



WOMEN IN SOCIETY

FEMINISM
IN A
TRADITIONAL
SOCIETY

Women of the Manipur Valley

Manjusri Chaki-Sircar

This study focuses on the basic foundation of feminism, i.e. women's individual self-reliance, and sisterhood or collective solidarity, in a society under strong Brahmanic influence. In an atmosphere with a legacy of Hindu patriarchy, when the issue of women's rights is often in question, the ethnography of Meitei women brings a breath of fresh air to our cultural horizon.

In the far-eastern corner of India, amidst the lower Himalayan ranges, lies the valley of Manipur—the home of the Meiteis. A society facing extinction, they are unique for the distinct overtones of female power and independence of women in a patrilineal society. Colonial rule, Sanskritization and a devastating war which drastically reduced the male population have left their mark, but the trend is towards a resurgence of the indigenous culture—the Meitei traditional way of life—in which mutual partnership and respect between the sexes prevails. Men and women perform their assigned roles in complementary spheres, and women's collective power thus emerges as an integral part of the patrilineal system.

This book is based on anthropological field research in the urban and rural communities of the Manipur Valley, focussing on women's traditional sex roles and the changes that are now being wrought.

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WOMEN IN SOCIETY

FEMINISM IN A TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

Women of the Manipur Valley

Manjusri Chaki-Sircar



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*In memory of my father
the late Nanigopal Chaki
and
to my husband
Dr Parbati Kumar Sircar*

Preface

Can feminism survive in a society where there is a strong influence of Hindu patriarchy? The present study of Meitei women of the Manipur Valley in north-eastern India focuses on the basis of feminism i.e., women's individual self-reliance and sisterhood or collective solidarity, in a society under strong Brahmanic influence.

In Indian societies women still have extremely limited options to extend their role outside the domestic domain. There is rarely any scope for women to act as a collective body. Among some lower socio-economic communities women enjoy considerable freedom outside their homes, but they too are often subjected to pressures from high-caste ideology and male domination. Today, average educated women, working and non-working, face continuous discrimination stemming from a patriarchal culture and its appurtenant sexual preference for male children, prejudice towards daughters' inheritance rights, and unequal access to job-oriented education and professional fields. They face especial discrimination in marriage where the portent of dowry casts its lurid shadow. The traditionalism of the marriage custom often blurs the issue of sexual equality and intersexual harmony.

In this atmosphere, a legacy of Hindu patriarchy, where the issue of women's rights is in perpetual pendency, this study of Meitei women may expose some new aspects to extend the scope of our cultural horizon. In spite of the strong ideological impact of Hindu Brahmans, Meitei women have retained their vital roles in the public sphere, the dissonance with Brahmanism being particularly evident in their unaffected contact and interaction with Meitei men.

This book is based on anthropological field research conducted in 1977-78 for approximately one year in the urban and rural communities of the Manipur Valley, focusing on women's traditional sex roles and the changes evidenced. While dealing with women's

roles, I try to focus on Meitei cultural values, which greatly differ from the Brahmanic ideology of mainstream Indian culture. The study thus projects the issue of the inherent conflict between the two cultures—Brahmanic Hinduism and traditional Meiteism—which have been in confrontation over the past two hundred years.

This study analyzes women's roles in the ritual and non-ritual spheres of Meitei society in Manipur. *Lai Harouba*, a principal ritual of the indigenous pre-Hindu faith (which presently coexists with Hinduism) serves as the major ethnographic focus for this account of traditional Meitei sex roles as interpreted and evaluated in the context of contemporary Meitei society, especially in its political, economic, social, and religious spheres. *Lai Harouba*, it is argued, represents the traditional socio-moral world of the Meitei, a world based on a mutual partnership and respect between the sexes.

Two major historical events—a devastating male depopulation resulting from protracted warfare (which was ended by the Indo-Burmese Treaty of 1826), and the advent of colonial rule in 1892—have had a considerable impact on Meitei sex roles and social relationships. While the depopulation of males expanded women's economic roles, it also promoted polygyny. Subsequently, the development of a transportation network under colonial auspices enabled these women to extend their trading activities throughout and beyond Manipur. Meanwhile, under royal patronage and supported by immigrant Brahmans, the Meitei have undergone a massive process of Sanskritization since the early eighteenth century: the neo-Hinduism thus created helping to enrich Meitei religious and cultural life, especially its ethnic traditions of music, dance, and ritual. However, while Meitei society may be viewed as a field of conflict and compromise between two diametrically opposing forces—the process of Sanskritization and the resistance to it from the indigenous tradition—because of the strong position of Meitei women in the extra-domestic world, Sanskritization here (unlike in many Indian societies) largely failed in curtailing the role of women vis-a-vis men.

