

## IMA MARKET OF MANIPUR\_AYUSHI ARORA (AYANKA)

This piece details the origins, functioning, and cultural relevance of the Ima market in Manipur. The market is known for being Asia's only women-run market with nearly six thousand women who own businesses here. Since women are an innate part of the market, it will deal mainly with the location of Meitei (majority community of Manipur) women- who are the primary occupants of this market- in the Manipuri society and their relation to its complex history of insurgency with demands of secession and conflict with the Indian State. Their position is further complicated by the presence of long-standing intra-state ethnic conflicts between the Meiteis (primary occupants of the Imphal valley) and hill tribes which include among many others, Kukis and Nagas.

### THE MARKET

IMA market is known as 'Mothers Market' or *Ima Keithel* or *Nupi Keithel*, situated at *Khwairamband Bazaar* in Imphal.' In the market around 5,000 women shopkeepers hold licences. These licenses are passed down from one generation to another in a family.'<sup>1</sup> While the exact time of its beginning seems unknown, researchers indicated that the Gazetteer of Manipur 1786 indicates that all the marketing of the country was conducted by women in the open air, and markets were mostly held in the morning time.<sup>2</sup> History has indicated that 'it is said that due to the imposition of a forced labor system called *Lallup-Kaba* (in 1533 CE) in the kingdom of Manipur, all men from the Meithei community were bound to serve in the army, tax collection, and other developmental activities.'<sup>3</sup> Under this system men between the age of 16 and 60 were supposed to work for 10 out of 40 days for free for the government that utilized their labour for the development of their region.

Thus to be able to provide for their families, and for the sustenance of livelihood, Meitei women were given licences to run business on the land allotted for the market. The area of about 3.5km is now the *IMA Keithel* market or the *Nupi Keithel* market. The Ima Keithel was the primary permanent market in Manipur until the 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

The present structure of the market is divided into three buildings namely - *Leimarel Shidabi ema Keithel* (also called Purana Bazar). It is named after the Goddess of supreme household,

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<sup>1</sup> Tiwari, Anuj. (November 11,2022). Ima Keithel: Know About Imphal's 500 YO World's Largest All-Women Market. India Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.indiatimes.com/trending/social-relevance/ima-keithel-history-of-asia-largest-all-women-run-market-in-imphal-584543.html>

<sup>2</sup> Begum, A. Anjuman. (November 12, 2010). Ima Market of Imphal. Blogger. Retrieved from: <http://womennes.blogspot.com/2010/11/ima-market-of-imphal.html>

<sup>3</sup> Same as above

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ima\\_Market](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ima_Market)

*Emoinu ema Keithel* (also called Laxmi bazar) named after the Goddess of prosperity, wealth, and kitchen, and *Phouoibee ema Keithel* (also called new market named after the Goddess of bounty).<sup>5</sup> One can easily find items ranging from food items such as fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, and dried fish to local herbs to clothes and woolens, and traditional costumes. Metal and bamboo items are also found in the shops.<sup>6</sup> In another section, women sell popular handlooms and textiles of the state.

The traditional belief of the people here is that these deities are in the market with people there which is why these markets have also been named after the goddesses.<sup>7</sup> This new three-building set-up was built in 2010 by the Municipality in Imphal. Earlier, these shops were housed in sheds, but the Imphal Municipal Council has built a four-storey building from which the market operates now. In the olden days, a raised platform was built out of mud for women to conduct trade. It was only during the reign of Maharaja Bheigyachandra Singh in 1789, that a proper place was chosen and the first *keithel shang* or market sheds were constructed using mud, bamboo, and thatch. Later on, in 1905 the British governor-Shakespeare Saheb completed the shang with iron beams and galvanized tin roof with a capacity to accommodate 1763 women. Each woman was allotted a space called "*Potpham*", to store, display, and promote their merchandise.<sup>8</sup>

After demolishing the old building, the present three-storey building was constructed on the same spot which was inaugurated in 2010.<sup>9</sup> In 2010 when the market was being constructed, Anjuman Ara Begum, Human Rights Activist, freelance journalist, and blogger from North East India, wrote that - this development is not beyond controversy. Starting from the nomenclature of the three complexes, allotment of shops, a feeling of discrimination, etc will haunt the celebration for many women. Several indigenous bodies have objected to the nomenclature of the three complexes terming it non-representative of the culture and history of the land. Shops are allotted to 'licensed' vendors while some women said that an average of 300 single women and widows, mostly the widows whose husbands are killed in encounters join the market to earn their livelihood. Most of these women have no license. In

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<sup>5</sup> Meetei, Ulemba Heerom. (December 2015). Ema Keithel: The Mother's Market. Retrieved from: <https://dsourc.in/sites/default/files/course/visual-ethnography-designers/sample-reports/file/Ema%20Keithel%20-%20mother's%20market.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Same as 2

