

Trans Women (*Nupi Manbi*) Identity in Manipur: A Critical Review

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ABSTRACT: Studies on transgender lives in India have expanded considerably in recent years, yet they remain uneven in their regional focus and conceptual depth. Much of the existing literature continues to privilege metropolitan, hijra-centric, or public-health perspectives, often overlooking indigenous gender identities and everyday institutional experiences. This review critically examines the interdisciplinary literature on transgender lives in Manipur, with a particular focus on identity formation, education, culture, and resistance within the *Nupi Manbi* community. Drawing on sociological studies, historical analyses, narrative inquiries, policy critiques, and literary interventions, the article argues that transgender marginalization in Manipur is historically produced and institutionally sustained rather than culturally inherent. Early studies played an important role in documenting visibility and health concerns but were shaped by deficit-oriented frameworks. More recent studies foreground history, lived experience, creative expression, and agency, revealing how transgender individuals negotiate conditional acceptance within cultural spaces while facing persistent exclusion in education, employment, and social institutions. By synthesizing these bodies of work, the review highlights key contributions, shared limitations, and emerging shifts in transgender research. It concludes by emphasizing the need for intersectional, ethnographic, and policy-oriented approaches that translate indigenous gender histories and lived realities into meaningful structural change.

INTRODUCTION

The trans women community has a long history as old as our civilization. Indian law recognizes trans-women as third gender, but to date, they are struggling for their identity; they are not accepted by society. *Nupi Manbi* (one who looks like a woman) of Manipur identify themselves as women. They observe, learn, and live like women, possess feminine qualities, and have the desire to be accepted as women as well as social beings having equal roles in a society. In recent years, our society has become

more supportive and welcoming towards the gender identity of the trans woman *Nupi Manbi*. Despite this, the *Nupi Manbi* community has not gained enough social acceptance from the patriarchal Meitei society.

The issue of transgender inclusion in India has gained renewed attention in recent years, particularly following landmark legal developments, such as the Supreme Court's recognition of a third gender and the enactment of the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019*. Alongside formal legal recognition, increasing media visibility and public discourse have highlighted the social and economic

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challenges faced by transgender individuals. Despite these developments, transgender persons continue to experience deep-rooted exclusion in everyday life. Key domains such as education, employment, healthcare, and social participation remain sites of persistent discrimination, harassment, and systemic marginalization, illustrating a significant gap between legal frameworks and lived realities.

While studies on transgender issues in India have expanded, it remains unevenly distributed across disciplines and often disconnected from local and cultural specificities. Much of the research focuses on metropolitan contexts, public health, or legal frameworks, overlooking the nuanced experiences of transgender communities in smaller towns, rural areas, or culturally distinct regions. Consequently, the complex interplay of identity, social norms, and institutional practices remains insufficiently documented, limiting the depth of understanding necessary for culturally sensitive social policy and intervention. Manipur provides a particularly significant context for examining these contradictions. The region has a long history of gender plurality, with cultural and ritual practices recognizing non-binary and gender-diverse roles. The *Nupi manbi* community has historically been deeply connected to ritual performance, kinship networks, and community life, reflecting fluid and contextually grounded understandings of gender. Yet contemporary transgender communities continue to experience social stigma, limited access to healthcare and education, and economic marginalization. The tension between historical recognition of gender diversity and present-day exclusion highlights the complex dynamics shaping transgender lives in the region.

Existing studies on Manipur span multiple disciplinary perspectives. Early studies often focused on public health concerns, including HIV prevalence, sexual behavior, and mental health. More recent sociological, narrative, and literary research explores identity formation, community practices, and strategies of resistance. However, these studies remain fragmented and rarely engage in sustained dialogue with one another. A comprehensive, anthropologically grounded understanding of

transgender experiences in Manipur is therefore still lacking.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Search Engine

This review was conducted across multiple databases, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Shodhganga, to identify published and unpublished papers from 2010 to the present. The search terms used were “Transgender”, “*Nupi Manbi*”, “Manipur”, “Gender Identity”, “*Shumang Leela*” (a traditional courtyard play of Manipur).

Inclusion Criteria

Studies and papers from 2010 to the present, published in English and conducted among the Meitei populations, were included.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies that are not conducted among the Meitei populations, and those that do not meet the required timeframe, are excluded. Also, journals that cannot be accessed openly are also excluded.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative review method based on secondary sources. Research papers and journal articles from online academic journals were carefully selected and read to understand key arguments, themes, and gaps in existing studies. These sources were read carefully to understand their main ideas, arguments, and findings. Instead of merely summarizing the studies, the paper critically reviews them to identify common themes, different viewpoints, and gaps in existing research.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

Yumkhaibam (2017) examines the identity formation and socio-cultural challenges faced by male-to-female transgender persons (*Nupi Manbi*) in Manipur. Based on primary data collected from four valley districts, the study highlights the community’s struggle for an appropriate local identity, distinguishing *Nupi Manbi* from *Nupi Sabi*,

male performers in traditional theatre. The paper traces the historical presence of transgender persons in religious practices such as *Lai Haraoba* (merry making of gods), where they once performed priestly roles as *Maibis* (female shamans), followed by their subsequent marginalization in everyday social life. It documents pervasive social stigma, family rejection, discrimination, and the use of derogatory labels against the community. From a public health perspective, the study discusses vulnerabilities related to HIV/STIs, substance use, and mental health, while noting improvements due to NGO-led intervention programs. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for legal recognition, social acceptance, and targeted policy interventions to address the structural exclusion of the *Nupi Manbi* community.