Meitei women make crucial economic contributions and hold a distinctive position in social, religious, and political life. Outside of subsistence, the Meitei economy provides two major avenues for women's autonomy—the weaving industry and trade—which remain exclusively in the female domain. Within an overall patrilineal framework women are thus able to develop a power base and a group solidarity, strengthened by various women's

organizations. Women's collective power in the political arena, hitherto a male domain, was made evident during the "women's wars" (*Nupi-lan*) in 1904 and 1939, against colonial policies.

Nevertheless, the Meitei are a patrilineal society with an inherent social ideology of male superiority. This notion of male superiority, however, does not entail actual female subordination, a situation whose ambiguity causes conflict and tension between the sexes. *Lai Harouba* attempts to resolve this inherent social-structural contradiction. It promotes idealized sex role models and stresses intersexual harmony. It recognizes two contrasting models for women: the primary role as mother, wife, and daughter, and the alternative or nonconformist role of the woman as priestess. The recognition of ordinary women's economic contribution and the acceptance of nonconformist women as priestesses in their society's core religious ritual indicate the extraordinary position women are accorded in Meitei culture. In Meitei society men and women perform their assigned roles in complementary spheres. Women's collective power thus emerges as an integral part of the patrilineal system; it provides moral backing to that system, rather than a subculture of opposition to it.

The "Meitei-ization" of Manipuri society in modern times—a re-emphasizing of non-Hindu cultural traits—has diminished the political power of the Brahmans. As a result, women have become increasingly prominent in the Hindu religious sphere. A resurgence of *Lai Harouba* as the embodiment of Meitei cultural identity has recently occurred. It has served to reassert traditional Meitei values vis-a-vis the ascendancy of Sanskritized culture.

Does this indicate that the Meitei are shifting toward their pre-Hindu ideology with more enhanced social freedom for women and intersexual harmony? Or, is it that the visible manifestation of ethnicity in *Lai Harouba* ritual is only a statement of their political awareness? Is it too late to liberate the chauvinistic attitude of the Hinduized Meitei males?

This study raises some of these questions and brings up some revealing aspects of sex roles and social relationships in a changing society, which are not only unexpected in South Asia, but also unusual in the ethnographic terrain of anthropological literature.

MANJUSRI CHAKI-SIRCAR

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Introduction

FIRST ENCOUNTER

For this anthropologist, a native Bengali Hindu middle-class woman, the first encounter with Meitei society was overwhelming in its unexpected contrast with other Indian societies. Particularly was this so in the ubiquitous presence of women in the public domain and the mode of intersex behaviour in various social situations.

On my first day in Manipur in November, 1977 I was looking for a suitable place to live in. In the house of my prospective landlady (an established entrepreneur) in Uripok *Leikai* (ward), Imphal, my companions (a princess of Manipur and a common man) and I were offered a tray of western and local cigarettes (*biris*). The women and men lighted one another's cigarettes. The old lady asked me several questions, e.g. "Are you a divorcee?" "Do you have a son?" "What do you do to make a living?"

On the first evening in my new home, the landlady's daughter-in-law, Laxmipriya (45) was helping me fix a mosquito net. As we went about our task, she explained her situation to me. "Sister, I live with my mother-in-law, along with my son, daughter-in-law, and two daughters. My mother-in-law threw her son [her husband] out because he brought home a new wife." "She threw her son out and asked you to stay with her?" I asked in surprise. "Yes, Sister," she replied. "My mother-in-law and I work together with many, many weavers. We do not want a strange woman among us. My mother-in-law got very annoyed at her son's irresponsible behaviour. It was very sad. But now I am happy—my son got married only last month. In a way I am relieved that he is out of the household. He used to drink all the time."

