

Empowering Traditions: The Historical and Cultural Legacy of Ima Keithel in Manipur, North-East India

LUWANGCHA JETLEE MAYENGBAM

Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Manipur University, Canchipur, 795003

E-mail: jetleemayengbam@gmail.com

KEYWORDS: Ima Keithel. Historical Significance. Cultural Significance. Women Vendor. Manipur. Women Empowerment.

ABSTRACT: The Ima Keithel Market, popularly called “Mother Market,” is a distinctive marketplace that is exclusively managed by women. It is located in Imphal, Manipur, India, and it represents a very important aspect in both the history and culture of Manipur. This market, which dates back to centuries, is a prime example of the significant contribution Manipuri women have made to local trade, agriculture, and handicrafts. Ima Keithel is more than just a trading hub; it’s a matriarchal values-enshrined social institution that represents the tenacity, resiliency, and entrepreneurship of women. It has been the centre of political activism and social movements as well as a hub for information sharing and social cohesion in the community. The rationale for studying Ima Keithel is to collect, preserve, and disseminate its history and culture. The study’s objectives include tracing the origins of the product, looking into the cultural beliefs and rituals associated with it, and examining the role of the women vendors in societal upliftment and cultural preservation. A variety of research methods were used in this study, including focus groups, semi-structured interviews, archival research, observation, and artifact analysis with a sample size of 30 participants

INTRODUCTION

Markets are defined as a system, place, or arrangement where individuals, businesses, or organizations engage in the exchange of goods, services, or resources but, they have always been more than mere trading venues often times they serve as social and cultural hubs that significantly influence the historical and cultural development of communities. Throughout history, markets have acted as intersections of cultures, facilitating not just the exchange of goods but also ideas, traditions, and innovations. They reflect the socio-economic conditions of their time and have been places for political discourse, social movements, and communal decision-making. In addition, markets

hold religious rites, festivals, and artistic events. Their designs frequently reflect the cultural values and technological developments of the communities in which they are found. The Middle East’s intricate bazaars and rural Africa’s cooperative open-air marketplaces, for example, provide as examples of varied cultural expressions and community dynamics. Markets nowadays still maintain their historical roles while adjusting to contemporary demands. Urban farmers’ markets encourage environmentally friendly farming practices and strengthen ties among the community, whilst flea and craft fairs assist independent business owners. Thus, markets remain vital, dynamic spaces that reflect the cultural, social, and economic fabric of societies.

[‡]Research Scholar, corresponding author

Ima Keithel, also known as “Mother Market,” is a unique market in Imphal, Manipur, India, that is exclusively run by women. *Ima Keithel* itself is actually a concept that can be found all over the state of Manipur, but today the *Ima Keithel* of the *Khwairamband Keithel* has become the most well-known one and therefore the focus of this study. This market, which dates back to the 16th century, illustrates the significant contribution Manipuri women have made to the trading, agriculture, and handicraft industries in their community. The marketplace, now an important trading centre, offers an abundance of commodities, ranging from fresh produce to textiles. *Ima Keithel* forms part of the market and is also part of the social institution embedded with matriarchal values that are deeply rooted in Manipuri society. It is reflective of women’s strength, resilience, and entrepreneurship in forming a community centre through which information is passed and communal bonds are strengthened. It has a significant role in preserving Manipuri culture and traditions, especially the promotion of traditional handicrafts. It has become a pivot for social movements and political activism as proven by the women vendors actively participate in protests against social injustices and colonialism. All these factors have combined to establish its image as a symbol of strength and bravery it has today (Arambam, 2020).

The objective of this study is to trace the origins and historical development involving the *Ima Keithel* and the women vendors, to investigate the cultural beliefs, rituals, and symbolism associated with the *Ima Keithel* and to investigate the role of the *Ima Keithel* and the women vendors in uplifting and the society and their role in the preservation of millennia old culture.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This study was conducted in *Ima keithel* area, *Khwairamband Keithel*, Imphal, Manipur, India. It was selected as the ideal area for study as the most well-known Ima market was located in this area and it is also where one of the largest concentration of women vendors are located in a single area and also due the convenience of access and safety for the

students conducting this study. In the study conducted on women traders of *Ima keithel* from all sections, including street vendors. The research method includes focus group discussion, semi-structured interview, Archival Research, Observation, and Artifact Analysis.

The collection of secondary data was needed due to the topic being relatively obscure to the women vendors of the *Ima Keithel* and the primary data alone being insufficient. For the procuring of the primary data, interviews were conducted through semi-structured, open-ended questions. There were 30 respondents from the women vendors of the *Ima keithel*. Semi-structured questions were used in the field visit during the data collection. All the questions were directly correlated to the research questions. The subjects are given prior information about the research. The process of rituals and the daily conducts of the women that were opening their stalls were observed. The custom that are followed in the *Ima Keithel* are also carefully observed. The items sold are also carefully analysed and their significance to the people are also determined. This research was conducted for 7 weeks from the 14/06/2024 to 01/07/2024.

