

## The Historical and Current Tradition of Ema Keithels of Meitei in Manipur India

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the historical development of the women's market in Manipur (Ema Keithel), including its circumstances before, during, and after British rule. Only women are allowed to trade at Ema Keithel, which is also regarded as a communal center to encourage and empower women. This paper highlights Meitei women's ventures into the traditionally male-dominated world of public trade. Ema Keithel, the largest women's market in Asia, serves as proof of the Manipuri women's active participation in trading. At current in the markets, women from Manipur's; rural, urban, and hilly areas sell a range of goods, including fruits, vegetables, rice, flowers, garments, handicraft, handloom and other essentials for daily living and well-being. They thereby serve a unique role in the state's marketing industry. The study has used secondary sources of Ema keithel which is significant as women Market of Manipur, India. To analysis this paper theories like functionalist approach and conflict approach are considered.

**Keywords:** Women Market, British Rule, Meitei, Gender

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### Introduction

Unlike the general notions of the existence of one big Ema Keithel in Manipur, the reality is that every small town of Meitei has its own local Ema Keithel. Ema Keithel literally means Mother's Market, a market run and managed by women. Ema is a Meitei word, that means Mother and Keithel means Market. This tradition of having a functioning Ema Keithels is traced back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Common Era during the reign of Meidingu (King) Khuiyoi Tompok (Tensuba, 1993). The Khwairamb and Keithel which is the combination of various Keithel that is located in Imphal near the Kangla is the

most popular one and this Keithel has been functioning since the 1614 Common Era. This Ema Keithel is an institution in itself with its norms, expectations, functions, and roles of individuals coming to the Keithel, a procedure to start stalls, its own local financial systems, socialisation, etc. This paper will explore events and activities of gone past and present to determine what actually Ema Keithel means to the Meitei Society.

### **Ema Keithel before the British Rule**

Clear written records of existing functioning of Ema Keithel were starting to be found from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century written monoliths. The presence of Ema Keithel (women's markets) is indicated during the time of Meidingu Kainou Chalamba the ruler of Manipur from 1544-1561 Common Era. He used these markets to erect monoliths to show his authority and convey rules and regulations to the public. During the reign of Meidingu Senbi Mungyaamba from 1561-1596 C.E., many Ema Keithel (women's markets) were established by him in various places across Manipur and all these Keithel were lost in time. His successor Meidingu Kagamba who ruled Manipur from 1596-1651, established ten new Ema Keithel in 1614. Those Ema Keithel are Sana Keithel (present-day Khwairamband Keithel), Kha Keithel, Paibung Keithel, Chairen Keithel, Ahong Keithel, Khuman Keithel, Moirang Keithel, Paibung Keithel, Chairen Keithel, Namphou Keithel and Andro Keithel. Some of the Keithel that Meidingu Kagamba had established are still surviving and functioning today (Singh W. J., 2015). In oral mythological history of the Meitei story of 'Goddess Emoinu and Chaklamba' indicates the existence of Ema Keithel in both the Meitei Kingdom and the Khuman Kingdom. Goddess Emoinu from the Khuman Kingdom possessed all good seeds of vegetables, fruits, and offspring of animals which Chaklamba took to the Meitei Kingdom with advice from his mother. Meitei Kingdom annexed the Khuman Kingdom during the reign of Meidingu Kongyaamba who ruled the Meitei Kingdom from 1323 to 1334 C.E. Khuman King Adon Lamyai Kaikhinba surrendered his Khuman Kingdom without any bloodshed (Manikchand, 2018). In the Moirang Kangleirol (History of Moirang Kingdom) before it merged with Meitei Kingdom in 1473, in the part of KhumanKhumba and MoirangThoibi, the existence of well-functioning EmaKeithel is written where Khumnu sold forest products in that market (Nodia, 1996).

