

# The Contributions of Women in Ancient Manipuri Society, Culture, and Warfare

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## Abstract

This paper explores the variegated roles played by women in ancient Manipuri society with special reference to economic activities, political involvements, perpetuation of cultural ethos and martial practices. The paper argues against the prevalent trend of historiography which often tend to project female realm in Manipur located in India's North East region largely on the basis of their relatively empowered and dynamic status. Guided by a qualitative and holistic method this research will focus on oral and traditional historical sources, cultural anthropological insights and some local literary works. The roles women played in the various socio-cultural arenas are analyzed thematically thereby attempting to obtain a rational appreciation of those roles and of women's social status. This indicates women formed the central pillar of economy through weaving, we specifically produced Lei rum Phi and agricultural. Women were not just an entity to the economic structure but they also posed as active figures in political organization, collective resistances or community leadership. In cultural aspects, Maibis (priestesses) safeguarded ritual knowledge and performative tradition festival time ritual like Lai Haraoba; therefore we see existence many indigenous cultural practices. Also, folklore and martial traditions hinting towards involvement in warfare shows women questioning gender norms and passivity. This study offers a nuanced and critically enriched understanding of gender issues in Manipur stressing the need for appreciating indigenous knowledge system and oral traditions in inclusive and descriptive historical reconstruction.

**Keywords:** Manipuri women, gender dynamics, cultural preservation, warfare, lei rum phi, meira paibi

## 1. Introduction

The study of women's roles in medieval South Asia has often been influenced by generalized assumptions of patriarchal dominance, with women largely relegated to domestic spaces. But local and regional histories often tell a different story. Manipur, in northeastern India, provides an example of a socio-cultural milieu where women enjoyed economic, cultural and social autonomy. Geographical location and ethnic diversity played crucial role in determining the

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structure of the Manipuri society where women took active parts in the various spheres without confining herself within the four walls of a house. Woman's contribution to economic production especially in weaving and agriculture apart, they took visible part in political processes as well as in religious practices even in warfare situations. Despite these unique features, the status and role of women in ancient Manipur has not received due attention in mainstream historiography. Studies conducted so far highlight specific events like Nupi Lal (Women's War), or offer descriptive accounts without linking its analysis to a larger theoretical framework. Thus we have little knowledge on how women's roles were structurally embedded in different domains of society that resulted in social organization as well as cultural perpetuation. There has been a lot of work done by scholars on the topic of the Manipuri society, never the less, the lack of research which would take into account various aspects of women's activities is apparent. The current state of studies can be characterized as fragmented because the existing research papers are either oriented towards historical events, economic activity, or religion in the absence of a more integrative view of the subject matter. For example, historical and ethnographic works mention the participation of women in the Nupi Lal movement; however, the discussion focuses on the process itself and does not consider a historical continuum of political activities of Manipuri women. Anthropological papers, at the same time, point to women's contribution to the economy, specifically mentioning the Lei rum Phi weaving and agriculture; however, their significance to power relations is overlooked. In addition, the significance of the role that the Maibi performs during Lai Haraoba celebrations requires a more detailed discussion since it involves an important intersection between cultural, religious and sociopolitical spheres. The role that women perform in martial sports remains under researched. Thus, the most significant limitation in current literature is the lack of an integrated and multidisciplinary study that looks into the contributions made by women simultaneously in the spheres of economics, politics, culture, and war within a chronological time frame. In this context, the proposed study attempts to bridge these research gaps by viewing women's roles through a multidimensional perspective which integrates economic, political, cultural and military factors and by treating their spheres of participation not in isolation but as reinforcing each other. Hence, through a broader perspective gender relations can be better understood and viewed beyond the reductionist perspective that confines women's contribution within one sphere only.