RESULTS

The concept of “Mother Market,” *Ima Keithel*, has a history that extends to pre-colonial periods, perhaps even before the first century. In the Meitei society, where women have always been actively involved in trading, it is an essential component of the traditional social system. The market, which is in *Khwairamband Keithel*, is housed in three buildings: *Phouoibi Ima Keithel* (which sells traditional clothing and handloom items), *Imoinu Ima Keithel* (which sells household items and traditional textiles), and *Leimarel Shidabi Ima Keithel* (which sells a variety of products like vegetables, textiles, and fish) (Hirom, 2015).

Historically, *Ima Keithel* was significant in the *Nupi Lan* Movements of 1904 and 1939, where women protested against British colonial policies and several other incidents. These movements highlighted the leadership and solidarity of Manipuri women, making *Ima Keithel* a symbol of resistance and empowerment.

Economically, the market is crucial, providing many families with income and autonomy. It sells a wide range of goods, boosting the local economy and preserving Manipur's cultural heritage. Culturally, *Ima Keithel* is a social hub where women exchange news, discuss issues, and support each other, ensuring the transmission of traditional crafts and practices.

Today, *Ima Keithel* adapts to modern challenges while maintaining its traditional essence, attracting global tourists and remaining a central part of Manipur's socio-economic landscape.

Origin and Development of Ima Keithel (Women/Mother Market)

The exact point in time for the origin of the markets in Manipur is unknown with only vague legends, oral tales and limited historical account providing the relevant information on this topic. The historical account indicates that the concept of *Ima Keithel* has existed since the time of ancient kings when a policy called the *Lallup Kaba* system, a system instituted by early Meitei kings, that required the abled men to work in distant lands or serve in the army was issued. This led to the women taking up entrepreneurship as a means of survival and hence starting the concept of a market where only women are the sellers (Barua and Anita, 2004).

There are also many variations describing the origin of the *Ima Keithel* in the myths and legends of Manipur. One such legends describes a time in the distant past during the age of gods when the immortal gods and man quarrelled with great animosity between them. This caused chaos and anarchy in the land that devastated both sides. Seeing this the clans of man and gods decided to form a pact of harmony in order to quell the fighting. The treaty was made on the 20th day of the Manipuri calendar on a "*lamta*" (February-March) Thursday. This became known as the "*Kumja Lakyel Taipham*" (beginning of a new age). As celebration of this new beginning eight goddesses by the name of *Pukshi Khombi*, *Thingpha Loikhombi*, *Angaibi*, *Thong Ngaibi*, *Koting Leima*, *Thareima*, *Yucheng Leima*, and *Cheng Leima* set up the market after which a few gods and humans proceeded to the market to buy food for a feast. It is

said that the market initially sold products such as the heads of men and cats, but since these products were not useable by the humans so the gods decided to change the products to food and crafts. This act of the eight goddesses setting up the market and the gods and man buying from them became celebrated as "*Lai Keithel Kaba*" (Gods setting up market). Using the foods materials bought from the market the gods made eight portions of meals, each for the eight clans of man namely the *Mangang*, *Luwang*, *Khuman*, *Moirang*, *Angom*, *Sarangleishangthem*, *Khaba* and *Nganba*. One man each is picked from each clan and feasted together with the gods. After attendance and feast, the people will pray to the gods for prosperity and longevity in the reign of the king. The gods were happy and promised that the land will prosper in harmony accordingly to the rule of the king. This story is considered by many to be over two millennia old as the fact that the King *Nongdalairan Pakhangba* celebrated this festival when he ruled from 33AD to 54 AD indicates that the concept of a market exclusively ran by women have existed long before his rule (Naoroibam, 2015).

Another variation of this legend stated that there were in fact fifteen goddesses that set up the market place namely *Pukshi Khombi*, *Khajaongammi*, *Tallileima*, *Pithekleima*, *Huimuleima*, *Tangaibi*, *Chengleima*, *Shilleima*, *Hiyainu Yainupi*, *Phulon Taret Chakshoubi*, *Yoibu Khoimom Lairembi*, *Kadonlairemme*, *Thingpha Loikhombi*, *Lang Nga Nupi*, and *Lok Lao Leima* with the rest of the story being similar.

The existence of the *Ima Keithel* in both the Meitei and the Khuman kingdoms was alluded to in the oral myth "*Goddess Imoinu and Chalamba*," that tells the story of the Goddess *Imoinu* of the Khuman Kingdom, the giver of all good seeds of vegetables, fruits, and offspring of animals, being taken by *Chalamba* on his back from the Khuman Kingdom to the Meitei Kingdom on the advice of his mother. The Meitei Kingdom annexed the Khuman Kingdom during the reign of King *Kongyaamba* who ruled the Meitei Kingdom from 1323 to 1334 C.E. The Khuman King *Adon Lamyai Kaikhinba* surrendered his Khuman Kingdom without any bloodshed. From this we can possibly approximate the existence of at

least the concept of the *Ima keithel* being there before the first millennia (Oinam and Jayashree, 2003).

In the “*Moirang Kangleirol*” (History of Moirang Kingdom) before it merged with Meitei Kingdom in 1473, certain events were recorded in the forms of an epic named the story of “*Khuman Khumba* and *Moirang Thoibi*” which was thought to have happened during period of 1093 – 1148 A.D. In the epic, the existence of well-functioning *Ima Keithel* is written where Khumnu the sister of Khamba sold forest products in that market. Using these oral accounts that have been passed down to through the generations it can be inferred that the concept of the *Ima Keithel* has existed for a long time (Oinam and Jayashree, 2003).