Scholars like Lairenmayum Ibungohal who used the functionalist school of thought credit the Lallup System of Meitei as a sufficient cause of EmaKeithel in Meitei society explained and reasons that in olden day's works were divided into two; hard work which includes *lallups* ເຮັດໜັງ and soft work. When the women go to the market, the male work somewhere doing hard labour, which helps the functioning of their families and society (Ibungohal, 1963). The Conflict School of thought or feminist thinkers like explained the phenomenon on Ema Keithelas "Due to polygamy in the valley of Manipur, women do not always enjoy happy and peaceful domestic life. Because of that, it perhaps made the ladies of Manipur become self-supporting, independent workers in the market and run their business to earn money" (SenSipra 1992). Historians like Birachandra, Sanamani Yambem, and Kirti Singh find that the start of polygamy in Meitei society was after the '*Seven Years Devastation*' from 1819-1826 at the hand of Burmese or Ava to increase the population of the ruined society and that also mainly in rich families (Birachandra, 2009; Singh M. K., 2005; Yambem, 1976). Yaiphaba Ningthoujam found that the economy of the Meitei Kingdom was ruined by the Seven Years' Devastation, all the markets, houses, and temples were level to ground; and rebuilding of the society and the kingdom was left to the hand of women (Ningthoujam, 2021). Sociologists like Chaki-Sircar and N. Tombi Singh feel that the Seven Years' Devastation elevates the social roles of women due to the absence of able-male bodies at the domestic level and social levels (Chaki-Sircar, 1984; Singh N. T., 1972).

During the days of Kings, ladies of royal blood were given reserved stalls in EmaKeithel known as Pheeribipotpham with a monopoly to sell worthy materials meant for gods and goddesses. Specific sellers are assigned to sell some specific goods. EmaKeithel (women's markets) are social institutions with their own set of dos and don'ts (Devi H. B., 2020). Meitei men were not allowed to enter into the EmaKeithel but men from other communities were allowed to enter the EmaKeithel (Dun, 1886; Brown, 1873). The theory of Sipra Sen is that "Polygamy is the cause of Ema Market in Manipur" but the norms of the EmaKeithel during the King's days hints otherwise as Meitei Male are not allowed to enter the Keithel by the women themselves who are running the market. According to scholars like HiromUlembaMeetei, before 1789 the marketplace stall platforms were raised by earth and mud with an open shed. Maharaj Bheigya chandra Singh started the tradition of building proper stalls using bamboo, mud, and thatch. Governor Shakesphere upgraded Keithel's stalls with iron beams and galvanized tin roofs in 1905 (Meetei, 2015). According to W. J. Singh, EmaKeithel was not just a place for selling and buying goods and services during the era of kings. Keithels were used for recreational activities by organising gladiator-like events, places to spread Kings' dictums and show his authority, places to distribute foods and grains to the needy at times, and at times meeting places with dignitaries (Singh W. J., 2015).

### **Ema Keithel during British Rule**

As soon as the British won the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, the British Empire hanged five prisoners of war to show its authority over Manipur on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1891. The five prisoners are Thangal General, Chirai Thangal, Pukhrambam Kajao, Prince Tikendrajit, and Niranjan Subedar. Of them, the General of the Manipur Army, Thangal General, and Crown Prince Tikendrajit are hung inside PheidaPung (Meitei Court for Market matters) for the people to see, a symbolic way to saw the people that Manipur is under the control of the British Empire. The point here is that at that time Meitei Society used to have a dedicated court that dealt only in Market related issues. Meitei kingdom also used to have a court that dealt only in family-related disputes in which a royal lady always acted as a judge and the name of such court is Patcha. With the rule of the British Empire, there were changes in the exchanges of goods and services in Manipur. Male traders also started getting involved in trades of goods which were normally imported from various corners of the British Empire or exported. The British rule organized the Kwairamband Keithel which is near the Kangla (the historical political power center of Meitei tribes) into two parts i.e. Sadar (Selected Area Development Administrative Region) Bazar in the southern part where all the imported goods from Burma and other East Asian countries are sold, Maxwell Bazar in the Northern part which deals with imports and exports with other parts of current India (Irengbam, 2020). The ImaKeithels are placed at the center where the Sardar and Maxwell Bazar meet. Currently, Sardar Bazar is known as PaonaKeithel, and Maxwell Bazar is known as ThangalKeithel after the names of warriors who fought against the British Empire in 1891. There was another market known as the Police Bazar at the center of Imphal which is a weekly market. The else Police Bazar complex is currently occupied by the Manipur State Road Transport Corporation and lies in ruin. Inside it lies the famous Temple of LeimapokpaKeirungba which served as both the temple of Shri Radha-Vinoda and a granary on the ground floor till the end of the Second World War (Thokcham, 2018; Khongbantabam, 2015). In this process, the market started to be dominated by the Marwari Traders from the Udaipur region with relatives in Calcutta (Irengbam, 2020). In 1904, the Political Agent and Superintendent of the State, Colonel Maxwell attempted to reintroduce the Lallup System of the Meitei Tribe without the permission of the nominal ceremonial king. Under the Lallup system, every male belonging to Meitei was supposed to provide 10 days of free labour every forty