The main purpose of the study is to critically explore the various roles that women played in ancient Manipur in their socio political and economic life. In this context, the research intends to examine the participation of women in various economic pursuits such as weaving and farming, including the production of the traditional dress known as Lei rum Phi, and how it helped women gain their economic independence and improve their status. This research also aims to explore the role of women in political affairs, specifically their decision-making power in movements such as the Nupi Lal. The other objective will be to analyze the role of women in war and martial culture including the practice of Thang-Ta, thereby defying traditional gender perceptions of defense and warfare. Also, another objective will be to investigate the role played by women in cultural and religious activities, especially the role of the Maibi institution and religious performance rituals such as Lai Haraoba. The aim of the research will

be to offer an all-surrounding perspective on the importance of women within Manipur society.

This research also raises some question like in what manner and degree were women in Manipur able to play an active part in shaping economy, politics, culture, and warfare and how did such contributions by women contribute to the construction of Manipur's society beyond the conventional idea of the domestic sphere?

This research argues that the case of Manipur challenges monolithic interpretations of patriarchy and highlights the importance of regional diversity in understanding gender dynamics. By foregrounding women's agency and recognizing the value of indigenous knowledge systems, the study contributes to develop a more inclusive and context sensitive historiography.

### **Review of Literature:**

Literature on the Manipuri's society has considered the presence of women but failed to analyses them extensively. Early ethnographic studies like Hodson (Hodson., 1908)<sup>(1)</sup> offer fundamental knowledge about social organizations, but their analysis lacks a gender perspective. Singh (Singh N. L., Manipur past and present, 1989)<sup>(2)</sup> and Singh (Singh N. L., Manipur past and present (Vol. 2)., 1998)<sup>(3)</sup> have focused on the involvement of women in social and political affairs, noting their contribution to organizational frameworks and collective activities. In particular, the discussion of the Nupi Lal movement by Joy Chandra Singh <sup>(4)</sup> (Singh J. , 1996) reveals the potential for women's mobilization. However, these sources are more centered on events and fail to examine historical continuity. From an anthropological perspective, Devi (Devi., 2002)<sup>(5)</sup> emphasizes the economic contribution of women in weaving and trade networks. The manufacture of Lei rum Phi fabrics symbolizes economic autonomy and cultural pride. This evidence implies that economic activities may have increased the social power of women. Regarding religion and culture, Parratt (Parratt., 1997)<sup>(6)</sup> emphasizes ritual ceremonies and the importance of Maibis. Their crucial position in the performance of Lai Haraoba suggests that religious power did not entirely belong to men. Oral tradition reinforces this portrayal of women's power through mythological characters like Panthoibi. There is no holistic and multidisciplinary approach to study the contribution of women in the economic, political, cultural, and military realms in ancient Manipur. This paper aim and objective to how women's contributions to economic activities like weaving and agriculture, women's contributions to politics and community level decision making, women's contributions to warfare and defense mechanisms, women's contributions to culture and religion.

### **Methodology:**

This study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach in analyzing the many roles played by women in the ancient Manipuri society. The use of an interdisciplinary approach is expected to offer a more holistic understanding of the contributions made by women in different areas. The research makes use of thematic analysis as its key methodology to make a systematic assessment of women's participation in four important areas economy, politics,

culture, and military. The method helps in recognizing any recurring structure, pattern, and form of agency in these areas. Also, a comparative approach is taken into account to recognize any consistency and change that occur in the roles of women from ancient times to future developments like the Meira Paibi movement. The current research is grounded on an interdisciplinary theoretical perspective based on gender theory, cultural anthropology, and social history. Special attention is paid to the examination of gender relations, power dynamics, and the process of formation of social roles, as opposed to merely describing events. Such an approach allows for an understanding of the role and position of women within the sociocultural context of Manipur. The research makes use of thematic analysis to analyze the roles of women in four areas: 1. Economics, 2. Politics, 3. Culture, 4. Military. Comparative analysis is also applied to analyze the connection between past practices and new movements like Meira Paibi. Emphasis is given on gender relations rather than narration.