The earliest clear written records of existing *Ima Keithel* in the *Khwairamband Keithel* were from the 16th Century etched on to monoliths that were implanted in the market during the time of King *Kainou Chalamba*, the ruler of Manipur from 1544-1561 CE. He used these erected monoliths to show his authority and convey rules and regulations to the public and marking the area as important by royal recognition using a rock that was dragged from *Oinam* village establishing some form of regulation or infrastructure for the future market (Oinam and Jayashree, 2003).

During the following reign of King *Senbi Mungyaamba* from 1561-1596 C.E., many *Ima Keithel* were established by him in various places across Manipur and all these markets were lost in time. His successor King *Khagemba* who ruled Manipur from 1596-1651 was one of the most influential kings of Manipur. Some of his work include the shifting of the nine markets that were already there inside *Kangla*, namely, *Meidingu Moiramba Keithel*, *Meidingu Leichol Keithel*, *Tolong Keithel*, *Sana Keithel*, *Kha Keithel*, *Awang Keithel*, *Yimlep Keithel*, *Leikhong Keithel* and *Leichon Leima*. Initially, there were several markets located within the *Kangla* fort, the central administrative and the royal residential area of the kingdom. King *Khagemba* recognizing the need for more space and better organization, decided to relocate these markets outside the fort area to reduce congestion and enhance their accessibility. The markets were moved to the west of *Sanathong*, the

Royal Palace Gate, which served as the main entrance to the *Kangla* fort. This relocation was strategic, ensuring that the markets remained close enough to the centre of power while providing them with more room to grow and function efficiently. As part of this reorganization, King *Khagemba* founded three major markets beyond the *Kangla* fort to the west of *Sanathong*. These newly established markets were: *Awang Keithel*, *Sana Keithel*, and *Kha Keithel*. These three markets not only replaced the older ones inside *Kangla* but also symbolized a new era of economic development under King *Khagemba*'s rule. The relocation and establishment of these markets played a crucial role in facilitating trade and commerce in the region, making them central hubs for economic activities and contributing significantly to the socio-economic fabric of Manipur (Laishram, 2002).

After the reign of King *Khangemba* several subsequent kings also established their own market such as King *Charairongba* (1697-1709) who initiated the establishment of *Charairongba Keithel* in Imphal after which King *Garibaniwaj* also known as King *Pamheiba* (1709-1748) founded *Khunbi Lanyamba Keithel*, while his preceptor, *Shantadas*, established *Shallungthel Keithel*. In the 19th century, under the reign of King *Chandrakirti* (1834-1886), several new markets were established, including *Keibung*, *Maklang*, *Kwairamban*, *Tera*, and *Minoothong Keithels*. Each of these markets played a vital role in the economic life of Manipur, offering spaces for the exchange of goods ranging from agricultural produce to handicrafts.

It was during the reign of King *Pamheiba* that the market started to face a significance change due to the king converting to Hinduism under the guidance of the Vaishnavism priest, *Shantidas Gosai* and the rest of Manipur were declared to do so. Due to this a syncretism between *Sanamahi* *laining*, the local religion, and Hinduism emerged changing the way of worship in the market too such as when the women vendors worship the seven market goddesses and the Goddess *Imoinu*, the goddesses of prosperity and discipline, the Hindu goddess, *Laximi*, also became to be worshipped.

King *Gambhir Singh* also played a crucial role in the development and support of markets during

his reign in Manipur. He established a market at *Langthabal*, which contributed significantly to the economic activities of the region. His efforts were instrumental in providing infrastructure and organizational support to the markets ensuring their continued operation and growth.

During the reign of King *Chandrakirti*, several new markets were established across Manipur, his reign saw significant developments in market infrastructure and economic activities. The establishment of new markets under his rule facilitated trade and commerce, enhancing the economic landscape of Manipur.

King *Bodhachandra's* reign saw significant advancements in market infrastructure with the establishment and inauguration of markets such as *Thoubal Keithel* and others in Manipur. These efforts aimed at fostering economic activities and providing organized spaces for trade and commerce. His initiatives in promoting marketplaces contributed to the socio-economic development and resilience of Manipur, ensuring the continuity of vibrant market traditions that are integral to the region's identity.

After the British took control of Manipur in 1891, one of their primary focuses was on reorganization and infrastructure development. The British administration recognized the importance of the *Ima Keithel* as a central economic hub. They undertook measures to modernize the market, which included the construction of permanent market sheds and better facilities for the vendors. This infrastructural development aimed to make the market more organized and efficient, accommodating the growing economic activities and population. The three evening markets, *The Awang Keithel*, *Sana Keithel* and *Kha Keithel*, that had been established by king *Khagemba*, were ceased to be active by an order of the then Political Agent of Manipur, H. St. P. Maxwell on Friday the 15th November, 1901. The *Khwairamband Keithel*, the morning market was the only remaining one (Oinam and Jayashree, 2003).

At first, the market was an open-air market. In the last war of Manipur's independence, 1891 the British defeated Manipur and occupied Manipur capital, *Kangla*, evicting all the surrounding villages around *Kangla*, the British took over a vast area of

land as 'British Reserve Area'. And since the area of *Khwairamband Keithel* fell in this Reserve Area, the British administration took over the task of developing this market.