<sup>7</sup> Same as above

<sup>8</sup> Same as 4; There is a particular kind of importance that the Manipuri culture gives to markets. And this importance is passed down via oral traditions. The importance that manipuris attach to markets is reflected in a number of myths, legends and folklores. According to Kamnung Engal Lishaba, a text which deals with the mythical account of keithel or market, seven 'Lairembis' or goddesses started introducing 'Lai Keithel Kaba' for selling articles. In connection with this, the seven Lairembis represented as, Chinga Leima, one important goddess dealt in rice; Pishum Leima, another goddess in gold and silver; Chinga Leima in vegetables, Waithou Leima in edible oil; Waisheng Leima in salt cake and so on and so forth.

<sup>9</sup> Same as above

such a situation there is a risk that these women will lose their livelihood. Several bodies have demanded special allotment or reservation for the women of their community. The Kabui community has demanded 200 shops while the Muslim community has demanded 9% allotments in the new complexes.<sup>10</sup>

The significance of this conflict can be understood in light of the context formed by the peculiar norms and demography of this market. The only licensed vendors in the market are those who have been married at least once (as also illustrated by 'mothers market'). The licenses and businesses are passed down from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. In this market, the inheritance does not follow transfer along bloodlines. The demography of the market is such that older women are more often seen working in the markets. Some women have brought up their children and can spill out, as their domestic roles have been taken care of by the younger affine, usually their daughter-in-law. Though younger women are also seen often now, they are usually the ones divorced or have been widowed in the insurgency in Manipur.<sup>11</sup> There are also those women who do not possess licences and therefore set up their shacks outside the market on the streets. Because they are unlicensed sellers, police view them as vulnerable targets to subject their brutality to. This is why the women would lay out their stock on plastic sheets that they could just pack and run as soon as the police arrived.

The market is managed by a union formed by Meitei women who work there. They help other women set up businesses in the market by providing them with loans. There have been instances when the police tried to forcefully displace those women who set up stalls in the open; the union also organized to resist that. The union is very powerful in the area and has had a history of unionizing in the face of challenges from the establishment.

## **WOMEN AND MEITEI IDENTITY**

The market is not only an economic center but also a political center as well. Centre for Organisation Research & Education (CORE), Manipur, India in a report published in 2005 pointed out that 'these Keithel as not just hubs of commerce, but also information exchange and socio-political processes'. During lunch or break times, women discuss socio-political issues and this flow of information keeps them aware and empowered.

It won't be wrong to say that the Nupi Lan or women's uprising against the British in 1904 and 1939 against the reimposition of the *Lallup* system of labor were organized and conceived from the marketplaces.<sup>12</sup> Between 1948 and 1952, a proposal came from some

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<sup>10</sup> Same as 5

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ima\\_Market](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ima_Market)

<sup>12</sup> Same as 6

local rich people in connivance with the petty alien trades to demolish the existing shed. However, women were not outnumbered and were successful in retaining it.<sup>13</sup> These women-led movements in Meitei society are not restricted to those who run businesses. Many Meitei women in the 1970s took on the role of the 'guardians of civil society' when they organized in numbers patrolling the streets at night bearing torches to redress the issue of human rights violations and rapes of women by armed and paramilitary forces deployed under the Armed Forces and Special Powers Act (AFSPA).<sup>14</sup> It was due to this that these women came to be known as *Meira Paibis* (women torch bearers). They have no centralized institutional organization; they are loosely organized at the State, district, and the *leikai* or neighborhood level.<sup>15</sup>

It remains to be noted though, that central to the women's collective is their identity as Meiteis and not just their gender. Meiteis are in the majority of the state (over 50%) and are the primary occupants of Imphal Valley. Though other indigenous tribes are allowed to own land in the valley the exact demographic distribution of the market is unknown. While the licensing procedures are also unclear from the sources available, demands for inclusion and reservation for other communities reflect that Meiteis form a socio-political majority in the market.

It is important to note that what we see as collectives or empowered women in a society requires a deeper reflection of the context in which they seem to be operating. To delve further into the complex web of identities that interact and form the base of their politics and role in the Manipuri society.

