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**NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**



**TWENTYTHIRD SESSION
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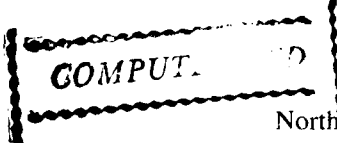
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Preface

The Twenty-Third Session of the NEIHA was hosted by the Tripura University, and was held at Agartala, Tripura from 26-28 September 2002. The Session was inaugurated by His Excellency the Governor of Tripura. The three days of the Annual Conference was very well attended by historians and other social scientists from different parts of the region and also from other parts of the country and the academic sessions, the most important part of the Annual Conferences of NEIHA, saw the active participation of all NEIHA members present. We place on record our thanks to the Vice-Chancellor of Tripura University for hosting the XXIIIrd Session of NEIHA and also our very sincere thanks to Prof. Mahadev Chakravarti the Local Secretary, and his colleagues in the Department of History and other departments in the University and Colleges who worked untiringly to make the session a success.

This volume is a collection of the papers presented in the various academic panels of the XXIIIrd session and also the proceedings of the business meetings of the session. We regret that the Audit Report and the Treasurer's report could not be printed because these were not received on time. The Association is grateful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the financial support advanced towards the publication of the Proceedings volume.

May we reiterate a point for the information of members that if the papers presented do not follow the **NEIHA style sheet** for referencing and if the revised drafts do not come to us within the last date announced in the business session it becomes very difficult for the editors and the Editorial Board to function. It was mainly for these reasons and also of course for the considered opinion of the Panel Chairpersons, whose comments on every paper were clearly recorded and the deliberations of the Editorial Board, that a number of papers had to be abstracted or listed. We request all NEIHA members to kindly follow the NEIHA style sheet of reference published in **Appendix F of the NEIHA Proceedings Volume of the XVIIIth Session (Agartala)** and also to send in their revised papers within the last date

decided upon in the business session of every Annual Conference. The task of editing, proof reading etc. of such a large number of papers within a very limited period is very time consuming and we can do the work to the satisfaction of all NEIHA members only with the co-operation of all the paper presenters.

Finally we would like to say a very special word of thanks to the members of the Editorial Board, Prof. J. B. Bhattacharjee, Prof. Mignonette Momin and Prof. F. A. Qadri who made our work much lighter by giving much of their time to sit through the Editorial Board meetings to decide on the status of the papers and also editing and doing the proof reading of the papers. We thank Mr. Pradeep Shaha and his staff of *Modern Offset* for their interest in the work and getting the volume ready in time for release in the 24th session.

Shillong
11th July, 2003



(Manorama Sharma)



(D.R. Syiemlieh)

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Women's Market and State: Experiences of the Manipur Valley

Sudhir Haorongbam

Introduction

Manipur valley prides herself of her own exclusive women's market system and its inextricably tied up historic experiences significantly to the state's wider political ambivalence. Women's market has always been an object of interest to the observers embarking on their researches on the history of the valley Meitei women. Yet, colonial market account borrowed uncritically by the native and Indian writers snarled up the scene on the historiology of the market system. The paper has the two pronged objective of penetrating deep into the profile of the market history, precisely of the Imphal Valley and its inseparable historic intimacy with the state's wider politics. The study is designed to re-assess the focused area scrutinizing the archival and previous secondary contributions with the indigenous Meitei literary sources and accumulated information based on preliminary personal interviews with the selected scholars and Meitei elders.

Pre-Khuntakpa Period

Delving into the archaic indigenous source clearly dispels existence and functioning of the market system in Manipur of the yore.

"Khwai Nungchengbi chanu goes to market and sells betelnut daily. Lamlen Malamkhei, end of Khwai".¹

The foregoing observation falls in an around the first century A.D. that could perhaps be established by the contemporaneity of Khwai Nungchengbi chanu with Sanamahi who happened to be the elder brother of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33-154) the first historical king as per record with whose accession to the throne in 33 A.D. commenced the history of Manipur. Origin of Kwakeithel as a market during Khuyoitompok's reign (154-264) can be one such flagrant example.