### **Findings and Analysis:**

In light of the findings of the above discussion, it is evident that women in Manipur had occupied a multivariate and influential status in economic, political, martial, and cultural and religious spheres, thus depicting an example of historically evolved agency rather than marginalization. The role of women in weaving including Leirum Phi and agricultural activities reflects their important part in the socio-economic life, financial independence, and economic security in terms of contributing substantially towards household income and management of available resources. With regard to the political dimension, it becomes apparent that the tradition of women playing crucial roles in community decisions, resolving conflicts, and participating in various forms of mobilization has evolved over time, culminating in political movements such as the Nupi Lal. On the martial level, it is evident that women played important roles not only in defending the country from enemy attacks but also in indigenous fighting practices, such as Thang-Ta. With respect to the cultural and religious aspect, the key role of women in conducting important rituals such as Lai Haraoba proves that Maibis were vital to the survival of culture and religion. It can be argued that women in ancient Manipur was not limited to their homes; they played an important part in the socio economic system, administration, military, and preservation of culture.

### **Economic Contributions:**

#### **Weaving**

Females in Manipur have traditionally occupied the forefront of weaving, which is one of the most important sectors within the indigenous economy. The females in Manipur were mostly involved in weaving fabrics like Lei rum Phi, which possessed both economic importance and cultural significance. In contrast to the general perception about weaving as merely an art practiced at home, it has been noted to be a very well organized economic activity. The weaving of fabrics had greatly contributed to the economic gains made by the families and even the entire region. The involvement of women in the economy of weaving led to a certain level of economic empowerment and recognition for them within Manipur society. The fact that women were productive participants in the economy allowed them to transcend certain patriarchal

restrictions on women's empowerment. Thus, for women, weaving became more than just an income source; it also became a tool for economic autonomy and socio-cultural prominence.

### **Economic Contributions**

Traditionally, women from Manipur have been the backbone of agricultural production, primarily involving rice cultivation that constitutes the cornerstone of its agricultural economy. They are engaged in every step of the agricultural process, such as sowing, transplantation, weeding, harvesting and postharvest processing. This involvement is not only indicative of their contribution in terms of labor but also quite practical knowledge about agricultural practices and resource management. The ongoing involvement of women in agriculture highlights their responsibility for household and community food security. Their role makes them critical components of the socio-economic ecosystem of Manipuri society. This work, beyond providing subsistence, not only buttresses economic stability but also deepens their incorporation into local systems of economy, demonstrating the interconnectedness of gender dynamics and agrarian sustainability.

### **Political Participation:**

Women have historically been an important part of advisory, organizational and leadership decision making mechanisms within communities in Manipur. Their participation was also outside of the domestic and cultural spheres; it included governance and social regulation. Women were also involved in resolving conflict, mediating issues, and organizing collective actions against oppressive forces according to oral history and recorded narrative. It is their ability to reach out to the grassroots and give voice to social issues that established their role as powerful players in the socio-political framework of Manipuri society. This actual engagement reflects an embedded tradition of female political agency that was native to the social fabric of Manipur. Women's leadership and participation in public affairs were historically rooted and socially recognized not something that came along later. This base of collective action and resistance eventually manifested in more organized and large-scale movements, most importantly the Nupi Lal, thus demonstrating a consistency of women's political consciousness and activism.

### **Role in Warfare:**

The women of Manipur were not limited to domestic or ritual spaces, they participated in martial traditions, too. Their training involved indigenous systems of combat like Thang-Ta, which includes swordplay, spear fighting and strategic physical discipline. Women have also served in defense during conflicts, as evidenced by oral histories and historic accounts. The works would be folklore and stories that preserve the memory of these women warriors, emphasizing their courage, skill, and involvement in protecting the community. Women in all war cultures (hence the martial as a cultural practice) are who this essay focuses on because it challenges gender stereotype of warfare with male bodies only within them. This shows a more alcohol contact society to Manipuri which allowed women to fill roles of physical might, strategic dignity and the protection of the community as a whole. This not only broadens the understanding of gender roles within the region but also highlights a historical precedent for women's agency in domains typically perceived as male dominated.