Within this web are individuals who have a certain kind of sentimental association with their culture; especially for a culture that has been vulnerable to dilution by various foreign forces historically. Identity in Manipur is defined by their demand for a distinct native identity. Vijaylakshmi Brara while speaking of the visibility that north-east women have enjoyed in their society writes that- 'the Northeast women with nationalistic cultural bandwagon, see themselves as a microcosm of the bigger social system encompassing them.'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Same as above

<sup>14</sup> Sharma, Manorama. (August 24, 2023). Meira Paibis: How Manipur's peace-keepers became agents provocateur. The Hindu. Retrieved from: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/manipur-conflict-meira-paibis-how-manipurs-peace-keepers-became-agent-provocateurs/article67212483.ece#:~:text=Usually%2C%20the%20Meira%20Paibis%20function,the%20various%20levels%20come%20together.>

<sup>15</sup> Same as 14

<sup>16</sup> Brara, Vijaylakshmi. Retrieved from (currently been made unavailable on this link): [http://www.insoso.org/images/pdfs/Vijaylakshmi\\_Brara\\_5.pdf](http://www.insoso.org/images/pdfs/Vijaylakshmi_Brara_5.pdf); Brara has written extensively on women's resistances in Manipur, but the said blog post has been made unavailable.

I take the name of the market as a reference point to unravel the politics that the place of women in such a setting signifies. *Emā Keithel* market is the 'mothers market' and for a culture to make service as a mother central to the whole space opens up various conversations. Several scholars from the north-east have written about this- Vijaylakshmi for example, says that in the north-east women have always been visible.<sup>17</sup> But over time they have come under the influence of patriarchy with rigid gender roles. One example is that of the garment *phanek* in the society which is symbolic of norms of purity and pollution (influence of Hinduism). This is because men are not allowed to touch the garment but at the same time the *phanek* is considered to be sacred if it belongs to older women. This implies that it is a garment worn by women of the menstruating age group that is not to be touched by men. It is one of the reasons why men are not allowed to sell in the IMA market.<sup>18</sup> In addition to this, their role in decision-making within households as well as in political spaces has remained extremely limited. Meira Paibis' influence has remained limited to *leikai* levels (neighborhood) with little to no representation in the state assembly which has a majority (40 out of 60) of Meitei men.

Despite the visibility that women have in society and the collective strength they possess, they have not organized against the oppression that comes from within their society. Vijaylakshmi argues that even though these women have successfully resisted tyrannical colonial forces, they have not positioned themselves in opposition to their culture.<sup>19</sup> This is where the idea that markets like *Emā Keithel* act as a 'microcosm of the bigger social system' comes in. It is representative of the moral backing that women provide to the system. In a region that is involved in a struggle to attain a nationality based on identity, there is a need to belong; there is a desire for a nation based on justice and freedom. 'When the issue predominantly encircles identities, it en-cultures around the pride of belonging to one's group. Critiquing one's culture then skirts around the charge of being anti-national.'<sup>20</sup> Therefore women become 'motherisits', militant mothers who have to fight for the survival of

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<sup>17</sup> Same as above; They were present in the social space in the form of traditional priestesses. There are stories of royal women in Assam, Manipur and Tripura who were warriors, promoted education and also peace negotiators. Women have been traditional storytellers, performers in proscenium theatres, etc. Even today this region is filled with stories of women from Northeast India having oral knowledge of herbs for curing incurable illnesses.

<sup>18</sup> It is hard to establish the roots of certain patriarchal practices. There are writings that state that Vaishnavism was enforced on Meiteis under the reign of Gharibniwaz, who also gradually introduced Bangla script and language. Although this faced resistance which continues even today, but the present day culture exhibits a kind of enmeshment of the two cultures that Vaishnavism in Manipur has become peculiar to the state. The two cultures i.e. Vaishnavism and Sanamahi are now indistinguishable from each other. Read more on: <https://12ft.io/proxy?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.indianexpress.com%2Farticle%2Fexplained%2Fwho-are-the-meitei-manipurs-valley-dwellers-with-an-old-and-rich-history-8602945%2F> and <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=7863fa7d7b45cbe8f2b0a37a5d8c25c984e8964a>

<sup>19</sup> Brara, Vijaylakshmi. Retrieved from (currently been made unavailable on this link): [http://www.insoso.org/images/pdfs/Vijaylakshmi\\_Brara\\_5.pdf](http://www.insoso.org/images/pdfs/Vijaylakshmi_Brara_5.pdf); Brara has written extensively on women's resistances in Manipur, but the said blog post has been made unavailable.

<sup>20</sup> Same as above

their children (nation).<sup>21</sup> They become the force on which the furtherance of the national cause rests and depends.