Though earlier evidences cast 'direct exchanges' and selling of surplus produces, weekly or monthly, at convenient spots beside rivers, lakes, roads and neighbourhood of villages amongst the women with in

the state as an age-long phenomenon, an organized marketing network was yet to arrive at till the crystallization of the Sana-Keithel as the daily epi-market. How old is Sana Keithel? Where was Sana Keithel?

A British officer turned ethnographer who was with the East London College and later the Cambridge's Anthropology department after his stint as an Assistant Political Agent in Manipur observed in his monograph,² "Imphal possesses the largest and most important of those markets to which the name Sena Kaithel³ is given. It is said to have been founded by Mongeanba⁴ in about 1580."⁵

The observation infers the Sana Keithel above all the markets sprawling the Imphal area. However, chronology of its inception in 1580 during Mungyanba's reign (1562-97) remain a question, for the existing indigenous sources expressly depict its inauguration in Khagemba's reign (1597-1652).⁶ The colonial historiography's location of its proximately to the royal enclosure or western royal gate⁷ fails to offer a limpid picture that necessarily calls forth verification.

One opinion situates the Sana Keithel at the present Bir Tikendrajit Park.⁸ There are evidences of a market in and around the present Sahid Minar pillar⁹ called 'Pheidapung Keithel' in the Bir Tikendrajit Park precincts. Is this Pheidapung Keithel the Sana Keithel according to the foregoing opinion? Another opinion traces the Sana Keithel to the area in and around the present Congress office.¹⁰ Information acquired shows existence of another market along the line of the north gate of the present Johnstone School opposite of the market in and around the Congress office. What the opinion portrays is the existence of two markets opposite each other called north market and south market divided by a road, the present Bir Tikendrajit Road and another one proximate to the southern one, the Pheidapung Keithel. There also had another historic market par excellence, the Khwairamband Keithel to the west of the proximate to each other in the Imphal area. One opinion perceives the Khwairamband Keithel embodying of all markets discussed above which is also known as the Sana royalty.¹¹ This arguments is responded by its adversary perceiving the Sana Keithel and the Khwairamband as two distinct markets with differences of chronology in inception and different market timings even though the same women might be shuttling in selling their produces in the said markets. Reading a write up interestingly spells out the genesis of derivation of its name, Sana Keithel for the transaction in the market carried out 'partially or wholly' in gold as medium of transaction¹² like

confirming to the literal-transaction of the concept Sana Keithel [Sana = gold; Keithel = market]. This is almost similar to what has been recorded by a colonial officer posted in Manipur¹³. However, the author fails to identify the exact location of the Sana Keithel. Keeping in view of foregoing arguments, the idea of identifying the Sana Keithel could be to what one opines of being a distinct entity appears plausible that sails its own journey along with co-markets at proximate touches. The journey lingered on until the emergence of the Khwairamband bazaar as being the largest market system with the gradual fading away the flavours of the markets in the post Anglo Manipuri War, 1891.¹⁴

Khuntakpa to Anglo-Manipuri War, 1891

The proper Imphal valley had a catastrophic experience during the seven years of the Burmese reign of terror (1819-26) eminently characterized by the large scale human desertion and dense overgrowth where retracted normalcy after an interlude of 25 years. An immediate tranquility could not brought in the Imphal valley as 'strategic and administration considerations' impelled Gambhir Singh (1829; 1825-34) to station his 'seat of rule' at Bishnupur,¹⁵ January 1826 and later shifted to Canchipur¹⁶ in October 1826.¹⁷ The journey of reconstruction initiated only in Nar Singh's¹⁸ time (1844-50) with the shifting of the capital back to proper Imphal, May 1844 that received a special attention in Chandrakirti's time (1834-44; 1850-86).