### **Cultural and Religious Contributions:**

Women the priestesses particularly, the Maibis are really at the center of religious and cultural life in Manipur. At major festivals like Lai Haraoba, it's not only that they are present; they're the leaders. The Maibis lead the rituals, the dances and the old chants. They preserve those ancient tales and traditions, embedding them into everyday life. But they are more than performers. They remember. They guard the prayers, the myths and the values, transmitting them all so each new generation knows precisely who it is that gave them those things. These women are the living bridge that holds Manipuri culture together. Maibis is more than a symbol; their role is real power. Here, women run the spiritual show. That is a huge change from what you.

### **Discussion:**

This research has shown that Manipuri society offered far greater opportunities for women's participation than most pre-modern South Asian cultures. Women weren't just bystanders they played a big part in economic, political, cultural, and military life. They worked, joined in on important decisions, and took part in rituals, so their roles really mattered. Sure, men and women had different responsibilities, but the dividing line wasn't so rigid or one sided like you'd see in many patriarchal societies.

Unlike the strict patriarchal system, Manipuri society did not confine women to just domestic roles. Instead, women here held a real presence and influence out in the open even if it wasn't complete equality. Look at Ima Keithel, the women's market, and the role of the Maibis, the priestesses. Through these, women built economic independence and took on spiritual leadership. These aren't just traditions they gave women social power, helped them carve out space in public life, and strengthened their sense of community and agency. When you look at it from an economic angle, women weren't just passive participants they actually controlled weaving and ran their own market systems. That gave them real material independence, which probably led to more influence in society overall. So, the idea that pre-modern economies were all about men doesn't really hold up. It makes you rethink how gender and economic power connect. Women worked in agriculture and traded goods, too, so they were essential for keeping households and even regional economies going.

On the political side, it wasn't just men calling the shots. Women stepped up as advisors, negotiators, and leaders in resistance movements. Sure, men usually got the official positions, but outside those formal structures, women built their own ways to lead and make decisions. This mix men dominating formal politics, but women holding sway in informal spaces says a lot about how complex gender relations were in Manipuri society.

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## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown the immense contribution of women in ancient Manipuri society. They were neither only limited to domestic and reproductive works nor had only passive role in production. Rather, the performances in various domains showed their roles that were noteworthy, important and vibrant as well right from the formation of economic modalities to cultural practices; from political institutionalization to defense mechanism indicating the fact that they could hardly be meagre appendages or hanger on for maintaining the socio-cultural phenomena of any society or region. The narratives show laws & orders were taken care by men countering a situation which looks like an ambush. The study stresses that Manipuri society is an extreme outlier, with women's economic independence, ritual authority and social visibility fostering highly flexible gender relations. Such findings demand a serious rethinking of current theoretical models too often extrapolated across South Asia in which local variations often are ignored. This paper has shown the immense contribution of women in ancient Manipuri society. They were neither only limited to domestic and reproductive works nor had only passive role in production. Rather, the performances in various domains showed their roles that were noteworthy, important and vibrant as well right from the formation of economic modalities to cultural practices, from political institutionalization to defense mechanism indicating the fact that they could hardly be meagre appendages or hanger on for maintaining the socio-cultural phenomena of any society or region. The narratives show laws & orders were taken care by men countering a situation which looks like an ambush. This study stresses that Manipuri society is an extreme outlier, with women's economic independence, ritual authority and social visibility fostering highly flexible gender relations. Such findings demand a serious rethinking of current theoretical models too often extrapolated across South Asia in which local variations often are ignored. This research contributes to the broader discourse on gender and history by showing that women's roles in pre-modern societies were far more dynamic and

significant than has often been assumed. It argues for a more inclusive historiography which recognizes the diversity of women's experiences and their continuing contribution to social and cultural life.

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