kingdom. To keep them under the administrative system of Manipur, various departments dealing with Meitei-Pangal community were established namely (i) Pangal Shanglen (ii) Fundreiloishang (iii) Pangal Ingkhoh (iv) Shingaloishang (v) Qaziloishang etc. (Birchandra, 2008, p.16)

Whether the abovementioned tasks were solely executed by the male group is to be discussed. It must be analyzed thoroughly even though historical written records were not found in case of the contributions of Manipuri Muslim women as there is lack of evidence and record to support their cause. As the members of the community were descendants of the indigenous Meitei community, they share a lot of traits with the Meiteis. Their zeal is probably inherited from the Meiteis. They demonstrate considerable courage and industriousness in managing and sustaining their families. Similar to the Meitei community, women assumed diverse roles within the family and society, through which they established and sustained a significant position in the social structure that continues to be recognized to the present day.

Unlike the common practice where majority of Muslim women in the rest of the world stay indoors and restrict outdoor activities in the purdah system, the Manipuri Muslim women did various activities alongside their male counterparts. In Manipur, the purdah system was virtually nonexistent until the annexation of the region by the British in 1891 CE. Thus, Muslim women participated equally alongside men in agricultural activities, much like women from other communities. Like Meitei women, Manipuri Muslim women also played a significant role in agricultural activities, as well as in handloom production, handicrafts, and weaving.

Availability of labour for agricultural work was very less in Manipur. People of Manipur during Medieval period seemed to be dependent on them. As Manipur's economy was predominantly traditional and subsistence-based, its people had, since ancient times, been dependent on one another for their economic and social sustenance. Thus, every member of the household contributed to domestic production in order to meet the family's subsistence needs throughout the year.

For the production of consumable goods for household purposes, almost every house in Manipur valley has a kitchen garden, a pond, a cowshed, a poultry shed, a granary known as phougei, a sangoi (a small cottage or hut built beside the house to keep tools, firewood etc) and a shumang (an open space in

front of the house). Every house is surrounded by a boundary known as chekpal of at least a land of 0.63 acre. Beginning with kitchen gardens, most households cultivate a variety of vegetables, grains, and other crops, including ginger, onions, garlic, turmeric, potatoes, tomatoes, peas, beans, and other seasonal vegetables, along with bamboo.

Herbal plants such as pullei (galangal), hongngoo (giant taro), laibakngou (Indian worm wood), peruk (Indian pennywort), tokningkok (lizard tail), coriander, basil leaves, pungphai, sagolhidak (mad apple), maroinapakpi (winter leek), leipungkhang (yellow berry), tulsi, mayangba (hoary basil), lomba, nungshihidak (mint), komprek (drop wort), kolamni (swamp cabbage) were essentially planted in every house. Fruits like nobap (grape fruit), heikru (Indian gooseberry), malhei (common apricot), heikha (plum), chumbrei (peach), chorphon (Indian olive), heinou (mango), pungdon (guava), champra (lemon), komla (orange), kaphoi (pomegranate), heining (wild mango), heijang (citron), heimang (wild varnish), heijampet (mulberry) etc were commonly cultivated in household gardens for their own consumption.

According to an interview with two elders namely Noordin and Abdul Karim of Yairipok Ningthounai, who were born in 1938 and 1939 respectively, the innovative changes came to Manipur in 1950s after the conclusion of the Second World War. Using of indigenous local ploughs for ploughing the fields and other intercultural operations were the means of agricultural practices. Using of machines for agricultural purposes such as rice mill, flour mill came to their knowledge after the second Nupi Lan (Women agitation) of 1939-40. There were few numbers of rice mills in 1980s. The tractor and kubota were seen in the early beginning of 1960s. By 2000 CE there were few bullocks ploughing in the fields but during the later part of the decade, the use of bullocks in agricultural operations was replaced by tractors and other modern farming equipment. Till 2010s, harvesting was done manually. However, with the onset of new technologies, harvesting with machines gradually took over in the following years. From this perspective, it can be deduced that since the ancient period the way agricultural practices were performed remained largely unchanged until the arrival of such machineries in the market. So, every work which is to be done to fulfill their needs in a family was done by all the members collectively.

According to the interview, for the cultivation of kitchen gardens, male household members traditionally prepared the planting beds using spades and created planting pits for crops such as

beans, potatoes, chilies, ginger, turmeric, cabbage, cauliflower, turnips, and other seasonal vegetables. Women subsequently planted the crops in these prepared pits using hand trowels known as karnel and hand cultivator known as khurpi. Agricultural activities of Manipur were dependent on rainwater mostly as irrigation facilities were less developed. Watering of crops was done by all the family members together. During summer, cultivators would wait for rain while during winter where less rainfall occurred; the plants were watered by the women who fetch it from the ponds or from the nearby rivers using pots. On many occasions, men also assisted in collecting and transporting water from the aforementioned sources by using bamboo carrying poles, with the pots placed securely in baskets.

Apart from the kitchen garden, the nearby paddy fields as well as land nearby river banks which is popularly called as sekchai or folli, an alluvial soil deposited during flood were also cultivated with seasonal vegetables and crops. Even wheat and different varieties of peas were also cultivated. Sugarcane and mustard were widely cultivated extensively to meet the households' annual requirements and ensure a sufficient supply for domestic consumption throughout the year.