What needs to be highlighted is that many of these discussions mention that 'women bear the burden of being mothers of the nation'. Or that the labor they do is not out of choice but mostly imposed on them. One study highlights the existence of what has come to be known now as "benevolent patriarchy", in the Meitei society. Benevolent patriarchy operates by producing and sustaining the consent of the subjects over whom the power is exercised.<sup>22</sup> What it means is that the visibility 'granted' to women in society is what secures that consent; that they are unaware that there is subjugation in exchange for visibility. While it is true that there is the institutionalization of their labor as mothers and not of the traditional systems of knowledge they hold (see footnote 15), it is also true that nation-building imagines a certain kind of role (often violent) for everyone. And that this imagination is not wholly external to individuals; there is a degree of complicity involved. Oppressors and oppressed do not operate in a binary. There are obvious instances such as those of certain women being excluded from being licensed owners of businesses. As well as stereotypes that exist against the women who are widows of insurgents. Or in the ongoing conflict, there is news about women blocking roads for allowing mobs to freely massacre people and rape women from the Kuki tribes. Taking the example of the conversation about the ongoing ethnic violence is imperative at this stage. The conflict began in May this year. The state has been raging with ethnic violence between the two major groups Meiteis and Kukis (many of whom are Christians) for the last six months. This has led to a dismal death toll that continues to increase, thousands have lost their homes and are displaced in settlement camps facing gross human rights violations in the absence of basic necessities.

As in cases of all major ethnic and communal conflicts, in Manipur as well the expression of rivalry has come in the form of sexual violence against women. Many such instances against Kuki women have surfaced in popular media accompanied by disturbing imagery. In most of these, women from the Kuki community were raped, stripped, beaten to death, and also paraded naked on roads in retaliation for rumors about rapes of Meitei women by Kuki men. What has been particularly shocking is the role that *Meira Paibis* allegedly played in making way for violent mobs to inflict such violence as well as by acting as bystanders or onlookers. In some cases, families of Kuki women who were dragged by mobs and held in closed quarters for long, also mentioned that allegedly Meitei women handed them over to the mobs.<sup>23</sup> However, it must also be pointed out that in instances of such prolonged violence

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<sup>21</sup> Same as above

<sup>22</sup> Same as above

<sup>23</sup> Sithou, Hoineihing. (June 1, 2023). How Fake News Created Pretexts to Lynch Kuki-Zo Women in Manipur. Newsclick. Retrieved from: <https://www.newsclick.in/how-fake-news-created-pretexts-lynch-kuki-zo-women-manipur>

of this kind sexual misconduct becomes the norm and is often inflicted on women on either side of the warring communities.

These instances are illustrative of the violence as a phenomenon that is as much coming from within as it is external. The pristine nature that is associated with motherhood contains equal amounts of violence. Oppressors are often those who are already oppressed. Narratives that position women as unaware subjects who need to sacrifice for the nation assume that oppression and violence are external to women. That the violence of nation-building is perpetrated on them and not at the same time happening through them. As if the nation and patriarchy are these overarching external entities that are externally responsible for the 'mothering' of women. It is important to understand that ethnic clashes become a place where ethnic identity often takes precedence over gender identity. Identification (national or ethnic) as a process assumes violence in its process of formation, a process that always remains unfinished. The process innately demands positioning oneself as the victim of the Other. 'Victimhood is something that happens, but when you turn it into an identity you're psychically and politically finished'.<sup>24</sup>

After the conflict that has unfolded in the state, there seems to be gaps in our knowledge and we are limited by the restrictions in the state. There have been internet and network restrictions, and difficulty in reaching out to people who have lost their homes. Additionally, it is difficult to gauge at this stage what has shifted for people and how, or is it just a culmination of something that the society was inevitably moving towards.

It might be of value to stay with a set of questions to be addressed at better times in the future when the situation seems relatively stable:

1. The idea that women run markets of such a large scale in a place like Manipur are representative of more equal societies or that they are economic and political drivers of the state brings us to - re-evaluate our conceptions of empowerment and visibility when faced with a complex space such as the Manipuri society and with little on-ground knowledge.
2. While we know that only married women can run businesses in the IMA Keithel market it might be worthwhile to know if divorced women or their young daughters or other relatives assist them in their job. How rigidly is this norm practiced?
3. It is mentioned in a couple of places that there are early instances of barter in the market and these have existed from feudal times. How did the nature of the market, transaction, and trade changed with the introduction of modern capitalism?

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<sup>24</sup>Sehgal, Parul. (May 12, 2021). A New Book Thinks Clearly and Creatively About Violence Against Women. The New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/12/books/review-on-violence-against-women-jacqueline-rose.html>

4. What is also unknown is a deeper understanding of the dynamics between Meitei women and women from other communities in the state.
5. While one can assume from available information the idea of 'mother' is central to mainstream politics and the market, it might be worthwhile to understand the community's idea of 'motherhood'; that in gendered or non-gendered ways what is the cultural relevance of this.
6. How are widowed women, especially those whose husbands were 'insurgents' or were killed in encounters treated in society? How are they treated in these markets? Is there resistance to their continuance?
7. Now that there is no enforced system of serving in the state army, what are the kinds of jobs the husbands of these women engaged in?