A few days later I went to visit some women weavers in Wankhai *Leikai*. As we (a young woman assistant and myself) got down from the rickshaw, we were greeted by two well-groomed women with

chandan marks¹, in their early thirties. On their way home, they stopped at a thatched-roof roadside café run by a woman in her forties. Several men and women lounged around, having tea and snacks. One of the women introduced me as a *mayang*² (foreigner or North Indian). She whispered the word *mayang* and added, "She is quite different from others. She likes us. She wears Meitei dress and tries hard to speak our language. She is going to write a book on Meitei women." The café was a rendezvous for both sexes. Men and women chatted in a relaxed comfortable atmosphere and smoked *biris*. A brother of one of the two women was the husband of the owner of the café. He sat next to me and treated me to tea and several snacks. He was curious about my visit and asked, "Where do you come from?" "Are you a *mou* (married) or a *laishabi* (unmarried)?" "How much money do you make?" "Do you have children?"

Later we visited the house of one of the women. It was a well-maintained thatched-roof, mud house with a huge wooden door and windows. On one side of the porch was a hand loom with half-finished silk fabric. There were two thread-winding wheels and several bobbins of thread scattered near the loom and a basketful of patterns drawn on paper. The courtyard was clean with a *tulsi*, a basil plant on a small earthen mound, a must for all Hindu Vaisnavite homes and a very familiar feature in Bengal. She said that she was the third wife of a man who visited her every weekend. She had no children, so she had adopted her brother's son. She was very close to the other woman, a divorcee with three children, who had left her husband when he brought home another wife and had come, with her three children, to live with her parents. They helped her build a small house in their compound. The anecdotes were related in good humour, with the women joking about irresponsible men running after women. The second woman introduced me to several of her female relatives. After being treated to a delicious hot lunch, we spent the afternoon visiting different homes in the neighbourhood.

¹*Chandan* or sandalwood paste or a paste made out of yellow clay, used to decorate the nose, forehead and throat with fine lines, is a sign of Vaisnavite Hindu faith among orthodox Vaisnavas in India.

²*Mayang*, meaning North Indian, has become a rather derogatory term at present, because of an anti-Indian political mood in the last few years. When children addressed me as a *mayang nupi* (foreigner woman), mothers felt very embarrassed and asked them to call me *Ine* (father's sister, or aunt).

Every house had one or more looms, with young girls (some looked thirteen or fourteen) and women making varieties of fabrics and mosquito nets. In the courtyards, bundles of brilliantly-coloured thread were hung from clothes-lines to dry and fences were draped with freshly dyed cloths or threads. The weavers took a break to chat with us, and some left their work and joined our team. A group of wide-eyed, giggling children followed us everywhere.

We were joined by the goldsmith's wife, who took us to her husband's shop. The goldsmith greeted me with a warm smile. His wife turned to his assistant, a man in his forties, and said teasingly, "Look at him. He must be near fifty and still a bachelor..." The man looked away, very embarrassed, with eyes cast down, and attempted to concentrate on his work. Other women and children giggled at the teasing.

Travelling by bus, I observed streams of women carrying loads of fish, vegetables, cloth, fabrics, rice, and other merchandise. Women helped each other unload huge baskets and boxes. On the street, many young women rode their bicycles to school or to work. I visited Khwarimbond bazaar, the main market, Laxmi bazaar, the cloth market, Kwakeithel bazaar, and Senjamei bazaar—everywhere I went, I found hundreds of women traders in tin-roofed or brick-built sheds. In the market, there were no children in sight, not even babies tied to women's backs. At every street corner there was a small roadside bazaar run by women vendors. There were no coolies anywhere.

In a few days I was to realize that I was in a very different society from the one I was familiar with in India. During my ten-month sojourn, I was to become more and more convinced that Meitei society was unusual not only in the pervasive role of women in the socio-economic sphere, but also in women's role in religion in a patrilineal society. In fact, the progressive revelation of the very nature of the male-female relationship in a so-called Hinduized or Sanskritized (Srinivas 1952, 1971, 1976) society like the Meitei was rather like an adventure into the unexpected.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

There is a body of literature written by colonial administrators between 1835 and 1913 which gives valuable accounts of the social, political and religious customs of nineteenth century Meitei society. The colonial writers were impressed by the contribution of women in