'It is a pretty sight in the evening to see all the women hurrying along with their wares on their heads, and their little babies slung on their backs'.¹⁹

Though there has been local tradition on the antiquity of coinage from the times of Pakhangba and Urakonhouba credited for introduction of bell-metal coins or recent attempts arguing Gambhir Singh' reign for striking the first coins, square bell-metal followed by silver and gold coins (both meant for ceremonial and large scale transactions), Sel introduced in the first half of the 19th century served as the main medium for daily common usage in the markets. Prior to the Anglo-Manipur War, precisely during Chandrakirti' reign, there was a serious concern on the part of the colonial authority to introduce British currency in the state but failed as people refused and resorted to the production of Sel at the local mint. With the establishment of British paramountcy "sel were withdraw from circulation, British Indian copper coins were forced on the population, and the mint at Manipur was closed permanently."²⁰

Post Anglo-Manipuri War : Colonial Times

A dramatic metamorphosis has been brought forth in the post-war market scenario with the creation of the British Reserve Area²¹ where operated the British Reserve Act under the British paramountcy. For administrative efficiency and safety of the colonial rule, market centres, which fall within the aforesaid area, were displaced. Yet, the British paramountcy patronized the two prominent markets – Sana Keithel and Khwairamband bazaar outdid the Sana Keithel.²² Its market (Khwairamband bazaar) timing changed to evening or late evening.²³

The history of the Khwairamband Keithel is shrouded in mystery. Yet, references have been found on dredging the Nambul river from the Chinga hill to the Khwiramband Keithel in Khunjaoba's reign and improvement of the market site by raising of dyke as a measure to control frequent inundation of the Nambul river.²⁴ Accounts unfold the Khwairamband Keithel sheds razed to the ground during Maxwell's Superintendency (1899-96; 1899-1904-05) that sparked the historic Women's Movement of 1904,²⁵ its rebuilding with angle iron posts and corrugated iron pillar roofs during Shakespeare's Superintendency (1905-08; 1909-14). The completion of construction of brick bridge and its tumbling down by 1897 great earthquake during Chandrakirty's reign²⁶ are well documented. However, the perception of the market's contemporaneity with the Chandrakirty's time calls forth review.

By the 1940's the market had sheds on raised plinths covered by C.I roofs accommodating about 2000 women sellers and an outside open air space twice in strength of the roofed compartment. While women sellers inside the sheds possessed occupancy and inheritance rights over the plots²⁷ unravelling a remnant of matriliney in the Meitei social structure, those in the open air space were devoid of such rights and served on 'first come first' but difficulty lies' to disposes them from their respective seat' as they had been occupying the same place age long.²⁸ The market exclusively of women was relaxed to the foreigners and entrance of some Bengali cloth traders in a corner of the market in the 1890's.²⁹

Classification of the market depending on the selling items on which the respective lineages controlled could be interesting. Yet, it would be erroneous to perceive the market system a manifestation of class character, rather, it is a lineage based system.

Market Administration

The market administration study is handicapped for want of adequate information. On available sources, market in earlier times is exhibited to have been administered by a Women's body, Lakkhong³⁰ till it was brought under the Cheirap Court's jurisdiction. In 1940, its administration was finally brought under the political agency court with the concurrence of the Maharaja and the Darbar.³¹ A dramatic metamorphosis has been brought about in the market dynamics in the colonial princely Manipur by the colonial initiation of a series of market regulations against the tradition of Manipur in the 1920s creating market a private property assigning attributes of saleability, transferability, mortgageability etc.³² However, the above market rules were conceived for application to the newly sprung up markets receiving patronage from the colonial authority in one way or another, while the customary customs still in vogue to the predecessor markets.

Prime Socio-Political Locus

The Khwairamband bazaar, besides being the epicenter of all women's marketing network, was a prime socio-political locus where illustrated evidently state's affairs emerged and prepared a promising avenue of interactions on varied socio-political issues via constant mutual exchanges within and in between and with different customers and visitors to the market. It was the principles square of women's politicization and community life where developed commonality, unity, self-confidence and collectivity amongst themselves. All the women traders were like 'an extended family' living together each other making their business to the sustenance of the families. A wonderfully interesting uniqueness of the functional mechanism of political consciousness and activity of the market having floated the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha³³ was its emergence as a fertile political assemblage where carried out discussion with the leaders and workers of the Mhasabha aggregated almost every evening.³⁴

Market women's consciousness of the traditional political culture without any institutionalized base and mobilization is age-long phenomenon due to historic forces which the British paramouncy realized well before.