The British brought a more formal and bureaucratic approach to the administration of the market. They introduced regulations and systems to manage the operations of the market more effectively. This included market timings, vendor registrations, and the imposition of taxes and fees. While these regulations helped in maintaining order, they also imposed new challenges on the traditional market dynamics.

The British period also saw a significant economic impact on *Ima Keithel*. The integration of Manipur into the wider British economic network meant that the market now had access to a broader range of goods and services. This led to an increase in trade volume and diversity of products available in the market. However, it also meant that local products faced competition from imported goods, affecting the livelihoods of local producers and traders. The market became a melting pot of local and foreign goods, reflecting the broader economic changes under British rule.

The changes brought about by the British also had cultural and social ramifications. The introduction of new goods and the influx of people from different regions brought cultural exchanges and influences. However, the imposition of British regulations and the economic pressures also affected the traditional social fabric of the market. The market, which was a bastion of women's economic independence, faced new challenges and adaptations in response to the colonial administration's policies.

In more recent time that is from the start of the 21st century there has also been great development on the *Ima Keithels* such as when in the early 2000s, the structural integrity of the old market buildings at *Ima Keithel* was found to be compromised the Government of Manipur, with financial support from central government schemes, undertook the ambitious project of demolishing the old structures and erecting new, modern market complexes. This massive redevelopment project, completed in 2010, resulted in three newly constructed market

buildings that provided a safer, more organized, and aesthetically pleasing environment for vendors and shoppers alike. The new buildings featured better ventilation, natural lighting, and a design that honoured the traditional layout while incorporating modern amenities.

Alongside the reconstruction, significant efforts were made to improve the facilities within *Ima Keithel*. The new market buildings were equipped with upgraded sanitation facilities, including restrooms and clean drinking water supplies, enhancing the overall hygiene and comfort for both vendors and visitors. Proper drainage systems were installed to manage water runoff and prevent flooding, which had been a persistent issue in the old market. The stall designs and layouts were reimagined to maximize space utilization, ensuring that each vendor had an organized and adequate space to display and sell their goods.

In response to concerns about safety and security, modern fire safety systems were installed throughout the market complex to mitigate the risk of fire hazards. These systems included smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, and clearly marked emergency exits. Additionally, enhanced security measures were put in place, such as improved lighting and surveillance cameras, to ensure the safety of vendors and shoppers, especially during evening hours. These measures helped create a more secure environment, fostering a sense of safety and confidence among the market community.

Recognizing the cultural significance of *Ima Keithel* as a symbol of women's empowerment and traditional commerce, efforts were made to preserve and promote its unique heritage. Initiatives included the organization of cultural events and festivals that highlighted the market's history and the important role it plays in Manipur's society. These events not only celebrated the market's rich traditions but also attracted tourists, thereby boosting economic activity. Additionally, programs were introduced to educate younger generations about the market's cultural importance, ensuring that its legacy would continue.

To support the economic sustainability of the vendors, various government schemes and

programs were introduced. These included access to microfinance options, training programs to enhance business skills, and initiatives aimed at boosting the vendors' capacities to manage their stalls effectively. The government also promoted *Ima Keithel* as a tourist attraction, which helped increase foot traffic and provided more business opportunities for the vendors. These economic initiatives played a crucial role in empowering the women who run the market, enabling them to thrive in a competitive environment (Barua and Anita, 2004).

Involvement in Historical Events

The establishment of *Ima Keithel*, a prominent all-women market in Imphal, Manipur, is closely associated with the reign of *King Khagemba* (1597–1652). His policies significantly promoted women's participation in trade and commerce, leading to the creation of market places like *Ima Keithel*, which became a platform for women's economic engagement.

The market gained more historical significance during the *Nupi Lan* movements, particularly the first in 1904 and the second in 1939. These protests were primarily against British colonial policies, including the forced labour system and economic exploitation that exacerbated local food shortages. The *Nupi Lan* movements empowered women and solidified their roles in commerce, enhancing societal acceptance of women's economic independence.

The first *Nupi Lan* (Women War) was a significant revolt led by women in the Imphal West district of Manipur in 1904. This historic event was triggered by Colonel Maxwell, a British official, who reintroduced a new *Lallup* system in July 1904. The *Lallup* system was a forced labour measure that required Manipuri men to provide 10 days of free labour every 30 days. When the residents of the four *Leikais* requested the Political Agent to revoke the order, he instead issued orders to bring wood, bamboo, bamboo strips, and cane. Enraged, the people assembled at the *Khwairamban Keithel* (market) and protested. The womenfolk of Manipur then met the Political Agent at his bungalow and requested him not to force the people to work on the bungalow construction. However, he turned down their plea

and instead arrested seven prominent men, including princes, and kept them chained at the Garot (military court). Faced with such responses the women folks organized widespread demonstrations and protests against the forced labour policy. The women's agitation was so intense that they even resorted to sleeping on the roads to block the movement of vehicles and supplies. There was even an event where the women folk broke into the mansion of the British Official and grappled with the sepoys stationed there at that time. This collective action by the Manipuri women was a powerful display of their resistance against colonial oppression.