Hebbbar and Singh (2017) examine psychiatric morbidity among transgender individuals in Imphal through a clinical, cross-sectional study of 32 participants using DSM-5 criteria and the MINI-Plus interview. The study reports a high prevalence of mental health concerns, particularly substance use disorders, with alcohol abuse and dependence being the most common. Anxiety disorders, depression, and significant levels of suicidality were also observed, alongside conditions such as social phobia and PTSD. While the study is important in establishing the extent of psychiatric vulnerability among transgender people in Manipur, it adopts a largely diagnostic and quantitative approach. Mental health is treated mainly as a clinical outcome, with limited attention to how distress is shaped by everyday experiences of stigma, family rejection, and social exclusion.

Yumkhaibam (2020) traces the historical and contemporary emergence of the *Nupi Maanbi* community in Manipur, situating transgender identities within changing socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts. The study demonstrates that gender-variant persons enjoyed cultural legitimacy in early and medieval Manipur as *Pheitas* (traditional title for gender variant person), who occupied privileged administrative and sacred roles. However, colonial disruption and the loss of royal patronage led to their marginalization in modern times. In the

twentieth century, transgender visibility was largely confined to performative spaces such as *Shumang Leela*, where male-to-female impersonators were known as *Nupi Sabis* (one who imitates a woman). The article argues that the contemporary *Nupi Manbi* identity emerged in the early twenty-first century through collective organizing, HIV/AIDS interventions, legal discourses, and the establishment of beauty parlors as a crucial socio-economic niche. These parlors function as sites of livelihood, community formation, and alternative family structures. Despite increased visibility and partial acceptance linked to economic contribution, the study concludes that *Nupi Manbi* continue to face social stigma, conditional acceptance, and exclusion from key institutions such as marriage and kinship.

Monika and Gogoi (2022) examined youth attitudes toward the LGBTQ community in Manipur using a cross-sectional study of 225 undergraduate students aged 19–22 years from four educational institutions. Data were collected using the standardized CSUN Attitudes toward LGBT Issues scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Z-tests. The findings revealed that most youth held generally positive attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals, rejected traditional gender roles, and supported LGBTQ rights. Many respondents believed that sexual orientation and gender identity are biologically determined. However, a majority reported only moderate comfort in interacting with LGBTQ individuals, influenced by religious beliefs and limited personal contact. No significant gender differences in attitudes were observed. The study highlights the need for educational and awareness initiatives to further reduce stigma and promote inclusion.

Yumnam (2024) examines the identity formation and social acceptance of transgender individuals in Manipur, focusing on male-to-female transgender persons known as *Nupi Manbi*. Using qualitative analysis of existing literature, census data, and socio-cultural narratives, the study situates transgender identity within the critique of the binary sex–gender system and emphasizes gender as a socially constructed and performed category. The paper traces the historical presence of gender-variant

individuals in Manipur, highlighting their decline in social status following colonial intervention and the loss of traditional patronage. While cultural platforms such as *Shumang Leela* have provided visibility and limited acceptance, transgender individuals continue to face discrimination, stigma, and exclusion in everyday social life. The process of coming out is shown to be shaped by patriarchal norms, family pressure, and conditional acceptance, often linked to economic contribution. The study concludes that despite legal recognition, *Nupi Manbi* remain socially marginalized, underscoring the gap between constitutional inclusion and lived realities in Manipuri society.

Yumkhaibam (n.d.) examines the socio-cultural location of *Nupi Maanbi*, transgender women of Manipur, by analyzing the historical roots of gender plurality and its subsequent erosion under rigid sex-gender binaries. The study traces how gender-variant persons (*Pheitas*) once held administrative and ritual legitimacy in pre-colonial Manipur, but lost social status following colonial intervention and the consolidation of patriarchy. In the twentieth century, transgender visibility became largely confined to performative spaces such as *Shumang Leela*, while everyday expressions of transgender identity were stigmatized. The paper highlights the persistent exclusion of *Nupi Maanbi* from education, employment, religious rituals, and cultural spaces, where acceptance is often conditional upon economic productivity. At the same time, it foregrounds the emergence of resistance through identity politics, community activism, and cultural assertion, particularly in response to moral policing and exclusionary practices. Yumkhaibam argues that the contemporary position of *Nupi Maanbi* is shaped by an ongoing negotiation between power and resistance, revealing both structural marginalization and growing agency within Manipuri society.