Meitei society and have not failed to express their admiration; but they do not offer any detailed information on this aspect. On the women's important role in the economy, Dunn (1975 (1886) : 17) states, "Most of the work of the country, except the heaviest, is performed by them [women], and they are consequently the mainstay of the family circle. All marketing is done by women, all work of buying and selling in public, and the carrying to and fro of the articles to be sold; whilst at home they are busily employed in weaving and spinning." Johnstone (1896:134) supports Dunn's view and says, "Women are the great traders, and many walk miles in the morning, and buy things in the more distant bazaars to sell again in the capital in the evening. It was not considered etiquette for men too often to frequent the bazaars. Crowds of hillmen visit bazaars." Hodson (1908, reprinted in 1975:23) goes further to state, "The women hold a high and free position in Manipur, all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them."

Concerning religion, Hodson (*Ibid* :109) states, "Side by side with the Brahman, there exist the priests and priestesses of the animistic faith who are called *maibas* and *maibis*." He adds another curious piece of information (*Ibid*: 62) : "The *Maibi Loishang* (the council of the *maibis*) corresponds to the *Maiba Loishang* and is the college of the *maibis*." On women's prominence in religious ceremonies of Lai Harouba, we find McCulloch's description (McCulloch in Hodson, *Ibid*: 104): "The worship consists in a number of married women and unmarried girls led by a priestess, accompanied by a party of men and boys in dresses of former times, dancing and singing and performing various evolutions in the holy presence." On women's participation in public dance performances, he says, "... all girls whose position is at all respectable learn to dance, for in Manipur the dancing profession is often a road to royal dignity and is not despised in any way as is the case in India" (*Ibid* : 23)³.

There are several pieces of tantalizing information here—women's pervasive role in trade, the presence of the priestesses on par with the Brahmans, "a college of the *maibis*," men and women participating

³At present, classical Indian dancing is a prestigious performing art for women in India. It has been accepted among the modern educated class in cities as an expression of their awareness of and pride in the ancient heritage of Indian culture. Despite the revival of this ancient art, women's dancing in public is mostly limited to the urban areas (Chaki-Sircar, 1971, 1977).

together in a religious ritual in public. Should this not suffice to arouse immense curiosity in an anthropologist familiar with South Asian societies? Yet, strangely enough, there is no further writing on Meitei women until 1958. Lightfoot (1958) gives a description of parts of Lai Harouba very similar to what had been provided by Shakespeare about half a century earlier (Shakespeare 1913: 428).

More recently, Meitei authors have written about their history, culture and literature, but these display a significant lack of attention to the role of women, of such specific concern to foreign writers. Some of the comments even betray an antipathy towards women. About women's economic role, for example: "... weaving is the second common profession which is practised more out of the people's sentiments for it than for its profit which is negligible in the present context" (N. Tombi Singh, 1975:47). About women's political role: "The Manipuri male folk considered it below their dignity to do so [i.e., to engage in non-violent collective protests as the market women had done]. So they left it to the females." [L. Iboongohal Singh, 1963:45] Sometimes the Hinduized value of the writer distorted the social reality: "It is considered by many that there is a widow or second marriage amongst the Hindu Manipur community. It is far from being true. A female can be married only once but a male can marry a hundred times." (*Ibid* :90.) However, younger scholars, like historian Sanamani Yambem, offer a valuable perspective on women's socio-political role in their studies on the *Nupi-lan* (women's war) (Yambem, 1976) and the recent study on the night patrollers of Manipur (Yambem, 1978).⁴ Anthropologist Ch. Buddhi Singh (1972, 1973) furnishes some valuable facts on women's socio-economic role in Meitei society in his field research on the fishing economy of a lacustrine community. All of these studies certainly gave direction to my own research.

MEITEI WOMEN AND SOUTH ASIAN SOCIETY

The preceding facts reflect the distinctive nature of the role of women in Meitei culture in comparison with other South Asian societies. In Dube's study (1956:174-175) in a social microcosm of a single village in Telengana we find a pattern of women's sex roles which can be found in many other communities of the larger Indian society. He presents a model of women in four socio-economic strata.

⁴Unpublished research data.

