

OCCUPYING PUBLIC SPHERE - ECONOMIC ROLE OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN MANIPUR

Feroja Syed^{1*}

^{1*}Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science Modern College, Imphal

***Corresponding Author:** Feroja Syed

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science Modern College, Imphal

Abstract

If we visit the Khuwairamband bazaar or any Ima keithel in valley regions of Manipur we will see a number of Muslim women as potfambis (vendors). It is very common to see them occupying regular stalls daily and selling commodities of daily consumption. Is the visibility of Manipuri Muslim women in the market the reality of the overall Muslim women in Manipur or is this their real presence and intervention in the public sphere? These and many other questions come to our mind when we talk about the economic role of Muslim women and compare them with women's of other communities in Manipur. Let us come to the answer of these questions after discussing and understanding the realities of Manipuri Muslim women.

Evaluation of women's work is difficult due to the multiplicity of household work, the irregularity of occupations and confusion on the advantages/disadvantages of market/non-market activities. Rapid increase in the modern and organized sector due to economic transformation and technological changes really affects the large unorganized or informal sector of the economy where most of the women are employed. All the three major sources of data on employment and unemployment including census report are not really useful for any proper assessment of the nature and extent of women's participation in our economy in spite the fact that the number of women in the unorganized sector constitutes a large fraction of the total women working force. The non-agricultural industries and services in the unorganized sector have been neglected by government agencies, experts and investigators. In a way, there is a deliberate exclusion of a whole range of non-market and unorganized activities performed by women.

The economic status of Muslim women seldom gets any attention because low work participation of Muslim women is often link unnecessarily with their low educational status and cultural norms. Religion is seen as the only factor influencing Muslim women's lives in every aspect from family, education, to employment etc. It is widely argued that cultural norms and the relationship of women to Islam are at the core of Muslim women's status. Therefore low status of Muslim women is because of Islamic restrictions on women's freedom. But Muslim Women's Survey (the first comprehensive baseline survey of Muslim women in India conducted in the year 2000) findings demonstrate that religion per se does not influence the status of women even though there are community-specific disadvantages which arise out of poverty. Even if they are seen outside religion, their problems and experiences are often viewed as similar to women in general or with Muslims as a whole. There is broad generalization in discussions, debates and writings of Muslim women's issues by focusing Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular. South Asian countries especially in Bangladesh, there is greater labour force participation of Muslim women because of changing opportunity structures. According to the MWS, two-thirds of Muslim women are self-employed or engaged in home-based labour. They are in the informal sector, self-employed in low-paying often semi-skilled home-based work, casual labourers, and domestic workers, all of which would be characterized by poor working conditions and low wages.

It is the unique historical experience that set apart Manipuri Muslim women from other Muslim women of the country and shaped their significant economic role in the state. There is more similarity and common bond of Manipuri Muslim women with *Meiteis* of Manipur. Unique economic role of *Meitei* women has its influence and impact on Manipuri Muslim women from time immemorial. The institution of *Lallup* from the 11th century to the end of the 18th century is one such experience which activates womenfolk of Manipur to take the economic responsibilities in the absence of the men group in the family. Manipuri-Burmese war of 1817, the Seven Years of Devastation and the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891 are many other incidents that further extent their role in economy because of the reduction in the male population.

Manipuri Muslim women like *Meitei* women participated actively in the first agitation against the British economic policies and atrocities popularly known as the *Nupilal*. Many of the women that participated in the *Nupilal* were Manipuri Muslim women of *Khawairamband* Bazaar. The very presence of Muslim women of *Khawairamband* Bazaar in the *Nupilal* shows Muslim women's direct participation in market from quite a long time. Though their visibility in the market was not in large number, their involvement in the economy is not new nor small in number. They used to involve indirectly and their participation was more like behind the scene.

There was no strict norms of *purdah* and seclusion that needs to follow by the Manipuri Muslim women in olden days and so they used to take up almost all the economic opportunities that was available at that time. Manipuri Muslim women play a significant role in the agricultural fields. They constitute almost 50% of total agricultural labour. In the rural areas, use of Muslim women's labour is quite prominent as most of the Muslim population was settled in rural areas. Their labour is used in broad-casting of rice seeds and its transplantation, harvesting, threshing, drying of the paddy and pounding. Another product that is supplied in the market is the vegetables and fruits planted by them in their *ingkhols* attached to their homesteads. Products produced by them is bought and supplied by *Meitei* women and other traders to the local and main markets. Some of them have taken up weaving as an important occupation producing cloths for sale which consist of *phanek*, *khudei*, mosquito net, shawls, towels, etc. This occupation played an important role for many widows and divorced women as a means to support their children. In this way they used to involve and play an important role in the economy of the state. But their less visibility in the market because of their indirect involvement is often viewed as the real picture of the economic role of the Manipuri Muslim women.

