

MUSLIM WOMEN IN MANIPUR SOCIETY: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

With a population of 8.4 percent, Manipuri Muslims are found in 4 districts of Manipur valley (Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur) and 2 districts of hill areas such as Churachandpur and Chandel.¹ As per the census enumeration of 2011, out of total 2, 39836 Muslim population of Manipur, 1, 19432 are female Muslim population. Nearly half of the total Muslim population of Manipur is of Muslim women. Thus, study of this sizeable chunk of Manipur population is necessary to get a better picture of the condition of the people of Manipur in general and Manipuri Muslims in particular.

Muslim women in Manipur, compared to women of other communities, lag behind in almost all the socio-economic, political and educational aspects. Due to such differences, the majority of Muslim women are among the most disadvantaged, least literate, most economically impoverished and politically marginalized sections of Manipur society.² In spite of many challenges, Muslim women are waking up to a consciousness of the distance they lag behind vis-à-vis the other communities. They are aware of the importance and inevitability of education as a tool of change and development. Education of women is now considered as an economic investment at the family level and cornerstone of development at the societal level. Many Muslim women have also entered the political arena at the grass-root

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¹ By Manipur Government order on 8th Decemeber 2016, Jiribam, Kakching, Tengnoupal, Pherzawl were created as new districts by bifurcating Imphal East, Thoubal, Chandel, Churachandpur districts respectively. Senapati, Ukhrul and Tamenglong districts were also bifurcated by the same government order.

² What is true of majority of Muslim women in India seems to be true of Manipuri Muslim women because the conditions of Muslim women everywhere in India seem to be similar. See Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004) p.3

level as Pradhans, Members, Zila-Parishads. They have also learned to organize themselves to voice their grievances through organizations and associations. In this light, the paper is an attempt to assess the changes and challenges of Muslim women in Manipur society by using socio-economic, educational, political and organizational aspects.

SOCIAL ASPECT:

Major documentation and well-known work on Indian Muslims have shown that the Shariat laws do not prevail and determine the day-to-day life of all or most Muslim women. Rigid patriarchy and many social customs and tradition like restriction on their movement, early marriage, misuse of personal laws have hindered immensely the social status of Muslim women in Manipur.³ Muslim women are more disadvantaged and inferior compare to Muslim men in legal status related to marriage, divorce, adoption and guardianship of children, maintenance and inheritance. There is misuse of the Islamic provisions concerning marriage and divorce that leads to the disadvantage position of the Muslim women. Many divorced Muslim women fail to get back the promised Mehr and also the maintenance benefits. In the matter of inheritance, Islamic provision relating to the inheritance rights of Muslim women are not given due importance and so often such rights are denied to Muslim women. Most of the Muslim women are unaware of their religious legal rights, and even if they are, they do not consider it important to mobilize themselves and fight for such rights which have been given to them by Shariat. There is lack of enough enlightened leaders among the Muslim community that would emancipate Muslim women from the clutches of patriarchy and other restrictive social customs and laws.

ECONOMIC ASPECT

It is the unique historical experience that set apart Manipuri Muslim women from other Muslim women of the country and shaped their significant economic role in the state. There is more similarity and common bond of Manipuri Muslim women with Meiteis of Manipur. The institution of lallup from the 11th century till the fag end of the 18th century is one such experience which forced the womenfolk of Manipur to take the economic responsibilities in

