

INTER-COMMUNITY VARIATION IN INCOME, OCCUPATION AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF WOMEN IN IMPHAL VALLEY OF MANIPUR, INDIA

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INTRODUCTION:

The three towering Ema (mother) markets at the centre of Imphal city epitomizes the role played by women in the economy, polity, and overall society of Manipur. Further, numerous small markets by the road side in various nooks and corners of the state where by women exclusively sell several goods necessary for day-to-day life are a common sight. There is even an old Manipuri saying that a man who does not go to Loishang(Council) and a woman who does not go to the market are worthless. The domineering task of women is often regarded as the result of the long historical process of the kingdom marred by frequent adversarial conflicts both internal and external. In fact, there were tussles among the seven kindred clans in the process of consolidation of the Manipuri kingdom till the 13th century and then with the Burmese and the numerous tribal chiefs later on. The unending conflict situation warranted the menfolk to be ever ready at the call of the king to be part of the army and, hence, the burden of the family falling upon womenfolk (Sircar, 1984). The tradition continues to date, whereby women are at the forefront in all aspects of life in Manipur though the society strongly maintains the norms of patriarchy.

However, it would be a grave mistake to consider women in Manipur valley as a homogenous unit as several ethnic groups settled there. The diverse ethnic groups have enormous differences in customs, traditions, and institutions that determine the overall condition of women. The valley, which is the place and origin of the Manipuri civilization since time immemorial, is comprised of five districts especially Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal, Bishnupur and Kakching. However, this study is based on the available information of the earlier four districts. The Meiteis form the majority in the central Imphal valley and Muslims known as Meitei Pangals and various tribal groups each differing from the other in their beliefs and ways of life inhabit there. Additionally, communities like Bengali, Bihari, Marwari, Nepali, Punjabi etc., who all have migrated at different periods and have contributed immensely to the overall progress of the state.

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This study focuses on the key women's communities of Meitei, Pangal (Muslims), and Tribal (Kabui) in the Imphal valley. According to the 2011 census, the Meitei community is the largest, with an estimated population of around 1.3 million, followed by the Pangal community with 239,836 individuals, and the Tribal communities with 56,913 people in the Imphal valley. Many researchers have studied Manipuri women from various perspectives, focusing primarily on their socio-economic background, socio-political movements, culture, religious studies, and empowerment. However, comparative studies of the major women's communities in the state remain limited, particularly on several key issues. Therefore, the study of inter-community variations in women's educational attainment levels, their children's school preference on government/private school and dropout rate, main occupational structures, main bread earners of the family in prevailing patriarchal society, income differences among women communities in the region is indispensable for socio-economic development process of a region and gender equality.

The significance of women in Manipuri society is well recognized. However, as noted earlier, there are multiple layers of diversity among the different ethnic groups in our study, particularly in terms of customs, traditions, institutions, and the overall status of women in their respective societies. While women from different ethnic groups have been the subject of numerous studies, these studies have generally been conducted separately. A comparative study to assess and understand their position and empowerment has been scarce. The present study attempts to fill the void.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The status of women in India has been always judged from how it fares with the male counterparts and several studies have been studied in this regard. However, the comparison of the status of women among themselves in terms of class, caste, religion or region has been negligible in the country with Manipur being no exception. Kipgen (2010) did a comprehensive comparative study of the women of the three major ethnic communities in Manipur viz., the Meiteis, the Muslims, and Tribal. The study concluded that among the three communities, the Meiteis not surprisingly have the highest social position of women and contribution in the economy and society is found to be unique. On the contrary, the Tribal women are becoming more educated are still bonded by traditional institutions imbedded in a strictly patriarchal society. The social position of the Muslim women on the contrary, is found to be much below the other communities and is still shackled by illiteracy, poor health, and subordination. Haokip (2008) also made a comparative study of the social position of the Tribal and Non-tribal women in Manipur. The study concluded that there is a considerable difference between the two communities regarding the respect of women inherits from their family members. It is found that Meitei women are more respected in the

family and they face a lesser degree of gender discrimination compared to the tribal women. Gangmei (2016) did a study to find out the status of the political empowerment of women of various Tribal women in Manipur. The study that encompassed major Tribal groups within the state concluded that one thing that is common among women of the tribes is that they are politically excluded and there is an acute lack of knowledge among them regarding their political rights and opportunities. The position of the Meitei women is presumed to be better to the tribal women, though they have miles to go before they are treated at par with their male counterparts. The same is also resonate in the findings of a study by Ningthoujam et al. (2021) where they found that Manipuri women, despite the façade of their high social status, lag behind the males considerably in terms of several development indicators like literacy, public employment, political participation and overall decision making.