The Second *Nupi Lan*, broke out in Manipur in 1939 during the reign of King *Churachand*. It was a time of food scarcity, followed by a grave shortage in paddy production. There was a shortage in the production of paddy crops, which the rice mill owners capitalized upon by buying at inflated prices and transporting the milled rice outside Manipur, leaving the local population in a state of famine and misery. As the crisis deepened, large sections of Manipur's women began to agitate against rice transport from here, led by the market women. Those women organized themselves and took direct action by dragging the Assistant Superintendent of State from his office and demanding an immediate ban on rice transportation. He refused and stated that he could not do so before getting an order from the king. The women took him to the postal office and compelled him to send a telegraph message to King *Churachand*, who was staying at *Nabadwip*. The Assam Rifles troops were ordered to scatter the agitating women. The confrontation between the women and the troops turned violent, and several women were injured by bayonets when the Assam Rifles retaliated. However, the continuous agitation of women forced King *Churachand* to act. He telegraphed back to Manipur and ordered that the demands of the women should be satisfied. As a result, many rice mills in Manipur were closed down, and the transportation of rice became prohibited except for the quota for sepoys based in Manipur and Kohima. The second *Nupi Lan* is a perfect example of the tenacity and determination that are found in Manipuri women. It showed the clever role they can play and do play in setting right social and economic

wrongs. This movement underlined what history had already, the fact that it is the market women of Manipur who always come to the forefront during times of crisis, be it against the oppressive actions of security forces, social injustices, or political turmoil. This activism of women during the Second *Nupi Lan* not only salvaged immediate sufferings but also bequeathed a lasting legacy of women's empowerment and collective action in Manipur

Ima Keithel not only serves as a marketplace but also symbolizes resilience and women's empowerment. The cooperative spirit seen in *Ima Keithel* fosters a supportive community for women traders. This environment has contributed to the market's sustainability and vibrancy over the years. Government and NGO support have further bolstered *Ima Keithel*, improving its infrastructure and operational conditions, allowing it to remain a vital economic hub. Subsequent movements, such as the Nisha Bandh movement in the 1970s and the AFSPA protests in the 1980s and 1990s, have continued to highlight the market's role in advocating for justice and women's rights in the region and their participation in various other social shaping events till this day.

Meira Paibi (Women Torchbearer)

Meira Paibi, literally translated to "women torch bearers" in Manipuri, is among the greatest women's movements in Manipur where women of a locality come together to form a loose organization that help in the safe guard and upliftment of the morality of the people. The beginning of this movement and organization can be traced back to the *Nupi Lans* of 1904 and 1939 and even be directly attributed to them but it was formally established in the late 1970s to counter alcoholism and drug addiction that have become prevalent within local communities. Later on, it took up a number of human rights-related issues, particularly the excesses perpetuated by the Indian Army under this draconian AFSPA act. The *Meira Paibis* have adopted an innovative method of protest that the where they gathered together at night with burning torches as a sign of vigilance and resistance, organized night vigils, patrolled the respective communities, and intervened in cases

of human rights violations. This, in turn, lay in very deep foundations within the acknowledged traditional role of the woman in Manipuri society as preservers of social order and morality. The *Meira Paibi* played a very important role in the struggle for people's rights and against state violence during the 1980s and 1990s. They organized nighttime patrols where members from respective communities would move around with actions pertaining to violations of human rights brought global attention to the suffering of the people of Manipur. The real strength of this movement is the local-level organization and active participation of women of different ages and varied backgrounds. *Meira Paibi* cleverly used some of the traditional social structures and their value system in mobilizing and continuing their protest. Such as an alliance with other civil society groups within and outside of Manipur to raise their voice and increase their influence. The influence of *Meira Paibi* does not remain merely focused on curbing drug abuse or defending human rights. It links with the larger struggle for peace, justice, and determination in Manipur. Through its activities, it provides space for women's empowerment, deepens community solidarity, and challenges patriarchal norms. The *Meira Paibi* movement stands out as one of the most prominent examples of women's activism in Manipur. The long and continuous struggle against social and political injustices has turned *Meira Paibi* into a symbolic vision of resistance and hope in the eyes of many. The movement was very important in empowering the women of Manipur by involving them in various social and political causes that affected their respective communities. These women, viewed traditionally as custodians of social order, played such roles in rising against pressing social ills like alcoholism, drug abuse, and human rights abuses. They addressed not only immediate concerns but also challenged the prevalent patriarchal norms. Through activism, they created a platform that supplied them with self-efficacy and visibility in the otherwise male-dominated public sphere. Its grassroots nature, apart from using already established social structures, strengthened their bonds of solidarity and collective action among women, further empowering them over things concerning local governance and societal change. Thus, the *Meira Paibi* movement

was a physical change in society, altering the status and functions given to women within Manipuri society and raising their potential for leadership and advocacy.