days and even food and lodging during the days of labour should also be bear by the male themselves. This happened after an incident, where bungalows belonging to Captain Nuttal and Mr. Dunlop the Assistant Political Agent in Manipur were burnt down. After the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, the British Empire abolished the Lallup System as the Lallup System was used to gather armed militia by the kings of Manipur to draw wars or battles. Under the new Lallup System, able males must go to Kabaw Valley (present-day Sagaing Region of Myanmar) to cut and bring teak woods and later build the bungalows of the British Officials. The information of this humiliation and a colonial style of disgraceful form of slavery got to the ears of Ema in the Keithel (ladies who are involved in the women's market). They started and led an agitation against the British Empire to withdraw the new Lallup System. This agitation went on for a week and the British Empire withdrew the system and also transferred the Political Agent, Colonel Maxwell. This women's agitation is currently known as the first Nupi-Lal (Women's agitation) in Manipur (Kamei, 2013; Yambem, 1976). About three thousand women participated in the first women's agitation in Manipur (Meitei, 2016). The first women's agitation achieved to dissolution of Lallup System forever (Kashyap, 2019).

In the early 1920s, when the British Empire officials increased the taxes on pipeline water in Manipur, civil non-cooperation movements and agitations were employed by the people of Imphal (Crawford, 1923). Most of the participants in this non-cooperation movement were women (Huirem, 2013).

In 1939, the Second Women's Agitation occurred in Manipur due to ill governance by the Manipur Darbar under the Manipur's King and advisory of The British Political Agent Christopher Jimson and assistant political agent T.A. Sharpe. By this time, Marwaris merchants monopolised the rice business and also established themselves a monopoly in the money lending business as loan sharks. These Marwaris started running large rice mills with permission from the Government of Manipur and started processing the rice. At the same time, they bought all the rice at discounted prices from Manipur and sold it at an inflated rate in Assam and Bengal (Chishti, 1979) with the help of the Political Agents and the British India Army (Meitei, 2016; Longjam). This led to fear of famine in Manipur. On 11<sup>th</sup> December 1939, Ema of *Khwairamband Keithel* took a decision to take the matter in hand. And from 12<sup>th</sup> December, the Second Women's Agitation was fully started by the Ema of *Khwairamband Keithel*, and 21 women got hurt with bayonets and butts of British rifles. The agitation went on for more than a year (Kashyap, 2019), in the meantime the British administration even tried to sell off the *Khwairamband Keithel* (Pallapothu, 2020). This is the first time Manipur resonates with the slogan of "Vande Mataram". The achievements of the Second Women Agitation are a ban on the uncontrolled export of rice, and the system of Wakhai Sel, Mangba-Senba, and Chandan Shekhai under the Brahma Sabhawas also changed (Kashyap, 2019). Even during the time of the British Indian Empire, the Ema Keithel of Manipur were vibrant loci which functioned as the hub of Manipur's economy. When situations and problems arise from time to time, the women of EmaKeithel arose as protectors of its society from political oppression, cultural oppression, and social and economic oppression. The EmaKeithel are loci of socio-economic-political changes in Manipur during the era of British rule.