Because of the new awakened forces of revivalism and islamization process, there was Islamic resurgence and denigration of the un-Islamic elements adopted by Manipuri Muslims from Manipuri culture starting from 1960s to 1980s. Manipuri Muslim women started adopting *purdah* system. There was restriction of the social mobility of the Muslim women which affected their engagement in economic activities and also their role in the market. With due course of time, the changing economic condition along with urbanization, migration, fragmentation of lands and new family structure (like nuclear family) leads Manipuri Muslim women to negotiate the norms of *purdah* and seclusion so as to take the available economic activities and opportunities. Poverty is the main factor that drives many Muslim women into the labour market. Manipuri Muslim women's employment has to do with the participation of uneducated women in the labour force. Poorer and uneducated are more likely to be employed. Nowadays, Manipuri Muslim women in large number participate directly in the market economy.

It is very common to see markets at convenient spots by the roadside of village squares where a group of Muslim women would assemble either in the morning or in the evening selling groceries and all the basic commodities which they manage to amass from the nearby villages. A unique all Muslim women's market can be seen at Lilong, the highest Muslim concentrated area almost 6 km from Imphal. In this market, around 200-300 Muslim women occupy regular stalls daily and they sell commodities of daily consumption. Many Muslim women vendors could be seen in many of the *keithels* (markets) in the valley of Manipur, sitting side-by-side with women of other communities, selling vegetables, fresh and dried fish, fruits, eggs, clothes, and other merchandise. In the *Khwairamband* Market, only around 25 Muslim vendors (mostly egg sellers, hotel-keepers and tailors) got permanent seats. More than 200-300 Muslim women vendors, who do not have a permanent place to put their stalls, could be seen in the narrow *gallis*, roadsides, near the *nallas* or at any open space available in and around the *Khwairamband* Market. In Imphal city, besides in and around *Khwairamband* Market, Muslim women vendors could be seen along the roadside of Hatta area, Tribal Market in New Checkon, Konung Mamang *Keithel*, selling commodities of daily consumption. They could be seen in other *keithels* (markets) in far-flung areas like Lilong Bazaar, Thoubal Bazaar, Wangjing *Keithel*, Nungfou Bazaar, Khongjom *Keithel*, Sora *Keithel*, Mayang Imphal, Kakching and Pallel Bazaar, etc. Muslim women engaged themselves in various categories of low-profile, informal or unorganized economic activities – shop-keeping, hotel industry, animal husbandry and poultry farming, embroidery, tailoring. Many Muslim women are today engaged in other unorganized works like construction works and brick farms as manual labourers (*jugalis*). Muslim women also earn their livelihood as domestic helps in the affluent homes or taking up business in drug trafficking.

The number of women-headed households has increased and many are pushed into taking on the economic burden of the family. Socio-Economic Survey of *Meitei Pangals* (Manipuri Muslims) 2004 found out that as many as 90.12% of the Muslim women are outside the labour force with respect to distribution of persons by principal usual activity status. Manipuri Muslim women are pursuing a number of non-economic activities such as maintenance of kitchen garden, household poultry farming, collection of fish etc. These activities are a great economic gain to their household management and if these are counted, the Muslim women's work participation would be considerably high. According to 2004 survey, 41.40% are self employed Muslim women. Unfortunately, Manipuri Muslim women are disproportionately self-employed. They are engaged in family based ventures but do not report themselves as employed, even as unpaid helpers.

According to 2001 census, Manipuri Muslim women have larger share than their males in the category of agricultural and household industrial workers. Muslim women share 58.8% as against 41.2% of Muslim men in agricultural labourer and 81.77% as against 18.23% in household industry. Census also shows 60.29% as the share of male Muslim workers in Manipur and 37.71% as the share of female Muslim workers. But the results of the Socio-Economic Survey of *Meitei Pangals* (Manipuri Muslims) 2004 vary from the findings of the 2001 census. 2004 survey says that percentage share of male Muslim workers is much higher than the female Muslim workers. The percentage of male Muslim workers has been found to be 85.46% as against the female Muslim workers 14.54%. Muslim women have very low work participation rate compared to women of other major communities in the state. As per the census of 2001, the work

participation rate of the Muslim women is just 29.6% while that of Hindus and Christians are 38.5% and 41.8% respectively.

As per the Socio-Economic Survey (2004), almost 35.31 percent female workers are working in household enterprise as unpaid helpers. Maximum number of Muslim women are found to have been engaged in household enterprises as own account workers. It is followed by unpaid helpers in household enterprises. The percentage of employment among Muslims in Manipur is low with just 24.18%. Only 6.39% of females are working as regular salaried/wage employee as against 21.65% of their male counterparts. Educational backwardness is the reason for the minimal representation of Manipuri Muslim women in the service sector. 2001 census shows that the literacy rate of Muslims is 58.6% (male 75.0%, female 41.6%) much below the state's average of 70.5% (male 80.3%, female 60.5%). In the urban areas the literacy rate of Muslim male and female are 82.2% and 51% respectively, while in the rural areas 72.1% and 37.7% respectively. As per the census enumeration of 2011, the literacy rate of Muslims in Manipur is 67.8 per cent (Male – 80.3 per cent and Female – 55.2 per cent). The number of Manipuri Muslim literates is 1,34,292 (79,474 male and 54,818 female). The female literacy rate of Muslims is 55.2% much below the state's average of 70.3%. In the urban areas, the literacy rate of Muslim male and female are 85.1% and 62.5% respectively, while in the rural areas 77.8% and 51.2% respectively.