Nisha bandh Movement

The Nisha Bandh movement is the nucleus for the emergence and early movements of the *Meira Paibi* women's movement in the Indian state of Manipur. Though evolved in the late years of the 1970s, the root of the *Nisha Bandh* movement by itself can be traced back to the movement of Meitei women against alcohol addiction and drug addiction in Manipur. Groups of women went out on night processions in the streets of Imphal and other parts of Manipur, carrying lanterns and rebuking those in a state of inebriation. They went to the extent of burning liquor shops as part of their agitation. It was due to this act of women involved with *Nisha Bandh* that prohibition laws were enforced in the state of Manipur. It was through the *Nisha Bandh* movement that the liquor and drug addicts were made to realize the ill effects of addiction. The groups that used to comprise the *Nisha Bandh* came to be known as the *Meira Paibis* or the "Women Torch Bearers," as they switched over to carrying flaming torches instead of lanterns during their marches and protests. In this way, the Nisha Bandh movement was an early-oriented movement of the larger *Meira Paibi* movement, since activities expanded beyond merely fighting alcoholism and drug addiction to other areas of social and political issues in Manipur.

AFSPA Movement

The movement against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in Manipur represents a significant chapter in the history of resistance and the struggle for human rights in the state. The AFSPA was enacted in 1958 and grants extensive powers to the Indian military, allowing them to shoot to kill, conduct searches without warrants, and without the consent of the receiver. While the law is purportedly used to combat insurgency, its widespread application across the country has resulted in extrajudicial killings, instances of torture, and rape. The "mother's market," or *Ima market*, playing a very significant role in the movement against AFSPA. In Manipur,

the *Ima*, or mothers, have always been important in terms of society and politics. The market serves as a focal point for social interaction and political mobilization in addition to being a business district. As a result of increasing instances of violence and mistreatment by the security forces, the *Ima Keithel* has in fact turned overtly anti-AFSPA. The 2004 incident involving a young lady who was reportedly sexually assaulted and murdered by Assam Rifles soldiers, was one of the most prominent catalysts. Nationwide indignation was triggered by this act. Due to their influence and numbers, the Ima market women's movement staged incredibly large-scale demonstrations and rallies calling for the abolition of AFSPA. These tactics included marches, sit-ins, and hunger strikes that brought attention to their cause on a national and worldwide scale. The most successful of these protests was the nude rally in front of Imphal's Kangla Fort, where old women hoisted banners calling attention to the horrific crimes the Indian Army had done under the AFSPA. Additionally, these women supported Irom Sharmila, better known as the "Iron Lady of Manipur," both morally and practically when she went on a hunger strike in 2000 to demand the abolition of the AFSPA. The 16-year-long protest in Sharmila has grown to be a pillar of the Ima market and the anti-AFSPA campaign. In addition to providing a sizable labour force, the women of the Ima market consistently and systematically worked to raise awareness of the AFSPA issue and put pressure on the government. Their work is a living documentation of the relationship between gender, politics, and human rights in Manipur, as well as a quintessential example of a grassroots movement. These elements all emphasize how crucial it is to work together and how powerful women can be in bringing about political and social change as well as justice.

Cultural Preservation

Ima Keithel is one of the cultural hubs of Manipur; therefore, proof of its evolution in culture and custom can be found here. Most of the ritualistic and traditional items in Manipur are mainly found on the premises of *Ima Keithel* itself, as crafters of these ancient works, passed down through generations, either sell their products or have middlemen sell them

in the Ima market. It gives them an active market to sell some of the products to spread further, as people come from all over Manipur into this market for their marketing, keeping the traditions alive.

The items traded in the market include *Kabok Afaba*, which is simply popped rice processed from rice grains. It is a popular snack that was liked by people in olden times; it is significantly accepted as a regular snack; and it is also used in various religious rituals, occasions, and marriage ceremonies. *Kabok khoidum* is another traditional Manipuri snack prepared from roasted rice that has been mixed with various other ingredients, like hot sugarcane syrup and sometimes coconut. These snacks are often offered as an offering to the gods and have also found a place in the hands of hosts as a present for their guests at great festivities such as marriage.

Lalu is another snack seen in *Ima Keithel*. It is white in colour and made by grinding puffed rice. Apart from being taken as a normal snack in everyday life, *lalu* is of immense importance and used as an offering to the gods in worship and marriage ceremonies in Manipur.

The other snack available is *kangshubi*, a snack of roasted black sesame mixed in sugary syrup. This, too, is used in ceremonial offerings. *Ima Keithel* also sells traditional women's clothes such as *muka phi*, *Wangkhei phi*, *Rani phi*, and many more worn by women during special occasions or sometimes when staying at home. These traditional clothes have existed since ancient times, and the Manipuri people have mastered the art of making them to perfection. The simple ones are worn for home use, while the more intricate ones, with their fascinating flower and vine pattern, indicate that they are to be used for ceremonial purposes.

There are also various ritualistic items on sale in *Ima Keithel*, such as *chandon*, which is a hardened paste made out of sandalwood paste. It is used for marking the forehead in a certain pattern to indicate sacredness and purity. It is done after one has taken a bath and before praying to the gods. This mark is put on the head by the *chandon chei*, which is a slightly flat wooden stick pointed at one end. Another paste that is used to mark the head is *leisha*. *Leisha* is made by gathering sacred ashes mixed with charcoal,

herbs, and oils. Used to mark the forehead with a black mark, symbolizing ritual purity and protection from evil spirits. Used in religious practices.

