

**Women And Human Development:
A Case Study Of Manipuri Muslim Women**

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Abstract

Religion is always considered as the primary force influencing every aspect of Muslim women's lives. Such misconceptions usually leave Muslim women invisible. Most of the research studies on Muslim women deal with certain issues like personal laws and education. And such studies are concentrated mostly in Muslim dominated states of India. The paper is a comprehensive study of Manipuri Muslim women within a theoretical framework of human development and capabilities approach. The paper tries to study different dimensions of human development – livelihood, education and health which play important roles in shaping the well being of Muslim women in Manipur. It seeks to deepen the human development discourse by looking beyond basic indicators to more complex and wider networks of the community, civil society (like women's organizations) and the direct and indirect actions of the state.

Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices. In principle, these choices can be infinite and change over time. But at all levels of development, the three essential ones are for people to lead a long and healthy life, to acquire knowledge and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living.ⁱ If these essential choices are not available, many other opportunities remain inaccessible. Additional choices, highly valued by many people, range from political, economic and social freedom to opportunities for being creative and productive, and enjoying personal self respect and guaranteed human rights.ⁱⁱ The human development paradigm values human life for itself. It values life because of its built-in assumption that all individuals must be enabled to develop their human capabilities to the fullest and put those capabilities to the best use in all areas of their lives.ⁱⁱⁱ The human development paradigm is concerned both with building up human capabilities (through investment in people) and with using those human capabilities fully (through an enabling framework for growth and employment).^{iv}

Women's condition has improved with respect to literacy, life expectancy and maternal mortality but they continue to occupy a subordinate position vis-à-vis men in all spheres of life – social, economic and political. Even the gains in terms of basic human development seem to have accrued predominantly to women from privileged groups and are more pronounced to specific regions or zones. According to the Human Development Report 1997, there is no country that treats its women as well as its men, according to a complex measure that includes life expectancy, wealth and education.^v Women are not treated as ends, rather as mere instruments of the ends of others. Martha Nussbaum argues that the capabilities should be pursued for each and every person, treating each as an end and none as a mere tool of the ends of others.^{vi} She adopts a principle of each person's capability based on the principle of each person as end.^{vii} It is important for women to actively engage themselves in a struggle to survive, to gain control over economic, social and political resources and to lead a life of dignity.^{viii}

According to Amartya Sen, social achievements are more impressive where women are better educated, more resourceful, more valued, more influenced, and generally more equal agents within the household and in society.^{ix} He gave the examples of Kerala and Manipur where women play an important social or economic role. The empowerment of women has had a different basis in each case. It is the economic role of the Manipuri women which is more central in the case of Manipur. Manipuri women have ended up with a far more equal and active role in the society than their sisters in, say, the northern region where the agency of women has been comprehensively repressed.

Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon argue that to understand Muslim women better, it is important to locate them within the broader context of economic, political and other interests and recognise their disadvantage,

discrimination and disempowerment are experienced at specific and particular intersections of class, caste, gender and community.^x Muslim women like women of other communities, are also differentiated across class, caste, community, residence and region. Despite these differences, when compared with others, the majority of Muslim women are among the most disadvantaged, least literate, most economically impoverished and politically marginalized sections of Indian society.^{xi} In this context, the paper assumes significance for studying the human development condition of Manipuri Muslim women with contrasting dual identities - of Manipuri women who are known for their active role in public sphere and of Muslim women who are considered as the most disadvantaged section of women in Indian society.

What sets the Manipuri women apart in the economic sphere is its unique historical experience. It is an age-old tradition for women in the region to shoulder all the internal trade of the state. *Keithel* (marketplace) solely belonged to the women. Manipuri womenfolk in 1939 led the first agitation against the British economic policies and atrocities known as *Nupilal* or women's agitation. At Imphal, there is a large all women's market, believed to have been founded in 1580 known as *Khuwairamband bazaar* (or *Ima Keithel*), where over two thousand women occupy stalls. The entire market is managed by women. Markets such as this, but of smaller size, are found in every nook and corner of the state. All the marketing is done by women, all the 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. In Manipur, weaving is exclusively practiced by women and handwoven fabrics constitute an important export item.