³ Syed Ahmed, Women Empowerment and Development: A case study of Manipuri Muslim Women (Seminar paper on Women Empowerment and Development with special reference to Manipur organized by ICSSR-NERC and Manipur College, Imphal, March 20-21, 2009)

the absence of the men group in the family. Manipuri-Burmese war of 1817, the Seven Years of Devastation and the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891 are many other incidents that further extent their role in economy because of the reduction in the male population. Manipuri Muslim women like Meitei women participated actively in the first agitation against the British economic policies and atrocities popularly known as the Nupilal. Many of the women that participated in the Nupilal were Muslim women vendors of Khawairamband Bazaar. Muslim women in Manipur play a significant role in the agricultural fields. In the rural areas, Muslim women's labour is used extensively in broad-casting of rice seeds and its transplantation, harvesting, threshing, drying of the paddy and pounding. They also engage in animal husbandry and poultry farming. Besides home consumption, Muslim women supply in the market, the vegetables and fruits planted by them in their ingkhols attached to their homesteads. Products produced by them is bought and supplied by Meitei women and other traders to the local and main markets. In fact Lilong and other Muslim inhabited areas of Thoubal district supplied a large proportion of the vegetable and other cash crop products in the keithels of the state.⁴ Some Muslim women have taken up weaving as an important occupation producing cloths for sale which consist of phanek, khudei, mosquito net, shawls, towels, etc. This occupation played an important role for many widows and divorced women as a means to support their children. With the awareness of the governmental development and welfare programmes, many cooperative societies and self help groups are organized by Muslim women in their villages. Such groups help Muslim women in taking up schemes for income-generation through loan and grants from the government.

The changing economic condition along with urbanization, migration, fragmentation of lands and new family structure (like nuclear family) has tremendously changed the economic activities of the Muslim women in Manipur. Poverty became the main factor that drives Muslim women into the labour market. Muslim women's employment has to do with the participation of uneducated women in the labour force. Nowadays, Muslim women in large number participate directly in the market economy. They are seen as vendors in almost all the *keithels* in the valley regions. Lilong is one of the main markets where many Muslim women of various age groups sell commodities of daily consumption like vegetables, fruits,

⁴ Syed Ahmed, Muslim Women in the Unorganised Sector: Some Observations (National Seminar - Muslim Women in Manipur: Opportunities and Challenges organised by Manipur State Minorities Commission, Imphal, June 5, 2011)

fishes, sweetmeats and others. Besides Lilong, they also occupy regular stalls in Sora, Yairipok, Thoubal, Kwakta, Singjamei, Hatta, New checkon keithels. Muslim women also engage themselves in various categories of low-profile, informal or unorganized economic activities – shop-keeping, hotel industry, embroidery and tailoring, etc. Nowadays, many Muslim women work as manual labourers, domestic workers and even taken up business like drug trafficking.

Report on Socio-Economic Survey of Meitei-Pangals, 2004, (hereafter 2004 Report) found out that as many as 90.12% of the Muslim women are outside the labour force with respect to distribution of persons by principal usual activity status. Muslim women are pursuing a number of non-economic activities such as maintenance of kitchen garden, household poultry farming, collection of fish etc. These activities are a great economic gain to their household management and if these are counted, the Muslim women's work participation would be considerably high. According to 2004 Report, 41.40% are self employed Muslim women followed by 35.31% of them working in household enterprise as unpaid helpers. Unfortunately, Muslim women in Manipur are disproportionately self-employed. They are engaged in family based ventures but do not report themselves as employed, even as unpaid helpers. 2004 Report further highlighted the minimal representation of Muslim women in the service sector. The percentage of employment among Muslims in Manipur is low with just 24.18%. Only 6.39% of females are working as regular salaried/wage employee as against 21.65% of their male counterparts. Educational backwardness is the reason for the minimal representation of Manipuri Muslim women in the service sector.

EDUCATIONAL ASPECT:

Due to the revivalist tendencies of Manipuri Muslims in the early part of 20th century, they emphasized mainly on the importance of religious studies. They failed to comprehend the value of modern secular education and thereby ignoring it. Muslims took to modern education as late as the 1970s and that too was limited to few elite groups from Imphal. Muslim women were not educated for a number of reasons: poverty, religious considerations, early marriage and lack of awareness and so there is no option of continuing schooling after marriage. As per the census enumeration of 2011, the number of Manipuri Muslim literates is 134292 (79474 male and 54818 female). The following table is the number of literate of Muslims in Manipur.