Other communities' women took the lead in acquiring modern education, entered new professions and started progressing. While Muslim women lagged far behind comparatively. Due to the revivalist tendencies in the early part of 20th century, Muslim women were emphasized only on the importance of religious studies. Besides religious factor, Muslims also find modern education as not serving their functional need and hence was not given priority before. Muslims took to modern education very late and that too was by a privileged few in Imphal. With change in outlook of people, majority of the Muslims have the feeling that women's education is necessary for the development of their society. But there is no proper attempt to educate them through constructive action even if some parents recognize the necessity and importance of girl's education. Exclusion of a large chunk of Muslim women from professional and clerical jobs (that is from public domain) affects not only their status within the family and community but also their say in governance and development. Therefore, the overall economic backwardness of the Muslims acts as a massive hindrance in their educational achievement and vice-versa.

Because of the changing situation in Manipur, it is important here to highlight four main points regarding the economic role of Manipuri Muslim women. First, there is always a sense of insecurity and uncertainty among the people especially in a conflict ridden state like Manipur. Such situation hit hard on women particularly on those who involve themselves in the market. The number of women-headed households has increased and many are pushed into taking on the economic burden of the family. Second, there is no initial push from the state which is required in recognizing the right to development and its implementation. Huge expenditure on security related issues by the state has cut the funds to undertake development activities in Manipur. Third, high economic participation of women in the market alone do not provide the scope for involvement in public affairs. Their access to economic power does not necessarily lead to the increase of their overall status as such. Fourth, women's relation with the market is changing because of the reduction of their role as producers. There is decline of women's role as traders in the market, the role which set Manipuri women apart from others. The above mentioned changes affect Manipuri Women in general but the worst strike is on Manipuri Muslim women because of what is said they are disadvantaged thrice over (that is as women, as poor women and as members of a minority community).

Evaluation of women's work is difficult and there are no easy methods of measuring the value of women's input in household activities or the value of their output. Economic contribution alone did not provide the scope for involvement in public affairs. High participation in economic activities of Manipuri women within the supportive framework of the women's market has ensured economic security to the women. But their access to economic power not necessarily lead to the increase of social status of Manipuri women and their presence in decision-making. On the other hand women's relation with the market is changing with the decline of women's role as traders in the market which was the central focus for women in the earlier generations.

Now it is time to come out of the popular stereotype image of Muslim women as only veiled and uneducated women which continue to dominate the public image for quite a long time. Focus should be on the large unorganized or informal sector of the economy where most of the Manipuri Muslim women are employed. It is unavoidable circumstances that leads to the coming up of Manipuri Muslim women to the public domain. Their visibility in the market is not the reality of the overall Muslim women in Manipur. Economic intervention of Manipuri Muslim women cannot overshadow the whole issue of 'occupation of public sphere'. More opportunities should be provided so that they are in a position to exercise and enlarge more choices of their own free will. Therefore, choice rather than circumstance should be the reason for Manipuri Muslim women's visibility and their occupation of public sphere.

References:

1. Census of Manipur, 2001
2. Census of Manipur, 2011
3. Report on Socio-Economic Survey of Meitei-Pangals (Manipuri-Muslims), 2004
4. Social Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India – A Report (Sachar Report), Govt. Of India, 2006
5. Maitreyi Bordia Das, “Muslim Women’s Low Labour Force Participation in India” in Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (eds.) In a Minority: Essays on Muslim Women in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005)
6. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004)
7. Feroja Syed, Inequalities and Deprivation of Religious Minorities: A Study of the Manipuri Muslims in Urban and Rural Settings, Ph.D Thesis (Unpublished), Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2018
8. Syed Ahmed, “Women Empowerment and Development: A case study of Manipuri Muslim Women” (Seminar paper on Women Empowerment and Development with special reference to Manipur organized by ICSSR-NERC and Manipur College, Imphal, March 20-21, 2009)
9. “Muslim Women in the Unorganised Sector: Some Observations” (National Seminar - Muslim Women in Manipur: Opportunities and Challenges organised by Manipur State Minorities Commission, Imphal, June 5, 2011)
10. “Economy of the Muslims in Manipur: Problems and Prospects” (National Seminar on Opportunities and Challenges of Muslims in Manipur organised by All Manipur Muslims (Meitei-Pangal) Welfare Association under the aegis of Manipur State Minorities Commission, Imphal, December 9, 2012)