There are the ceremonial swords representing the seven clans: *Mangang*, *Luwang*, *Khuman*, *Angom*, *Moirang*, *Sarangleishangthem*, and *Khabanganba*. Every sword has its own shape, and they are used at times during ceremonial processions. Normally held by the sons of each clan, they are also used in ancestral worship.

The Manipuri people like many types of fermented food; among them are *ngari*, or fermented fish, and *shoibum*, or fermented young bamboo shoots. *Ngari* forms an integral part of the Manipuris' diet, excluding dishes of meat. *Ngari* is added to almost every dish as a flavouring material. *Shoibum* is eaten with meat dishes or spicy dishes called *shoibum eromba*.

Dried fish is another main ingredient in stew dishes. Fishing has been a source of food in Manipur since ancient times. Fish can be termed a ceremonial food, for when there is a celebration, a fish dish will almost always be involved in the celebration feast.

They also sell clay pots in the *Ima Keithel*. This shall be used for ceremonies, like holding sacred water or keeping offerings for rituals and ceremonies.

Mode of inheritance

The stalls of the *Ima Keithel* have a specific way of inheritance in that it is passed down from the mother to the daughter or if they don't have a daughter it is given to their daughter in law. There are a few exceptions in this inheritance rule can be found during the times of the kings where ladies of royal blood were given reserved stalls in *Ima Keithel* known as *Pheeribi potpham* with a monopoly to sell worthy materials meant for gods and goddesses. If the women do not have a daughter, they may give their stall to someone they trust and know when they are no longer able to work (Oinam and Jayashree, 2003).

Ancient Customs and practices

Most of the practices that were practised in the early days of Ima market can no longer be seen.

The reason behind can be credited to the change in administration system. Some of the practices include the prohibition regarding the wearing of shoes, the use of head cover shading with an umbrella, carrying any item of the seat, carrying of sword, spear, club, or mallet, and any act of arrest were forbidden inside the market campus. In case of a violation of such rules, it may be reported to the *Pheida*. *Pheida*, or *Pheida Loishang*, was a vital body of administration in the framework that held responsibilities for maintaining order and enforcing certain rules in the *Ima Keithel* of Manipur. This entailed adherence to very strict codes of conduct pertaining to their prescribed duties. They maintained the lost and found protocols whereby all found items had to be reported to them. They also handled vendors' disputes with each other or between them and their customers at *Pheidapung*, and if not resolved, referred the matter to a higher office called *Lakkhong*. The market hours were also regulated by the *Pheida*, ensuring everybody arrived on time to sell and left at sunset hence maintaining discipline within the market. They also regulated customs, like *Haomacha Potcha*, where tribal servants collected daily necessities from vendors free of cost, though this practice was abolished in 1871. When the king visited the market the *Pheida* ensured proper respect and protocol was maintained for instance no one was allowed to protect his head with a palm-leaf umbrella or stand or turn his back on the king. Other customs include only allowing women to enter the premises of the market, Meitei men were not allowed to enter into the *Ima Keithel* but men from other communities were allowed to enter the *Ima Keithel* (Naoroibam, 2015).

Daily Activities of the Women Vendors

The women vendors at the local market adhere to a strict religious routine while selling their products. They arrive early in the morning, often as early as 3 AM or by 10 AM at the latest. Before setting up their stalls, they bathe, wear fresh clothes, and worship the household gods and goddesses.

Upon arrival, they seek blessings from the market guardian goddesses and Goddess Laxmi at the temple, where they offer flowers, fruits, or money as a sign of respect. The women responsible

for managing the shrine give them a blessing in the form of sacred water, rice grains, or flowers.

The women vendors set up their stalls in designated areas, selling specific items that are traditionally associated with those areas. They respect territorial boundaries and only sell items relevant to their designated area.

The first sale of the day, known as the *Khulang Khang*, is considered sacred and is often accompanied by a brief prayer or ritual to invoke the market goddesses' blessings for successful sales throughout the day. This sacred offering is kept separate and used only for its intended purpose.

As evening approaches (around 5-6 PM), the women begin closing their stalls. Before closing up shop, they complete one final sale, which is also considered sacred. They seek a final blessing from the goddesses for successful sales tomorrow.

Finally, they return home, bathe again, change out of their market clothes – which cannot be worn at home – and wash these clothes to wear them again next time they go to market.

Protocols in the Ima Keithel (Women/Mother Market)

In the *Ima Keithel*, there is a centuries-old custom, where stalls are usually passed down through the daughters of the next generations or assigned by past owners to another woman she trusts. Local women's associations regulate the market, resolving conflicts and enforcing regulations. Women must register with market officials and pay fees that support market maintenance in order to put up a stand. Vendors have rules in place to prevent duplication of goods and offer a varied range of things, such as household goods, textiles, and local produce. Local government entities have set specified days and times for the market to operate, and sellers are expected to closely follow these timetables. A code of conduct also mandates that merchants maintain cleanliness, behave ethically in business dealings, and show respect to both customers and other vendors. Enforcing environmental standards also encourages sustainable activities, such as using eco-friendly materials and disposing of garbage properly. In addition to promoting a fair-trade environment,

these regulations support the *Ima Keithel's* traditional and cultural value as a crucial hub for women in the area.