Table 1: Number of Literate of Muslims in Manipur

Sector	Number of Literate					
	Muslim			State		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
Rural	50129	32916	83045	710134	572725	1282859
Urban	29345	21902	51247	329724	295893	625617
Total	79474	54818	134292	1039858	868618	1908476

Source: 2011 Census

Historically, there has always been a gap between the education of boys and girls in India. In the case of Muslims in Manipur, the gap has been a yawning chasm. Unfortunately, majority of the Muslim students are first generation learners and so they failed to get any help from their illiterate guardians. There has been a higher incidence of drop-out among the children at primary level, particularly those who have illiterate parents. Majority of the Muslims do not consider modern education an important asset for their women. Most of them believe that the women are not going outside to take up jobs, so there is no need to educate them properly. Knowledge beyond primary and religious education for Muslim women is not desirable. Although enrolment of Muslim girls in primary level schooling is equal to that of other community's girls, drop-out rates in middle school for Muslims are higher. As a result, a substantial proportion of them revert to illiteracy within 4-5 years after leaving school. One community-specific factor is the late entry of Muslim girls into school which impinges on the drop-out rate after middle school. This certainly affects the enrolment of Muslim girls in the relevant age group.

Literacy rate of Muslim women is very low in rural areas compare to urban areas. The breakdown of government village schools typically affects female children more than male children because more girls are in government schools than boys. Because of ineffective and in efficient functioning of the schools, there is more dependent on private tuitions and coaching institutes as additional learning institutions in urban areas. The high cost of education, especially that of tuition and coaching centres, is a major consideration in decisions made on schooling, especially for Muslim girls. In such cases, only limited few can afford and poor families may not be able to send all their children to school. Ultimately, the result is absenteeism and dropping out. From the analysis of 2004 Report regarding drop outs of students aged 5-14years, it was observed that as many as 26% of the students discontinued due to heavy pressure of household activities and 21% of them could not continue their

studies for economic reasons. It is important to notice that the family income determine the problem of drop-out and reverted illiteracy of the Muslim children. The occupational structure of the majority of Muslims does not require high levels of education because they are predominantly self-employed. Education is likely to be utilized by those social strata that are oriented to employment in the professions and government services. Among Muslims, these strata are very less. The educational and occupational status of the parents has greatly influenced the pattern of enrolment and nature of drop-out among children. The appeal and benefit of education has not reached all sections of the Muslim community. Such differences create a widening gap among Muslim students based on residence and economic status. As a result, the education of Muslim women is severely hampered.

It is a common belief that a high proportion of Muslim children study in Madarsas. But in reality, Muslim students study in both formal educational institutions and Maktabas at the same time. There is need to distinguish between Madarsas and Maktabas. Maktabas are neighbourhood schools, often attached to mosques that provide religious education to children who attend other schools to get 'mainstream' education. Thus Maktabas provide part-time religious education and are complementary to the formal educational institutions. Very often one finds that Madarsas have indeed provided schooling to Muslim children where there is acute shortage of formal educational institutions in Muslim concentrated areas. Madrassa Imdadul Islam in Thoubal district, Darul-Uloom at Lilong, Aziza Madrassa (residential madrassa for girls) at Khumidok set good examples of such Madrassas in Manipur. Many children go to Madarsas and thereby acquire some level of education when there is no school in the neighbourhood. No middle class Muslim send his children to madrasas. It is only poor Muslims who cannot afford secular education that children are sent to madrasas. There are more Muslims students in government and private schools than in madrassas. Most families favour formal education over madrassa education. In spite of all, there are more women than men among Manipuri Muslims in the context of religious education.

The enrolment and retention rate of Muslim women in higher education is extremely low. As a consequence, their proportion in higher education is a mere 1.78 per cent. One of the key reasons for the low participation of Muslim women in higher education is their significantly low achievement level in higher secondary attainment rates. Dropout rates were considerably higher at the middle and secondary levels in the case of Muslim women. The table below shows the number in detail.