For large-scale agricultural production that required substantial labour, additional workers were occasionally hired; however, the employment of hired labour remained limited and relatively uncommon. There was a practice of helping the labour requirement by some relatives or people who live nearby which was commonly known as khutlang. Khutlang in agricultural spectrum, consist of a group of women of different age groups who agree to pool their labour and work together in agricultural activities. (Sushma, 2012, p.1) This pooling of labour resources amongst members of a community or groups is usually known as mutual exchange labour. (Karanth, 2002, p.219) This form of labour was practiced because there was less manpower and every family had their requirement of labour. Thus, as a mutual help, the labour which was hired through khutlang would not take the wage. When a person, who had provided labour, needs manpower for his or her own field, then the one who owed khutlang will provide the labour in return. This is a form of common consensus among the neighbors and relatives. This khutlang practice was practiced by women folk too. Even women would form a group at a time of transplantation of paddy and harvesting. Thus, they worked collectively in one another's fields through a system

of mutual understanding and reciprocal cooperation.

There was also a form of labour where wages were paid in cash in the later period. This is called as *namatnekpa*. *Namat* represents duration of work to be done by the labour. There are two durations of *namatviz.*, one that lasts from dawn till noon and the other one that lasts from afternoon till dusk. In this, both males and females were hired since the start of the cultivation of the fields and paid their wages which is known as *khutsumal*. However, wage rates varied according to gender, with female workers generally receiving lower remuneration than their male counterparts. Such differences of wages existed all over the world until there were revolutions in the European countries during the trade union movement.

Women were often preferred for agricultural activities that required relatively less physical exertion, such as weeding, transplanting, sowing, and threshing. This preference was partly attributed to their ability to perform these tasks comparably to men while receiving lower wages. Even though the same task is done women will be paid lesser. In some cases, it is found that the peasant would not take money instead they would take some rice, mustard oil or something which they needed in their family in lieu of their services. It may be a part or continuation of barter system even though money existed.

There is another contribution from women in agricultural activities. After the harvesting was done and the paddy was brought home, the women would dry the paddies in their pavilion using a large mat known as *yeinaphak*, a threshing mat made from *yengdou*, giant reed. Women were primarily responsible for drying the harvested paddy. Once thoroughly dried, the paddy was stored in granaries, *phoukei* with the help of males for subsequent consumption and use.

According to an interview with S.M. Sheikh of Khetri Bengoon Mayai Leikai, the onset of Islamisation in 1920s in Manipur changed the liberty of women. Among some rich Muslim families, their women were not allowed to go to paddy fields for work. However, they would be confined to their domestic work like that of other common women.

According to the aforementioned elders, their work was tremendous since early morning till late night. During the early dawn, women would grind the paddy either through two *chakri*, a stone and a wooden grinder or *shumbal* a wooden mortar using the *shuk*, a long pestle. "In the grey of the morning the females are astir and the village resounds with the blows of the long pestle in the wooden mortar beating out the rice from the husk" (Hodson, 2007, p.

41) Then they would winnow it with *yangkok* (a circular flat bamboo basket for winnowing rice chaffs) and again they would grind until the dust particles vanished completely. They would grind the paddy daily around one *laitangluk* which is a type of basket where weighing measurement of paddy took place.

Subsequently, they would go to nearby rivers or ponds for collecting water for consumption by using big pots like *tekchao*, *korphu*, *sanapul* etc which in return filled *kharung*, an earthen large pot kept in the kitchen unmoved. Apart from collecting water, cleaning of utensils and washing of clothes were also done. In this fashion, they used to engage themselves in the above said activities four to five times in the morning. Having completed these tasks, they would subsequently turn their attention to harvesting vegetables from the kitchen garden for the preparation of lunch. After the preparation of lunch, they move to field or kitchen garden. Following lunch, some women would rest briefly and later engaged in weaving various types of clothing using traditional handicraft techniques known as *Pangaleyong*, a technique of weaving clothes while in sitting posture with a broad belt of leather placed around waist of women known as *Shaanam*.

After having dinner, about nine to ten ladies from different family members were again engaged in making cotton threads from raw cotton while chatting lively among them sitting in *ningolka* or *eyongka* of a particular family. This process is called *moithapnaibaa*. Raw cotton was procured from the hill communities in exchange of goods such as poultry, tobacco, salt etc. Basically, their economy is geared to the satisfaction of basic subsistence needs and hence they fall into the broad category of production-consumption economies. (Sarda, 2010, p.107-108)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The contribution of Manipuri Muslim women to the agricultural sector constitutes a central theme of this paper. There are scores of arenas where the contribution of women and history of agricultural practices go hand in hand. The agrarian economy was sustained in significant measure by their persistent contributions to household management and, most importantly, to agricultural activities that constituted the principal means of livelihood for the community. In this paper, the agriculture practices like land tilling, seed selection, winnowing, weeding etc come to fore with women contributing mainly in transplanting, weeding, reaping and basking of paddy. While actively engaged in agricultural

activities, women also played a crucial role in meeting household needs by preparing food, caring for children and elderly family members, maintaining kitchen gardens, engaging in weaving and spinning, and undertaking the rearing of cattle and poultry. They continue to demonstrate considerable industriousness in meeting the needs of their families, a work ethic shaped by the expectation and practice of hard work instilled from childhood. Thus, it can be inferred without an iota of doubt that Manipuri Muslim women played a significant role in the agrarian economy that fuelled the state.

The contribution of Muslim women to the

agrarian economy of Manipur has been both substantial and multifaceted. These activities played a crucial role in ensuring food security and reducing the dependence of households on external sources of subsistence. Thus, women's contribution to agriculture in Manipur should be understood not as supplementary to that of men, but as an indispensable component of the agrarian system. Recognizing their contribution consequently provides a more comprehensive understanding of the social and economic structure of Manipur's agrarian communities and highlights the significant, though often under-recognised, role of women in sustaining rural livelihoods across generations.

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