3. METHODS :

This database is purely based on primary data collected through a household survey and questionnaire conducted in 2017 and 2018, using a suitable sampling technique. Women from the three major groups of valley Meitei, Muslim, and Tribal were selected from both urban and rural areas of the valley's districts to explore variations in factors like education, employment, and living conditions. The population comprises of 322,738 households across four districts of Manipur, as per the 2011 Census and the March 2017 electoral roll. Of these households, 170,028 are in rural areas, while 152,710 are in urban areas, excluding other communities. The study area includes 383 villages in rural areas and 43 towns in urban areas. A total of 570 households were chosen from the 322,738 households using a formula formulated by the United Nations (2005).

$$n_h = \frac{Z^2 r(1-r)fk}{p\tilde{n}e^2}$$

By fixing $z=1.96$ (95% confidence level), r = literacy rate of female=0.71, $f=2.0$, $k=1.10$ (10% of non-response in developing countries), $p=0.504$ (Total female divided by total population), $\tilde{n} = 4.87$ and $e=0.05$ $r=0.0355$ (level of precision at 5% of r), the estimated sample size is

$$n_h = 562 \cong 570$$

The study selected 570 households, including 280 from the Meitei community, 150 from the Pangal community, and 140 from the Tribal community. A multi-stage sampling technique, incorporating both stratified and simple random sampling, was used to determine the sample size. In the first stage, stratified sampling was applied, dividing the districts into two units rural and urban. In the second stage, 360 households were selected from 18 villages, with 20 households chosen from each village. Additionally, 210 households were

selected from 6 towns, with 35 households chosen from each town. In total, 570 samples were randomly selected from both urban and rural areas.

4. RESULTS :

4.1 Inter community variation in educational attainment of women

Educational attainment is widely regarded as one of the key indicators of a country's Human Development Index (HDI). The level of socio-economic progress of a society is in fact a determinant of the level of educational attainment (Pant, 2013). As a norm, the domination of men over women is found in all aspects of life in a patriarchal society. It ultimately hinders the empowerment of women, thereby limiting their contribution to society and the economy as a whole (Shabaya & Konadu -Agyemang, 2004).

TableNo.1: Male- Female literacy in Imphal valley, 2011 (in%)

Districts	Literate	Male	Female
Imphal East	81.95	88.77	75.32
Imphal West	86.08	92.24	80.17
Thoubal	74.47	85.00	64.09
Bishnupur	75.85	85.11	66.68
Manipur	76.94	83.58	70.26

Source: Office of the Registrar General of India.

Table 1 reveals a significant gap in literacy rates between males and females in the four valley districts, reflecting a societal bias that prioritizes male education over female education. This gap is particularly pronounced in the predominantly rural districts of Thoubal and Bishnupur. Meanwhile, Table 2 highlights inter-community differences in women's educational attainment. The data shows that Muslim women, specifically the Pangals, lag far behind the Meitei and tribal communities in educational achievements. However, in terms of higher education, Meitei women outperform those from the other two communities. From the chi-square test result, educational attainment level is significantly associated with community.

TableNo.2 : Community wise educational Attainment level of women (in %)

Educational Qualification	Community				Chi-square	P-value
	Meitei	Pangal	Tribal	Total		
Illiterate	23.9	30.6	23.5	25.6	34.8	<0.01
Below HSLC (class-x)	26.4	46.0	27.8	31.9		
HSLC (class-x-xii)	25.7	14.6	30.0	23.8		

Graduate & Above	23.9	8.6	18.5	18.6		
Total	100	100	100	100		

Source : Primary Survey, 2017-18

Regarding children's education, most parents demonstrate a clear preference for private schools over government schools, likely reflecting the perceived better quality of education provided in private institutions. The foremost reason for selecting private schools by the parents is the better quality of education imparted therein which they believe in the long run will give their children better prospects for government jobs in today's highly competitive world. On the other hand, majority of parents who chose government schools gave the reason as weak financial condition as private schools charged huge sums in the form of fees and other expenditures which are beyond their means.

In terms of children dropout rates (Table 3), the Pangals exhibit the highest dropout rate, while the Meiteis and tribal communities have comparable levels. The main factors for the dropout of children as per the respondents are overwhelmingly financial problems of the households followed by lack of interest in studies.

TableNo.3: Community wise variation in school dropout rate (in%)

Community	Male	Female	Total
Meitei	12.77	16.29	15.0
Pangal	17.93	32.81	26.67
Tribal	13.23	17.26	15.71

Source: Primary Survey, 2017-18

4.2 Inter-community variation in occupational patterns of women

Women in Manipur constitute a huge chunk of the total workforce of the state. Apart from their social and political roles, they play an indispensable role in the trade and commerce system of the economy (Devi et al. 2022). However, as observed from table 4, there exist considerable variations in the occupational pattern of the three communities too.

The Meiteis, being more advanced, have higher proportion of women being employed in better paying jobs like owning farms, government and private enterprises, running their own business, etc. The tribals on the other hand are less employed in their own farm activities and more occupied with self-employment of various kinds. A major portion of tribal women also engaged in casual labour and running small business. Further, being close to nature, about 13 percent of tribal women identified foraging and gathering forest produce as their main employment. Regarding, in matter of the Pangals, the casualization of women's

employment is clearly seen with about 35 percent of the total women identifying casual labour as their primary occupation. The second most common occupation for Pangal women is petty business, accounting for 25 percent. The Pangals have the least representation of employment in government and private enterprises with just 1 percent of them engaging in it, highlighting their weak educational and economic status. None of the Pangal women are engaged in manufacturing and trade in major business. Overall, the majority of Pangal women respondents, approximately 80 percent, have not been economically active.