Table 2
Percentage Distribution of Manipuri Muslims by Level of Education and Sex

Educational Qualification												
Sex	Illiterate	General									Technical	Total Population
		Pre-Primary	Primary	Middle	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Graduate	Master	Others	All		
Male	35.21	6.35	17.11	16.14	13.12	5.72	5.06	0.44	0.76	64.7	0.09	100.0
Female	59.22	5.43	13.98	10.04	7.08	2.47	1.08	0.08	0.59	0	0.03	0
Person	47.12	5.90	15.56	13.11	10.12	4.10	3.09	0.26	0.68	40.7	0.06	100.0
										5		0
										52.8		100.0
										2		0

Source: Report on Socio-Economic Survey of Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims) 2004

Even though poor parents perceive the importance of education, many a times they are not able to finance it. That is why, higher education is further denied to the disadvantaged groups and especially women from rural poor homes. Higher education for young Muslim women was not viewed as an immediate investment in their careers. Since higher education requires a longer investment of time and other resources, preference for young Muslim women is marriage as it is perceived as a priority over higher education. They were also socialized to perceive higher education from that view point. With increasing social demand for a specific kind of professional education (especially skill-oriented degrees) in the post-1991 phase, it is even more difficult for Muslim women to compete with others. General education which is mainly preferred by women for higher education is now unable to meet the growing demands of the modern economic development. There is moving away from the general education to the professional courses which lead to jobs and careers. Professional education requires several years of studentship and higher financial investment than the general education. Ultimately, professional education is either denied or almost impossible for the disadvantaged groups and especially Muslim women with poor and rural background. Therefore, Muslim women have very low participation in new professional courses.

Over the recent years, Muslims are not only gradually getting aware of the importance of educating their women but also providing them quality education for further studies. Parents are now supportive towards the desires and ambitions of their daughters, facilitating and encouraging them to take up demanding jobs, thereby, liberating them from the assigned

home bound roles.⁵ Few Muslim girls from well-to-do and middle class families who are seriously concerned about quality education are now studying even outside the state. Out of them, bright and energetic educated girls are pursuing Medicine and Engineering courses from Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bangalore and neighbouring countries like Nepal, China, etc.

POLITICAL ASPECT:

Muslims as faithful citizens of Manipur have been electing their representatives and participating in the management and administration of the State of Manipur since the introduction of a democratic set-up in Manipur and adult franchise system to elect people's representative for an Assembly in 1948.⁶ Muslim Women's political participation is considerably high in both formal and informal political activities like demonstrations, mobilizations, election campaigns, canvassing and other similar activities. In Manipur, women voters turn out have always been very impressive. Muslim women showed their faith to Indian democratic system in a large scale. As voter, Muslim women showed a remarkable progress. A large section of Muslim women voters have begun to take independent decision while exercising their franchise. After the enforcement of the 73rd and 74th amendments which reserve one-third of seats and posts in the Panchayati Raj institutions and municipalities, many Muslim women are coming forward playing active politics at the village and municipality level as Members, Pardhans, and even Zila-Parishads, thereby, acquiring a stake in the positions of power and decision-making.⁷ Though Muslim women's representation in figures has increased at Panchayat and Municipality level, their representation still remained marginalized. Not a single Muslim female candidate has contested in the Manipur State Assembly elections and MP elections of the state till now. Divided and few Muslim leaders elected from Muslim dominating constituencies do not constitute a strong bargaining force and so not powerful enough to effect a change in the state policy. When representation and participation of Muslim itself is a big issue, within that the

⁵ Syed Ahmed, Status of Muslim Women in Manipur, Islam and The Modern Age, Vol. xxxiii No.2, May 2, 2002, p.59

⁶ Syed Ahmed, Political History of Muslims in Manipur, The Orient Vision (Vol. IV-Issue1) July-September, 2007, p.36

⁷ Syed Ahmed, Women Empowerment and Development: A case study of Manipuri Muslim Women, op.cit.

question of participation by Muslim women is another dimension of the issue.⁸ Absence of a conducive environment for Muslim women mainly due to low literacy rate, access to information and reinforcement of cultural stereotypes affect their entry into politics.