### **Estate of EmaKeithel after the British India Empire to 2020s**

The British rule in Manipur was for more than a half-century (August 1891- August 1947) which brought significant changes in the socio-fabric of Manipur and to the Ema Keithel. After the Second World War, the Police ceased to function as a Market due to various factors and the compound was under the possession of Manipur State Transport Corporation from 1950 by the Road Transport Act, 1950. In 1957, the Sadar Bazar officially became Paona Bazar and Maxwell Bazar became Thagal Bazar (Chronicle News Service 2021). During 12<sup>th</sup> convention of 'All Manipuri Nupi Marup' (women



organization )held on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of May 1965s at Aryan Theatre, “*the Manipur Mahilasanmelani discussed the need for the setting up of a women’s market (EmaKeithel) and of reserving seats in buses for women*”(Devi N. L., 2011).

“*Anti-AFSPA movement and sought redress against human rights violations, The MeiraPaibi movement (1977) has come to be known as the third NupiLan (women agitation), in which women Market played a key role*”(Haobijam, 2021). A project to rebuild a new market complex at the location of Purana Bazar was started by the governor in the early months of 1992. It was determined that the state PWD (Public Works Department) and PDA (Planning and Development Authority) would split the burden of construction. Engineers and employees encountered opposition from Ema, notably the confident leaders when they proceeded to do the initial task of survey and measuring for the market(Singh O. N., 2023). In 2003, the Manipur Government without consulting the women vendors in the market “*decided to construct a supermarket complex*” on the site of EmaKeithel. “*Government meeting took behind closed doors in an elegant hotel, while the women stood outside protesting. Women stayed in the market day and night, worried that they would lose sheds once construction began*”(Monica, 2011).

Currently, there are four buildings located in Kwairamband Keithel for Ima Keithel which are name as Imoinulma Keithel (after goddess of wealth, prosperity, and kitchen), PhouoibiIma Keithel (after goddess of bounty and harvest), Leimarel Shidabi Ima Keithel (goddess of health) and Chakrikom Imakeithel (Place of market) (Nonibala Devi & Sachdeva, 2022). In ImaKeithel, individual women who have a license are permitted to operate a business. Families pass their permits down from one generation to the next normally from Mother-in-law to Daughter-in-law. For their seats, all of the female vendors in the ImaKeithel pay tax. Taxes are paid by everyone who sells goods, including those who do so on the street and at a shed (Panwar, 2017). There is a Keithel like NagamapalKeithel which was torn down forever in 2005, for the development of Road and transportation. Each and every Keithel has its own Lairembi and Lairemba (Goddess and God) before whom all the women in Keithel pray at the start of their day and end of their day. These Lairembi and Lairemba are also worshiped by other people as there are no restrictions. Today, EmaKeithel and its large network of local suppliers play a vital role in helping the women of Manipur to maintain a high level of economic independence. Ema keithel is often passed on through the female family member. For many of families, employment in the market is essential for meeting their fundamental necessities. In EmaKeithel, only shopping and transportation of goods are permitted for male members. Women alone are the owners and managers of the Ema Keithel. These women have a significant role in the political sphere in terms of agitation against illegal activities, conflicts, social problems, and violence in the state, thus it would be dishonest to categorize them solely as “entrepreneurs” due to the fact that their involvement extends beyond the market (Nonibala Devi & Sachdeva, 2022). In Singh M. words, “*Apart from selling and buying activities, the EmaKeithel also serves, from time to time, as a meeting point where elderly women debate on contemporary issues*” (Singh M 2017).