The markets are focal points of the women's community life. The commonality of interest as traders and the constant mutual exchanges have bred self-confidence and instilled a crucial instinct for collective action amongst women. Women's high economic participation and their mutual association in the market-place are two factors responsible for the emergence of strong women's agency in Manipur. The *Ima Keithel* is the biggest women market in the whole of South Asia which serves as a space for the mobilisation and functioning of *Meira Paibis*. It is said that in the economic sphere we have the *Ima Keithel*, in the socio-political sphere we have *Meira Paibis*. Manipuri women are visible not only in women's market but as *Meira Paibis* or the women 'torch bearers' in response to the excesses of the armed-forces in a conflict-ridden state like Manipur.

Unique economic role of *Meitei* women has its influence and impact on Manipuri Muslim women. It is the distinct historical experience that set apart Manipuri Muslim women from other Muslim women of the country and shaped their significant economic role in the state. Therefore, participation of Manipuri Muslim women in economy is link neither with their educational status nor with cultural norms.^{xii} With changing time, there is decline of women's role as traders in the market which affect Manipuri Women in general and Manipuri Muslim women in particular. The number of women-headed households has increased and many are pushed into taking on the economic burden of the family. 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. They engaged themselves in various categories of low-profile, informal or unorganized economic activities.

Women of other communities took the lead in acquiring modern education, entered new professions in service sector and started progressing. When compared with others, Manipuri Muslim women lagged behind because of educational backwardness. The literacy status and levels of education among Manipuri Muslim women is very low. Their situation is indeed very depressing in relative terms. Their deprivation increases manifold as the level of education rises. The expansion of the education among Manipuri Muslim women has been uneven and inadequate. There is both widening and deepening of inequalities among Muslim women on the basis of rich and urban women on one hand, and poor and rural women on other hand.^{xiii} Such inequalities certainly affect the quality education of Manipuri Muslim women.

Unhygienic living conditions, low level of health awareness and low access to health services made Muslims vulnerable to all sorts of diseases. Level of awareness is very low among Manipuri Muslim women about family planning, maternal care and other health related issues. High rate of home-deliveries among the Muslim women results in high maternal death rate generally due to bleeding during delivery, anaemia, infection, etc. High birth orders of Muslim mothers lead to higher incidence of pre-mature delivery and high-infant mortality rate.

Among the four essential components in the human development paradigm, empowerment of people distinguishes the human development paradigm from other development concepts (other three components being equity, sustainability and productivity). Empowerment focuses on development by the people by participating in the activities, events and processes that shape their lives. It implies empowering both women and men to take action on several fronts and compete on an equal footing. The empowerment of people – particularly women is link to growth and human development.^{xiv} Well-being of women can be enhanced with agency of women themselves bringing about a change. Women's agency precisely focused to play the role of an agency that can help in removing the iniquities that depress the well-being of women. Women's well-being is strongly influenced

by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights and to have literacy and be educated participants in decisions within and outside the family. These aspects (women's earning power, economic role outside the family, literacy and education, property rights and so on) have their positive contribution in adding force to women's voice and agency through independence and empowerment. An adequate realization of women's agency relates not only to the freedom to act but also to the freedom to question and reassess. Also necessary is to come out of their isolation and use their collective strength to gain control over self, to claim their due share of resources and power within their families, communities, marketplace and government organizations.^{xv}