At the highest level, women have a leisurely life with domestic help. They live a secluded life observing the rule of purdah (veil) and making absolutely no economic contribution to the family. Their men are land owners who engage people to work in their fields. On the next level, we find common peasants who work their fields without any outside help. Their women also live in seclusion, partaking of domestic chores but making no other economic contribution to the family. On the third level, he places the poor low-caste farmers who work on their family land along with their women. These women sometimes also work for wages in other people's fields and go to the market. On the lowest level are the untouchable and tribal people, the poorest of all. These women never expect to be provided for by their husbands and always work for their living.

Karve's study (1965) of regional socio-structural differences shows how subtly the life style of women differs from one part of India to another and also from one socio-economic level to another. This wide variation is illustrated by the available data on women from many studies. These include work on North Indian societies (O. Lewis, 1955; Marriott, 1955), on Central Indian Hindu or Muslim societies (Mayer, 1960; Jacobson, 1973, 1977), on the matrilineal Nayar and the patrilineal Southern Hindu (Gough, 1955, 1974), on the Lingayat and Havik Brahman of the South (Harper, 1964, 1969), on Himalayan Hindus (Berreman, 1966) and Himalayan Nepalese (Jones & Jones, 1976; Andors, 1976; Bennett n.d.), on Bengali middle class women (Roy, 1975), and on tribal women (Fuchs, 1968 on the Gond; S. Roy, 1912 on the Munda; Furer-Haimendorf, 1962, 1967 on the Naga; Orans, 1965 on the Santal, etc). From a review of the major literature on women in South Asia one consistent pattern emerges: the higher the socio-economic level of a group, the closer it is to the ideal Sanskritized life style for women. For example, among the Limbu (Jones & Jones, 1976), lower caste women have relative freedom to select marriage partners, to divorce, and to remarry (in the case of divorcees and widows). They contribute a major share of the family income. But the high caste Nepalese Hindu women do not enjoy any of this liberty. They have to adhere to the high-caste rules of Hindu society, e.g., strict segregation of the sexes, exclusion of women from the economic sphere, prohibition of divorce and of re-marriage for widows, seclusion of women from the public, and so on. Ulrich's study (1975) of a South Indian village in Karnataka shows this gap between the behaviour models of the

Havik Brahman women and the Sudra caste Divaru women. Traits like the self-effacement and submissiveness of the Havik women (who accept their husbands as personal gods) are absent among the Divaru women. On the contrary, a Divaru woman enjoys an egalitarian relationship with her husband and can even criticize him in public.⁵

Meitei society has gone through a massive process of Sanskritization over the past two hundred years, but has not yet accepted any of the common traits of women of upper-caste Indian societies or others which have Sanskritized their life style toward an upper-caste model (Epstein, 1973; Sinha, 1971; Mandelbaum, 1970; Bailey, 1957).⁶ A trait shared by almost all Indian societies is the division of religious labour between the sexes; but Meitei women co-operate with men in public rituals almost on an equal footing. There is no opportunity for professional priesthood for women in the formal religious system of Hinduism, whereas women are ordained as religious specialists and priests in the traditional Meitei religious organization.

Meitei women are not only major economic contributors (in both subsistence and trade); they also have a considerable voice in the political sphere. Until the colonial period there was a separate women's court with formal jural authority vested in women.

In fact, an analogy to Meitei women in other Indian societies was hard to find. We cannot expect the upper-caste "Sanskritized" behaviour model to prevail among the socially free Meitei women, nor can we equate them with any of the low-caste or tribal communities in India. Meitei women's socio-economic behaviour is to some extent similar to that of women in some Southeast Asian societies of Burma, Java, and Malaysia. The similarity is striking in the areas of potential economic freedom for women, marital instability, and the pattern of matrifocal households.

⁵The gap between the life styles of women in the upper and lower classes had been noted in the early literature of the colonial writers. Risley (1915:186-87) states, for example, "Among the lower caste women are much more of a power than they are among the higher; they assert themselves on a variety of public occasions, and in many cases they have secured themselves the right to initiate proceedings for divorce."

⁶Srinivas states, "Sanskritization is the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently 'twice-born', caste." (1971:6).