MANIPUR MUSLIM WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

Muslim women in Manipur have mobilized themselves to raise their grievance and aspirations through organizations and associations. A host of organizations solely organized by Muslim women have been active in Manipur for quite some time. Some prominent organizations of Manipuri Muslim women which were active - Kangleipak Muslim Chanura Development Organization (KMCDO), Association of Muslim Women Organizations (AMWO) and All Manipur Muslim Development Organization (AMMDO). Anwara Noorjahan, Sitara Begum, Ema Jano and Ema Amubi are some of the pioneer social activists of the Muslim community associated with the above mentioned organizations.

Over the years, many Muslim women's organizations and social activists have been active in mobilizing the Muslim women on diverse issues. Muslim women through such organizations have organized and mobilized themselves, started to talk about issues that not only concern the womenfolk and the Muslim society but about issues that concern the state of Manipur. They have increased participation in many spheres to express grievances, gain influence and direct public policy.

Activities of the Muslim women's organizations:

- Organize women as a collective group and give leadership quality training to women: Muslim women's organizations mainly involve themselves in organizing women and in giving leadership quality training to women. Some of them promote capacity building measures to women so that they strengthen and act with devolution of power and work collective-wise in different leikais (localities) with some members as groups under the leadership of their own chosen executive members.

⁸ See Anjuman Ara Begum, Muslim women have no place in Assam state's politics

Source:http://twocircles.net/2011apr04/muslim_women_have_no_place_assam_state%E2%80%99s_politics.html

- Educate on the issues of women: They educate women on the issues of women and their rights like right to equality, right to work, equal wages and how to live life with dignity. They even create awareness and organize awareness programmes regarding Gender, Human Rights, Child Rights, etc.
- Give skill training for income generation activities: Many Muslim women's organizations give skill training for income generation activities like detergent & soap productions, knitting, tailoring, weaving, embroidery, etc. Women are trained in groups, and once they acquire such trainings, they are allowed to use these skills for their own useful purposes.
- Deal with domestic violence issue: The various tasks undertaken by such organizations for the domestic violence victims and survivors includes arbitration in domestic quarrels and disputes, pressurizing the perpetrators to stop violence, counselling, facilitation of legal action, providing moral and motivational support to the victim and giving proper skill training for their future livelihood, etc.
- Participate in the larger issues related to the Manipur state: Many Muslim women activists of such organizations are involved in the activities of other prominent women's organizations in the state. They also address issues (like atrocities by armed personals, repealing of Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, issues of threat to integration of the state and conflict resolutions) that concern the state of Manipur. Anwara Noorjahan involves herself for the cause of Integrity and Peace Capacity Building for Conflict Resolution in the state. She is also the vice president of All Manipur Kanba Emalup (AMKEL) and Chief Convenor of International Committee on Puya Miethaba (ICOP). Recently, All Manipur Muslim (Pangal) Women Organization (AMPWO) under the presidentship of Anwara Noorjahan observed Nupi Lan Ningsing Numit (Nupi Lan Day) on 12th December 2011 to mark the 72nd anniversary of the Nupi Lan. Najma who leads Organization for Development (OFD) supports the cause of Irom Chanu Sharmila for repealing of controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act, (AFSPA) 1958. Najma is the member of the executive body of Just Peace Foundation. She even participated in 'Khuthang Chara Henba'. She is also the member of Manipur allies for Child Rights and member of Wing Women in Governance (Wing Promoters - Thoubal District). Sitara Begum (another Muslim women activist) is the vice president of Apunba Manipur Kanba Lup. She has also been honoured by Central and State Government with Dr. Ambedkar Fellowship Award, Youth Award by Nehru Yuva Kendra and Afabi Mama Award.