Table No.4 : Main occupations of the three major women communities (in %)

Main occupation	Community			Total Workers
	Meitei	Pangal	Tribal	
Own farm activities	21.13	15.83	9.46	17.22
Casual labourer	18.15	35.83	18.24	21.69
Foraging/Gathering	5.06	5.83	12.84	7.12
Employee (Govt./Pvt.)	15.18	1.67	14.19	12.25
Self-employed	14.29	15.0	25.0	17.05
Petty/Small business	20.24	25.83	19.59	21.19
Manufacturing	1.79	-	-	0.99
Major business/Trade	4.17	-	0.68	2.48
Total	55.63	19.87	24.50	100.0

Source: Primary Survey, 2017-18

Regarding the main bread earner in the family, we can observe that the tribal (72.14%) and the Pangal families (72.66%) rely more on the husband or the male head of the household as the main earner. The respondent women themselves as the main bread earners are highest with respect to the Meiteis (19.28%) signifying their responsibility in the overall economy, polity and the society. All three communities also rely heavily on sons as earners of the family while the contributions of daughters are generally meagre. To sum up, all the families cutting across the communities rely mostly on the male members, either the husband or the son, for subsistence.

4.3 Income differentials among women of the three communities

Despite being considered highly empowered, women in Manipur are found to be highly dependent on male family members, as approximately one-third of the total respondents across the three communities have no source of income at all (Table 5). Significant differences also exist among the three communities when it comes to women's income in our study.

The Meitei women are comparatively way better off than both the tribal and the Pangals by a considerable margin as far as personal income is concerned. The situation is worse for the Pangal with half of the women respondents without any income at all. About 28 percent of Meitei women earn more than 10000 (Indian Rupee) per month while the corresponding figure is 15 percent for the tribal and a meagre 10 percent for the Pangl women. From the chi-square test result, personal income variation of the women is found to be significantly associated with community.

TableNo.5 : Personal income of the women respondents per month in Indian Rupee

Community	No Income	< 5000	5000-10000	10000-15000	15000-20000	> 20000	Chi-square
Meitei	20.7	39.64	10.71	11.07	9.29	8.57	5.11 (<0.001)
Pangal	49.3	33.33	6.67	4.00	4.00	2.67	
Tribal	29.2	44.29	10.7	8.57	5.00	2.14	
Total	30.3	39.12	9.6	8.60	6.84	5.44	

Source: Primary Survey, 2017-18

5. DISCUSSION:

Women play a huge role in the overall socio-economy of the state since time immemorial. However, as stated above, the status and empowerment of women vary significantly among the communities residing in the central fertile valley of the state. The Meiteis not surprisingly are found to be most empowered when it comes to development parameters like education, income and employment. The finding is also resonated in the study of Arambam (2013) where she argued that Meitei women have experienced relatively less oppression compared to women in other parts of the country. The empowerment of women especially the Meiteis is manifested according to her in their active participation in various economic spheres. The Meite is not surprisingly are well ahead of the two communities when it comes to female education. The variation among the three communities is stark when it comes to higher education with the Meitei women doing much well compared to the other two communities. The female dropout rate is highest in case of the Pangals and lowest for the Meiteis with the tribal community coming in between. All the three communities also rely heavily on male members as main bread earners of the family while the contributions of women are generally meagre. To sum up, all the families cutting across the communities relies mostly on the male members either the husband or the son for subsistence.

There are notable differences in the occupational patterns of women across the three communities. Meitei women, being more educated, are generally employed in formal, higher-

paying jobs compared to the other two communities. In contrast, Tribal women are primarily engaged in self-employment, small businesses, and casual labour. Casual labor is most prevalent among Muslim women, reflecting their weaker socio-economic position. They are also heavily involved in petty businesses, which yield highly variable income. The low work participation of Muslim women is influenced by two factors (Asghar et al., 2014). The first factor is the non-preference of women working outside home according to the tradition of Islam and second one is their low educational status. There are also significant income disparities among the three communities. Meitei women have relatively higher personal income compared to both the Tribal and Pangal women. Meitei women have relatively higher personal income compared to both the Tribal and Pangal women. The situation is worse for the Pangal with half of the women respondents without any source of income at all. From the chi-square test result, personal income variation of the women is found to be significantly associated with community.

6. CONCLUSION :

Women in Manipur are well-known for their significant involvement in various socio-economic activities. They not only manage the main markets but also oversee numerous small markets across the state. Despite this, Manipur's society remains patriarchal; this results in women lagging behind men in areas such as literacy, employment in organized sectors, income, and political participation. Additionally, there is a noticeable disparity in women's empowerment levels among the three major communities in the Imphal Valley: the Meiteis, the Pangals, and the Tribals. The Meiteis are generally more advanced in terms of literacy and earning capacity, as they are engaged in higher-paying jobs. In contrast, the Pangals face social and religious challenges, placing them at a disadvantage in these areas. While Tribal women are more empowered than Pangal women, their income remains lower than that of Meitei women due to the traditional, low-paying nature of their work.

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