In socio-economic and political areas, Meitei women can sometimes be compared with those of some West African societies, such as the Igbo, Nupe, and Yoruba of Nigeria, the Ga, Akan, and Ashanti of Ghana, the Mende of Sierra Leone, where they have important roles not only in the subsistence economy but also in marketing and trade. In both cases, women belong to a wider, extradomestic world, exerting political power that arises out of their socio-economic network in the market associations (Awe, 1977 on the Yoruba; Van Allen, 1976 on the Igbo; Okonjo, 1976 on the Igbo; Nadel, 1970 on the Nupe; Lewis, 1977 on the Ivorian; Robertson, 1976 on the Ga; Ifeka-Moller, 1975; Sanday, 1974). When I observed the pervasive prominence of women in important ritual performances and the presence of women priests in the central religious organization, I recognized a rather unusual quality of Meitei culture found perhaps nowhere else in the patriarchal systems of Brahmanic India, Buddhist Burma, Islamized Malaysia or traditional Africa.

Intersexual dependence in the economy, a complementary and a considerable egalitarian relationship of the sexes in the socio-religious sphere, women's potential autonomy both socially and economically, and their high ritual status are distinctive characteristics of the Meitei among South Asian cultures. But all of these traits coexist with an ideology of socio-structural superiority of men. However, despite the socio-structural superiority of the male, Meitei ideology does not undermine the female role. There is no polarity of the sexes. Women's collective power has a recognized status in different cultural areas. Such an apparent contradiction indeed poses a problem for an anthropologist. This study does not promise to solve this problem, but probably will unveil some facts still unknown in the ethnographic terrain.

LAI HAROUBA RITUAL: STABILITY AND PERSISTENCE OF MEITEI CULTURAL TRAITS

I became particularly interested in Lai Harouba, a prime ritual of the ancient Meitei religion performed annually from five days to one month by almost all the villages in the Valley. Although Hindu culture has swept through the Valley in exuberant and aesthetic grandeur, the traditional religion of the Meitei has held its own and co-exists with the Hindu religious system in a mutually exclusive way. I focus on the basic cultural arenas of Meitei society: political, economic, social and religious. In Lai Harouba I observed the sex role

models as represented in the ritual repertoire. I have concentrated basically on the persistent character of certain traditional cultural traits especially in women's sex roles and how these have been preserved and reinforced in the Lai Harouba ritual.

Since mass Hinduization two hundred years ago, the Meitei have been living in a rapidly changing society. But even prior to that, in the fifteenth century, warfare with neighbouring states commenced, continuing for four centuries. During the last sixty years of this period, male population was considerably reduced. However, peace came in 1826 with the signing of the Indo-Burmese Treaty. British colonization started in 1892, bringing with it a measure of modernization which has accelerated since World War II. The merging of Manipur with the nation state of India (1972) freed people from traditional state control with respect to several social and cultural institutions. Where I discuss the process of change, especially "Sanskritization," I refer to the trend of "Meiteization" as an expression of "de-Sanskritization." De-Sanskritization in several Indian communities has had the political motivation of achieving some of the advantages offered by the Indian government to the scheduled caste communities (Sinha, 1971 on the Bhumija; Srivastava, 1966 on the Johar Bhotia in Mandelbaum, 1970; Lynch, 1969 on the Jatav of Agra; Patwardhan, 1973 on the Mahar Buddhist in Maharashtra; Orans, 1965 on the Santal).⁷ De-Sanskritization here aims more at secular progress and modernization (higher education and job facilities) than at the so-called ritual status of the upper caste.

Among the Meitei, the movement towards, de-Sanskritization (which I term Meiteization) rose from a deeper conflict between Meitei cultural identity and the dominance of an alien (Indian Hindu) cultural model. The process of Meiteization is particularly significant to me for its growing force in the Lai Harouba ritual. For the past few decades, there has been a greatly regenerated appeal for Lai Harouba among the people.

I was impressed by two important aspects of Meitei culture.

First, that Lai Harouba although an ancient ritual, still represents the Meitei cultural ethos, and expresses a spirit of mutual res-

⁷However, the Agra Jatav and the Mahar Buddhists rejected the entire social framework of the Hindu caste structure and adopted Buddhism to recover from their degraded untouchable status in Hindu society (Lynch, 1969; Patwardhan, 1973). An anti-Hindu consciousness developed into a new political identity for gaining secular privileges in modern India.

pect, companionship, and cooperation between the sexes in a joyous celebration of life.

The ritual model is an idealized version of the intersexual relationship of an ancient society. The fossilised forms may not directly reflect disharmony found in the present society but the ceremony still sustains and reaffirms the fundamental principle of sex role morals which is profound in the social and economic relationships of the sexes today.