"The market women form the vast majority of travellers along our roads and they are most keen in bringing any grievances to notice. If a bridge is wasted away, the first information comes from them, and they are also not backward in reporting a bad piece of road."³⁵

The economic independence, strong cord of mutual understanding and collective identity among the women aside construction of feminism among the Meitei women in the traditional valley society that may sound a slightly deviance to the umbrella perception of what feminism is all about for a conscious social movement of the women aiming at 'social equality' with the male counterparts, also built up a strong 'social force'.

Contrary to royal and noble women's direct participation, individually, to politico- judicial system, market women involved the state affairs indirectly in collective capacity in multi forms towards shaping of the state policies and correction of the administrative malaises meted out to the people for public orientation through the device of constitutional methodology supported by a repertoire of numerous recorded women" protests³⁶ of which the paper designs to touch upon two selected ones.

1904 Case

The movement emerged out of a precipitous act of burning down of the Assistant Political Agent's bungalow. Unknown whereabouts representing a laten deprivation prevailing quite for some time and the colonial authority's desire to compensate the damage in the shape of unleashing punishment to the townsmen of Imphal failing to identify the real culprits and an accorded proposal for miniaturization. It was oriented specifically to achieve the revocation of the imposed colonial injunction to the townsmen of Imphal in the form of unpaid coercive labour to rebuild the Assistant Political Agent's bungalow in the way of extracting teakwoods from the Kabaw Valley and to supply the required rebuilding materials against the indigenous tradition and to release their fellowmen imprisoned. The movement which defied the colonial order in people's congregations and included the programme of voluntary closing down of the market, collective protest in front of the Political Agent's residence, public protest meetings, submission of petitions and so on was eventually crystalised into the movement's future programme.³⁷

1939 Case

The first half of December, 1939 dragged the state to the collective voice raised by the indigenous women whose right to work and livelihood was grossly transgressed by a range of incessant rice export outside the state by the immigrant Marwari rice merchants. With the state's nod the modus operandi of cart system after milling the paddy purchased directly or in indirect way from the direct sellers or through their agents in the

newly installed rice mills on which they eventually monopolised. It lingered on till the Second World War reached the state. Hence, indigenous women's right to familial sustenance through rice trade involving selling the rice after husking the procured paddy in their simple household technology received a serious setback. The situation could perhaps have been fallen in a more conducive way by responding timely to the export and the glaring signal of the fast speeding gift of the nature in the form of drought and hailstorm. A little late response failed to transform in time the flame of fire, extinguished partially by rice export ban, nevertheless, the residual engulfed into resistance. This movement was aimed at protecting the rights of the indigenous people for self-sustenance and self-determination. One point ought to be noted is that the movement nowhere opposed the market globalisation but no crime in the name of progress. It was a response to the external encroachment on indigenous resources. Thomas Berger observes :

“Culture, however, must have a material basis. This gives compelling urgency to the movement for self-determination and self-sufficiency among the World's indigenous peoples”.³⁸

Notes and References

1. Bormani, sarangthen, Lammitlon, Imphal, 1954, p. 28. The text, in alphabetical sequence, explains origin of 180 important places of Manipur.
2. T.C Hodson's *The Meitheis*, a welcome sign, a series of publications under the auspices of the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, is a most valuable contribution and illustrates an intimate acquaintance with the indigenous Meitei people.
3. Unchecked colonial misspell of Sana Keithel.
4. King Mungyamba.
5. T.C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, Neeraj publishing House, Delhi, 1984 (Reprint of 1908, David Nutt, London), P.23.
6. Ibungohal and Khelchandra, *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, Imphal, 1989, P.35.
7. T.C. Hodson, *op. cit.*
8. Jugeshwar Singh, *The War of the Great Wamen of Manipur* (1904-05), Freedom struggle series, Imphal, P.791.