Issues and problems taken up by the women's organizations concerning women are often sidelined and marginalized for the greater cause of the security of the state as a whole. Such situation affects Manipuri women in general and Manipuri Muslim women in particular as Muslim women are the most disadvantaged and marginalized group in the state. State government's machineries are inefficient and ineffective especially in protecting the rights of the people and in implementing many government schemes. Right to Food, Right to Work, Right to Education, Domestic violence Act, Pension Scheme, Widow Benefit Scheme, etc are schemes for those who have money and muscle power. Because of the delay in giving justice to the domestic violence victims, the notion of free and fair legal aid service is not successful in many cases. Regarding the Public Distribution System, non-issuing of the ration cards cause denial of right to food in the state. In spite of NREGS scheme, many women are out-of-work for many months. There is no effective mechanism to monitor all such loopholes. Though the Muslim community are not fully against Muslim women's empowerment or setting up of their women's organization in the state, they are not fully co-operating Muslim women in their cause. Lack of support to the Muslim women's organizations from the male group in the Muslim localities is mainly because of the lack of education among the Muslims which leads to the maintaining of patriarchal structure among the Muslim community.

CONCLUSION

Today's Muslim women are aware of the changes and the demands of the time. They want to cope up with the progress and development achieved by women of other communities. They aspire to achieve equal status and empowerment by utilizing the opportunities of education and employment made available to them. The initiative of the Muslim community and policies and programmes of the state are crucial to help sustain the momentum that can get created through this change.

With the emergence of educated elite and middle class among the Manipuri Muslims, there are formation of various organizations and entry into politics putting forward the grievances and demands. They voice and highlight the socio-economic and political issues concerning the Muslims in Manipur. They believe in regaining overall problems of Manipuri Muslims with modern education and its values and through government's initiative and intervention.

The role of the state especially in conflict ridden region like Manipur is critical because of the politicization on ethnic identity and competition among different groups for state-controlled resources. For a community like Manipuri Muslims, the role of the state is much more crucial for their upliftment and to remove their most backward status. Unlike North Indian Muslims who give priority to religious or cultural demands (like preservation of Muslim Personal Law, Urdu, etc) along with economic demands, Manipuri Muslims are mainly in favour of focusing on socio-economic demands with the underlying aspirations for social and economic equality.

One critical issue is the role of the state in the promotion of minority education. The state can make available the scale of investment required for the universalization of education especially for Muslim girls, as their education demand higher investment in terms of more facilities, more women teachers, separate schools, transport and scholarships. As far as higher education is concerned, the best long term measure to correct this deficit is to increase school completion rates among Muslim women. The state must recognize disparities in educational attainment and availability across gender, class, residence and region. Therefore, there is need for comprehensive policy of inclusiveness in the field of education which will reduce disparities of any kind. With overall economic backwardness of the Muslims acting as a massive hindrance in overall change and development, state's role in economic upliftment is equally important. State's intervention is required in improving economic condition of Muslim women with anti-poverty programmes, increasing credit availability and policies regarding skill up-gradation to engage women workers in growth-oriented sectors.

It is not just governmental efforts that are necessary but a change in traditional and societal norms and in general mindsets of people are equally important. Many of the measures suggested above would become more efficacious if there is community participation. The Muslim community themselves should take the lead and work with dedication and sincerity for the upliftment of their own community. The leadership should emerge from within the Muslim society.

Now it is time to come out of the popular stereotype image of Muslim women as only veiled and uneducated women which continue to dominate the public image for quite a long time. It is important for Muslim women like what Ranjani Murthy emphasized on actively engagement of women themselves in a struggle to survive, to gain control over economic,

social and political resources and to lead a life of dignity.⁹ More opportunities should be provided for Manipuri Muslim women so that they are in a position to exercise and enlarge more choices of their own free will.

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⁹ Ranjani K. Murthy, Building Women's Capacities: Interventions in Gender Transformation (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001) p.349

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