“*A unique feature of the women in Manipur is that they take the central role in the business of marketing of almost all goods- the products of agriculture, handloom and handicraft*” (Chingtham, 2016). In Haobam Bilashini's own words “*A peculiarity of this women-owned market is not merely a place of subsistence economy on which women depend entirely for existence, it is a place for unity*” (Devi 2020). In an article written by Centre for Organisation Research & Education, Manipur titled “*Manufacturing Poverty: A Case of Women’s Market in Manipur*” it stated that “*the Global market is neither abstract nor intangible as it is often projected. It occupies real space: physical, economic and cultural. Where such space is already occupied by local traditional and indigenous systems and*

*practices, it must be sanitized and cleared to make way for the global market” (CORE, 2005). Haobam Bilashini Devi in her book “Images: Impact on Memory: A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Manipur”, highlights the importance of a single product called “Meitei Thum” (salt produced in Manipur which is generally a plate shape) in Meitei culture for rituals of YupanThaba (birth ceremony), Chagumba (first feeding ceremony), lohongba (Marriage), death ceremonies, and Cheiraoba (New Year Day). Meitei pregnant women are required to have Meitei Thum during those periods and a few months after the birth of the child. Meitei culture has a goddess of salt called TaoronaiLeima or NoinuThumleima. And this product is sold only in EmaKeithel. Like this product, Meitei as a tribe has lots of specific products that are required in various essential occasions of life. These products are produced in various parts of Manipur and sold only in EmaKeithel. These are also some of the reasons for the survival of EmaKeithel in the current Globalised Market.*

*Tripti Panwar expresses Ema Kethel with the following words “Women come in this market every day not just to sale the goods but to come and share their views on social economic turmoil under political affairs. Also, they set together and discuss how they can bring change in their strategies of selling to improve marketing and also to cop up with the adverse political atmosphere at some point in time. At some point in time, they come on streets to fight for their rights and to protect their market stability when the situation of economic breakdown gets worst they give suggestion and help the movement to bring the constructive result that is good for the social economic development of the state” (Panwar 2017).*

## Conclusion

The roles and functions of Ema Keithel of Meitei apart from the core economic function of loci of buying and selling have been evolving, adapting, and changing throughout the ages. During the ages of the kings, the Ema Keithel used to serve as an arena for various events to show the bravery and skills of warriors and for the entertainment of the people and the royalty. Ema Keithel also acts as a hub to spread information and knowledge of various kinds for the use by the people from learned individuals or to know the pulse of people by the ruling elites. At times, used Ema Keithel to spread by placing stone edicts, show his powers by using it as the venue to punish rebels or war prisoners, or to show his mercy and kindness by donating food or clothes or wealth from time to time or in when situation arises. During the colonial era, the British Empire first used the compound of EmaKeithel as a place to show its dominance over the land by hanging the then Crown Prince Trikendrajeet and General of Manipur’s Army Thangal General. And later, the women of Manipur used the Keithel to organised to voice their concern against humiliating and discriminating laws like those of Lallup in 1905 through the First Women Agitation, the high water tax of the 1920s, and 1939 the Second Women Agitation against the artificial famine and social issues like the system of Wakhai Sel, Mangba-Senba, and Chandan Shekhai under the Brahma Sabha. The Manipur Ema Keithel served as the economic center of the state even when the British Indian Empire was still in existence. The women of Ema Keithel arose as the society's guardians against political oppression, cultural oppression, social oppression, and economic oppression as situations and problems occurred from time to time. The Ema Keithel served as a focal point for Manipur's socio-economic-political transformations while under British control.

According to Manipur's historical records, the state has been involved in conflicts with a number of its neighbors, including Burma, which kept Manipuri men engaged in combat and other hard activities. It is only one of several factors that motivated Meitei women to leave their homes and start businesses. This is how the Ema Keithel in Manipur was developed and evolved. One of the symbols of women's emancipation in Meitei society is the Ema Keithe (women's market). This historic market provides

people with a lifeline and more as it is also a way of life-style with its traditions and customs. This market has always been a testament to Manipur's liberal character towards women and gender equality before the British era. Ima Keithel is a center of social-political debate on state assistance as well as business activities. Over the last 500 years, the ImaKeithel in the KhwairambandKeithel has witnessed numerous radical incidents. EmaKeithel continues to serve as a role model for women who want to be socially empowered, have a liberal identity, lead revolutions, advances economic equality, and take on leadership roles. The unique markets continue to promote the rich cultural heritage of Manipur.

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