9. Historic pillar in memory of martyrs of the Anglo Manipuri war, 1891.
10. Information from R.K. Jhaljit Singh.
11. Information from Pandit Khelchandra Singh.
12. L.D. Roy, "Gender and sustainable Economics or why Meiteis Women fought three wars against colonization in the 20th century" (typescript), p.3.
13. T.C. Hodson, *op. cit.*
14. A brief information may be found in Lal Dena (ed), *History of Modern Manipur* (1826-1949), Orbit publishers, New Delhi 1990.
15. Previously called Lamangdong, about 27 kms south of Imphal along the Tiddim Road is a historic place.
16. About 3 and ½ miles from the Imphal main town where the memorial of Gambhir Singh stands.
17. The First Anglo-Burmese war, 1824-26.
18. Gambhir Singh's cousin, actively participated to the liberation of Manipur from the Burmese yoke, served as the regent to the Gambhir Singh's minor son-King, Chandrakirti, was the king of Manipur for 14 years.
19. E. Grimwood, *My Three years in Manipur*, Vivek publishing House, Delhi 1975 (Reprint of 1891, Richard Bentley and sons, London), p. 55.
20. Nicholas Rhodes, *Coinage of North-east India*, Hythe, 1995, p. 191.
21. An area of around 1.83 sq. miles in the heart of Imphal encompassing the residency, markets, royals Citadel and palace, some segments of Khwai, Thangmeiband and Kaboleikai, Khurai under Political agent's direct jurisdiction, almost like a component of the British India where the British acts were operational.
22. Political Agent, Manipur to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, 21 March 1941, National Archives of India (NAI hereafter), New Delhi.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Sharma and Kaoba, *A Brief History of Manipur (1508-1709)*, Imphal, 2001, P.65.
25. This point will be discussed a little later.
26. Jhaljit Singh, *A Short History of Manipur*, Imphal, 1992, (Reprint 1965), p. 290.

27. Customarily, Daughter inherited the plot from mother. In the absence of daughter, daughter-in-law, yet mother's wisdom is final nowadays.
28. Political Agent, Manipur to the secretary to the Governor of Assam, 21 March 1941, NAI.
29. R. Brown, *Statistical Account of the Native State of Manipur and the Hills territory under its rule*, Mittal publications, New Delhi, 2001 (Reprint of 1874, office of the superintendent of the Government of printing, Calcutta), PP. 90-91.
30. Lakkhong, exclusive women's autonomous administrative department matters involving women consisted of the king's mother, queen and maximal lineage elderly women assisted by 18 helpers called Apanbi.
31. Darbar constituted in 1907 with Maharaja, the President, a British Officer, the Vice President and six members for the State's Administrative purposes.
32. Manipur State Darbar proceeding, 7 June 1922.
33. The first organized political party in Manipur formed in 1938. Detailed account can be seen on Maipaksana and Yaima (Comp.), Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha, Imphal, 1983. To one scholar, Nikhil Manipur Praja floated in 1932 led by L.Khogendrajit as the first political party in the state. See Ibobi, L., *Freedom Struggle in Manipur*, *Manipur Today*, XII, 4, October 1992, pp. 31-32.
34. Kunjabihari, "Freedom Struggle of India and Manipur", *Manipur Today*, XII, 4, October, 1992, P.20. The author, and active member of the Mahasabha, was the editor of the local vernacular daily, *Ngasi (Daily)*.
35. Administration Report of Manipur Political Agency 1895-96, P.8.
36. Protests to defer the royal decree compelling the men-flocks to catch elephant from the forest till the closing of harvest in Chandrakriti's reign, futile bid to prevent the execution of which the colonial authority felt the main brains behind the Anglo-Manipur, 1891 hanging at Polo ground (Mapal Kangjeibung), 13 August, 1891.
37. The author does not intend to go the details of the movement.
38. Thomas Berger, "Native Rights Movement", *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 11,1, 1987, p. 13.