Secondly, the sex role ideology of Meitei society is very different from that of Hindu society, which promotes the patriarchal model of male supremacy. In the Manipur Valley, the process of Sanskritization failed to work in the socio-economic and religious areas because of the vital presence of female power, which may be described as a kind of feminism. This can be recognized in women's individual self-reliance and collective solidarity. Here feminism does not entail a sub-culture or anti-male attitude but exists as a moral support to the male, an integral part of the social system. Thus Hinduism has been absorbed into the ethnic culture, and there is a pervasive and distinctive role for women in the public sphere, viz. political, economic, social and religious, found perhaps nowhere else in India.

This study is arranged in seven chapters.

In Chapter I, I describe my field site, with a brief geographical background of the Manipur Valley and its people.

In Chapter II, the focus is on women's role in the political context. I offer a brief account of the political position of a rural man and his direct link with the central state organization and show that, though in a peripheral position, women still have a considerable political voice.

Chapter III shows the basic division of labour between the sexes in the economic structure of the society and highlights the crucial importance of women in subsistence, in the weaving industry, and in trade.

Chapter IV delineates Meitei social organization, giving an account of the principle of patriliney, the formation of clan and lineage, the system of marriage, the rules of divorce and polygyny, the household structure, and the abduction of women.

Chapter V emphasizes the unusual prominence of women in the Meitei religious world. Two traditions of religious life are discussed: Vaisnavite Hinduism and ancient *Lai* worship. In the first, we see that the upper-caste ideology of Indian culture has had to accommo-

date itself to the public prominence of Meitei women in key roles of Meitei religious rituals.

Chapter VI presents a detailed record of my observations of the *Lai Harouba* ritual. In order to focus on the ritual status of women in relation to their social position, this chapter is especially important for its ethnographic reference.

Chapter VII starts with an ethnographic analysis to demonstrate the stability and persistence of the traditional Meitei cultural ethos. Two distinct aspects of Meitei women's sex roles are highlighted: firstly, the vital importance of women's role in Meitei society, which could not be diminished by the pressure of Sanskritization, and secondly, the coexistence of Meitei women's power with a social ideology of male domination.

With this perspective on the social position of women, I analyze the ritual repertoire of *Lai Harouba* and show that it not only reaffirms the traditional ethos, but also represents the socio-moral world of the Meitei.

METHODOLOGY

I collected case histories, interviewed people, gathered information from male and female informants of varied social backgrounds, and gained knowledge from my daily encounters with Meitei people in different social situations. Out of respect for their confidences and in order to preserve their anonymity, I use pseudonyms for all my informants and for my study villages in presenting my findings in this study.

Being a woman, I faced the usual problem of not having full research access to the opposite sex. But as a visitor in a rural society I was fortunate in not being treated as an outsider. Soon I found that certain men acted as my elder or younger brothers, uncles, or nephews. A visit by my husband and frequent visits by my daughter offered me a legitimate standing in the social framework of the rural society. Fictive kin terms helped me tremendously to be at ease with the people and removed any possible tension or suspicion that might have arisen from the presence of a "mayang" enquirer.

I worked with the assistance of two young Meitei women in their twenties. One lived in the capital. The other, my constant companion, L. Ibemhal Devi, was the daughter of a village *maiba* (shaman, medicine man) and elder sister of a *maibi* (woman priest). Members of her family (cultivators, weavers, shopkeepers, a primary school

teacher, students, and a trader in the bazaar) gave me a full and initial introduction to Meitei rural life. In my fieldsite, Nambol, my host, Dr. Waripokom Bhagirath Singh, a Meitei social leader, his wife, Gambhini Devi, a nursery school teacher, and their family took a special interest in my work and supported me almost as a team in different undertakings like the making of sketches, maps, and the collection of data. In the capital, Imphal, my hostess was Maharajkumari Binodini Devi, a celebrated writer. She spent many hours translating ancient Meitei texts for me, and introduced me to the complex organization of the royal temple and its hierarchical religio-political atmosphere. Through her I met several pundits, *maibas* and *maibis* (women priests) who were attached to the royal offices. Thus I was fortunate to have access to and contact with a veritable cross-section—members of the uppermost stratum of the society as well as with common cultivators and traders of the rural area.