Devi (2025) analyses the experiences of *Nupi Maanbi* (transgender women) in Manipur, focusing on their restricted participation in the Lai Haraoba festival as a reflection of broader struggles over identity and inclusion. It shows how cultural gatekeeping by dominant institutions marginalizes

Nupi Maanbi in the name of preserving tradition. Using Amartya Sen's concept of plural identities and Gopal Guru's theory of spatial hierarchies, the study highlights how *Nupi Maanbi* resist marginalization by asserting agency across multiple spaces and creating alternative sites of belonging. These practices are understood as forms of resistance that challenge dominant norms and reimagine possibilities for social inclusion.

It has been discussed that the marginalization of *Nupi Manbi* in Manipur is not culturally inherent but historically produced. Pre-colonial recognition of gender-variant persons contrasts sharply with their contemporary exclusion. Gender-variant people known as *Pheitas* were part of the religious and administrative life. Their present exclusion developed later, especially after colonial rule and the spread of strict ideas about male and female roles. This challenges the common belief that transgender identities go against Manipuri culture.

In contemporary Manipuri society, *Nupi Manbi* gain visibility in specific cultural and economic spaces, like in *Shumang Leela* performances and beauty parlors. Yet, they remain excluded from core social institutions like family, marriage, education, and religious rituals. Acceptance in these limited spaces does not translate into full social belonging; instead, it reinforces the idea that transgender legitimacy must be earned through performance or economic contribution rather than recognized as a social right. Family plays a major role in shaping transgender lives. Coming out is often difficult and shaped by fear of shame, social pressure, and expectations to follow gender norms. Even when families do not openly reject *Nupi Manbi*, they tolerate, but acceptance is often silent or fragile.

Research and literature regarding the trans community have been increasing rapidly, with the attempt to spread awareness and shed light on the identity, status, and experiences of transgender people. While some studies provide important overviews of gender identities and acceptance in Manipur, they remain largely descriptive and secondary in nature. As a result, the voices of *Nupi Manbi* are often presented in a more scholarly manner, leaving a significant gap in the real

narratives of the community's lived experiences. Another gap is that while many works with clear mentions of the socio-economic status of *Nupi Manbi* are there, it primarily focuses on a particular economic niche- the beauty parlours, as the central axis of identity, visibility, and acceptance. This emphasis risks privileging economic productivity as the principal pathway to social legitimacy, leaving partiality in attention to those persons who remain outside of such occupational spaces. Although mental health is increasingly addressed in studies on the transgender community, much of this work focuses on identifying the prevalence of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, or substance use. While such findings are important, they are largely clinical and quantitative in nature. What remains lacking is an ethnographically grounded and analytically rich understanding of mental health as lived experience. Few studies explore how emotional distress is shaped by everyday interactions, family rejection, moral policing, economic insecurity, and long-term social exclusion. As a result, mental health is often treated as an individual problem rather than as a social and cultural outcome of marginalization. Greater attention to narrative-based and ethnographic approaches would help capture how *Nupi Manbi* understand, cope with, and give meaning to mental health struggles in their daily lives. The literature also pays limited attention to relationships between *Nupi Manbi* and other gendered or marginalized groups within Manipuri society. Interactions with cisgender women, queer men, or other transgender identities are rarely examined, even though these relationships shape everyday experiences of solidarity, conflict, and belonging. Another gap concerns the role of morality, religion, and respectability. Many studies note moral policing and religious exclusion, but few closely examine how ideas of purity, respectability, and "proper womanhood" are used to judge *Nupi Manbi*. Understanding these moral frameworks is important for explaining why exclusion persists even in spaces that claim cultural or spiritual openness. Most existing studies focus mainly on urban areas. This creates a gap in understanding the lives of

Nupi Manbi in rural settings. In cities, community networks, NGOs, visibility, and livelihood options are more available. In rural areas, however, social control is often stronger, privacy is limited, and support systems are fewer. Access to healthcare, education, and legal awareness is also more restricted in rural contexts. Because research rarely compares urban and rural experiences, important differences in daily life, work opportunities, mental well-being, and social acceptance are overlooked. This urban bias limits a full understanding of the diverse realities of *Nupi Manbi* in Manipur.

CONCLUSION

The review shows that the marginalization of *Nupi Manbi* in Manipur is not part of tradition but is shaped by history, social institutions, and colonial legacies. While pre-colonial society recognized gender-diverse roles, today *Nupi Manbi* face exclusion in family life, education, employment, and religious spaces. Their acceptance is often limited to economic or cultural spaces, like beauty parlours and *Shumang Leela* performances. Existing studies have highlighted identity, culture, mental health, and resistance strategies, but they often focus on cities, economic niches, or clinical data. Important aspects such as rural experiences, everyday mental health struggles, moral and religious pressures, and relationships with other marginalized groups remain underexplored. These gaps highlight the urgent need for intersectional, ethnographic, and narrative-focused research that centers *Nupi Manbi* voices and everyday realities. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how historical legacies, social institutions, moral frameworks, and economic structures shape transgender lives in Manipur. Moreover, linking research findings to policy and social interventions is essential to bridge the gap between formal legal recognition and lived experiences.

Future research should center the voices of *Nupi Manbi*, use ethnographic and narrative approaches, and connect findings to policies that promote inclusion. Understanding their lived experiences more deeply is essential to moving beyond visibility and creating real social change.

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