Muslim women in Manipur have mobilized themselves to raise their grievance and aspirations through organizations and associations. A host of organizations solely organized by Muslim women have been active in Manipur for quite some time. Some prominent organizations of Manipuri Muslim women which were active - Kangleipak Muslim Chanura Development Organization (KMCDO), Association of Muslim Women Organizations (AMWO) and All Manipur Muslim Development Organization (AMMDO). Anwara Noorjahan, Sitara Begum, Ema Jano and Ema Amubi are some of the pioneer social activists of the Muslim community associated with the above mentioned organizations. Over the years, many Muslim women's organizations and social activists have been active in mobilizing the Muslim women on diverse issues. Muslim women through such organizations have organized and mobilized themselves, started to talk about issues that not only concern the womenfolk and the Muslim society but about issues that concern the state of Manipur. They stood up for various issues ranging from need of social reformation in the society, anti-drug drive, issues of integration, atrocities by armed personals, anti-people policies of the state government to conflict resolutions. They have increased participation in many spheres to express grievances, gain influence and direct public policy.

The quality of public services and effective governance as well as political commitment plays an important role in shaping human development indicators.^{xvi} The role of the state is important in recognizing the right to development and its implementation. But the right to development has not yet entered the practical realm of development planning and implementation in many states. Knowing the importance of the link between economic growth and human development, some states have now invested in education, health and skill improvement, more equitable distribution of income, government spending on social sector and the empowerment of the people. And such states have achieved a higher level of human development compared to the ones who have invested less. State is often capable of providing an initial push which is required in the initial stages of empowerment of women. Once they cross that threshold and start asserting, over a period of time, they start contributing to the process of development and ultimately form a strong women agency.

The role of the state especially in conflict ridden region like Manipur is critical because of the politicization on ethnic identity and competition among different groups for state-controlled resources. For a community like Manipuri Muslims, the role of the state is much more crucial for their upliftment and to remove their most backward status. Unlike North Indian Muslims who give priority to religious or cultural demands (like preservation of Muslim Personal Law, Urdu, etc) along with economic demands, Manipuri Muslims are mainly in favour of focusing on socio-economic demands with the underlying aspirations for social and economic equality.^{xvii} One critical issue is the role of the state in the promotion of minority education. Scale of investment by the state is required for the universalization of education especially for Muslim girls, as their education demand higher investment in terms of more facilities, more women teachers, separate schools, transport and scholarships.^{xviii} The state must recognize disparities in educational attainment and availability across gender, class, residence and region. Therefore, there is need for comprehensive policy of inclusiveness in the field of education which will reduce disparities of any kind. With overall economic backwardness of the Muslims acting as a massive hindrance in overall change and development, state's role in economic upliftment is equally important. State's intervention is required in improving economic condition of Muslim women with anti-poverty programmes, increasing credit availability and policies regarding skill up-gradation to engage women workers in growth-oriented sectors.^{xix}

Endnotes:

ⁱHuman Development Report 1990, United Nations Development Programme (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 10

ⁱⁱ*Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱMahbub ul Haq, Reflections on Human Development (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) p.17

^{iv}*Ibid*, p.21

^vHuman Development Report 1997, United Nations Development Programme (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p.39

^{vi}Martha C.Nussbaum, Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000) p.5

^{vii}*Ibid*

^{viii}Ranjani K. Murthy, Building Women's Capacities: Interventions in Gender Transformation (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001) p.349

^{ix}See Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995)

^xZoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 3

^{xi}*Ibid*

^{xii}Feroja Syed, Manipuri Muslim Women and Education: Identifying the Problems (National Seminar - Muslim Women in Manipur: Opportunities and Challenges organised by Manipur State Minorities Commission, Imphal, June 5, 2011)

^{xiii}*Ibid*

^{xiv}Mahbub ul Haq, Reflections on Human Development, *op.cit.*, p.22

^{xv}See Ranjani K. Murthy, Building Women's Capacities: Interventions in Gender Transformation, *op.cit.*, p.20

^{xvi}Sonalde B. Desai, et.al, Human Development in India: Challenges for a Society in Transition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 211

^{xvii}See Feroja Syed, Religion, Ethnic Identity and the State: Pangals in Manipur, M.Phil Dissertation (Unpublished) Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2007, p.88

^{xviii}Feroja Syed, Manipuri Muslim Women and Education: Identifying the Problems, *op.cit.*

^{xix}*Ibid*