After a two-month period in Imphal, I concentrated my work in the rural area for the succeeding eight months. Some years ago, I had received professional instruction in Manipuri Vaisnavite and Lai Harouba dancing from Meitei gurus in Calcutta. This background helped me a great deal towards warm acceptance at Lai Harouba ceremonies. Incidentally, I was the first *mayang* to have participated in the ritual dances of Lai Harouba in the Nambol area. Two established *maibis*, Ima Rajani Maibi and Yumsam Maibi, enthusiastically taught me some of their esoteric dances, and I cherish that knowledge and my close contact with these women.

My assistants and I collected 135 case histories of women as an opportunity sample. Out of these, forty-two were from Sample Village 2, where a population of 364 lived in sixty-six households. I took time to verify my data with the help of my male and female informants. The women were most cooperative and often opened their hearts to this stranger.

In attempting to collect case studies of men, I was confronted with some real difficulties, as they tended to talk more about their achievements than their personal life. I had to accept the limitations of my data in this respect. I interviewed pundits, *maibas*, *penakhongbas* (instrumentalists)—all men—and gathered whatever information I possibly could from my daily discussion with male informants.

Since I often focus on the conflicting aspects of male/female social relationships, there is a danger of assuming that Meitei family and

social life is always chaotic. On the contrary, I felt a joyous atmosphere pervading everyday life. An individual lives in a rather secure community and kin group based on mutual cooperation and dependence. A Bengali upper-caste woman visiting Manipur asked me, "Why do the women always appear so cheerful here? It seems that they really take care of themselves and always look so well groomed, with fresh flowers and *chandan* mark. Everywhere, in the bazaar, on the street and at home, they always seem to be enjoying themselves." Her sentiments are mine.

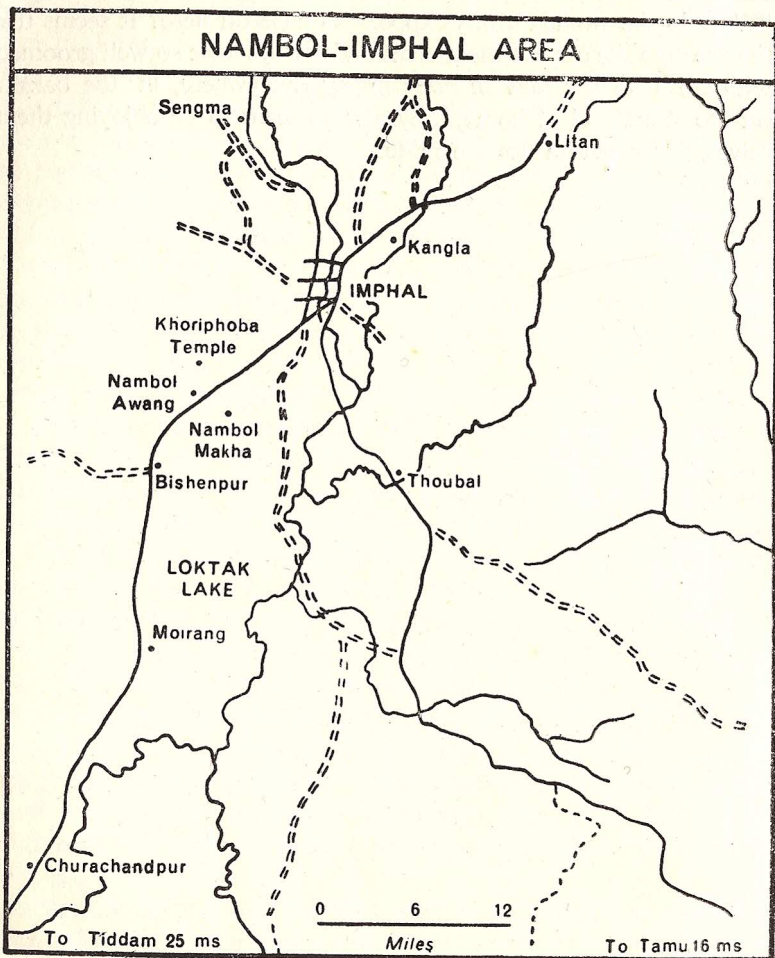


FIGURE 1