Rituals and Worship in the Ima Keithel (Women/Mother Market)

There are many deities worshipped in the *Ima Keithel* both from Hinduism and the *Sanamahi Laining* some of them are *Cheng Leima* the goddess of rice, *Chinga Leima* goddess of vegetables, *Heipok Leima* goddess of iron tools, *Hei Leima* goddess of fruits and sweets, *Laa Leima* goddess of banana leaves, *Phu Leima* goddess of pots and plates, *Pishum Leima* goddess of divine clothings, upper body clothing, gold and silver jewellery, *Thangching Leima* goddess of taro, herbs, chili peppers and chives, *Waisheng Leima* goddess of salt cakes, *Waithou Leima* goddess of edible oils, *Waal Leima* goddess of cooking, eating and kitchens, *Imoinu* the goddess of wealth and prosperity, *Phou Leima* the goddess of agriculture, paddy, rice and grains, *Panthoibi* the goddess of love, strength, independence, valour, handcrafts and warfare and *Leimarel Sidabi* principle goddess of earth, nature and household the Mother of all living beings. The women of the *Ima Keithel* worship these goddesses mainly but they also worship Laxmi the Hindu goddess of wealth. *Sanamahi Laining* being the main religion being worshipped the women perform rituals of *Sanamahi Laining* origin with a Hinduism twist like the gift of *prasāda*.

DISCUSSION

The “Mothers Market” or *Ima Keithel* in Manipur, India, is a significant centre of culture and commerce that has empowered women for generations. The market, which dates back to the 16th century, was born out of need when men were drafted into the military by the order of the king in order to protect their land under a system called *lallup kaba* (Dey, 2026). Over time, it developed into an important centre of the economy and a symbol of the tenacity and fortitude of women. Secondary data from earlier research indicates that *Ima Keithel* has developed from open-air stands to contemporary buildings, providing a wide variety of products that address regional needs (Naoroibam, 2015).

It has evolved from a place where women come to sell goods to meet their daily needs to a loose organization that allows the women to a role in the political and social situation in the state of Manipur. At *Ima Keithel*, women are integral to the ceremonies, cultural activities, and maintenance of traditional crafts. Important occasions like the *Nupi Lal* movements, which highlight women's participation and influence on sociopolitical concerns in the area, took place with great relation to the market. *Meira Paibi* and other organizations have been instrumental in advancing women's empowerment via political and social participation.

Primary data about the daily lives, routines, and cultural significance of the market are gathered through focus groups and interviews with female merchants. This information provides a deeper knowledge of vendors' experiences and the progress of the market, complementing secondary results. *Ima Keithel* is unique in that it serves as a hub for preserving cultural heritage and fostering community ties in addition to being a marketplace. *Ima Keithel* is thriving in spite of obstacles, which reflects the resolve and enterprising nature of Manipuri women. The market demonstrates how women have continued to contribute to the economy and society and how they have been able to modify traditions in response to globalization and modernity.

Unlike other singular ancient markets, *Jemaa el Fna* Square has become the primary point of interest for tourists and has varied greatly in terms of social interaction. What seems to have changed the most are the classical activities and relations that once defined the place, as it is now more of a commercial than cultural space. The study observed that modernization and tourism are the most important initiatives of globalization that have altered the square. The initiatives have changed the cultural practices of the square and the social atmosphere of this space, evolving it more into a commercial and tourist space rather than a traditional cultural centre. (Schmitt, 2005).

Contrary to this, *Ima Keithel* is a market in Manipur, India, that has maintained different cultural and social practices. It is an all-women marketplace where women from different communities come

together to sell their products, reflecting the strength and unity of Manipuri women. The market also represents a significant cultural symbol through which Manipuri society reflects long-standing values and social structures. The reason women's empowerment is intrinsic to *Ima Keithel* is that it is a space where women from different communities come to sell their produce, demonstrating their economic and social independence. Deeply entrenched in Manipuri culture, this market is a significant cultural symbol. Traditional values and social relations in Manipuri society are reflected through this market, highlighting the role assigned to women in society. These efforts aim to preserve the traditional practices and cultural significance of *Ima Keithel*, including the unique social structure associated with the market and the roles of women within it. The market thus remains an integral part of Manipuri culture.

Chandni Chowk is another unique and old market that the *Ima Keithel* is compared to in this study. Chandni Chowk and *Ima Keithel* were both significant markets with unique cultural attributes in their historical backgrounds. Chandni Chowk was started in the 17th century by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and has remained one of India's oldest commercial centres to this day. It showcases the might of Mughal architecture and town planning; historically, it was one of the busiest marketplaces for all visiting traders from across Asia. Culturally, Chandni Chowk represents the kaleidoscope of India's diversity with its religions, food, and traditional crafts. Its narrow lanes with spice shops, jewellery boutiques, textile shops, and street food define the dynamism and chaos of Old Delhi (Shandilya, 2018).

On the other hand, *Ima Keithel* is believed to be the only Mother's Market founded by women, with a recorded history dating back to at least the 16th century. This market became a symbol of women's economic independence and social empowerment in Manipur. This place has played a significant role in socio-political resistance since historic times, particularly during *Nupi Lan*, the Women's War against British Imperial Rule. Culturally, *Ima Keithel* exemplifies the roles played by women in Manipur's societal setup, displaying a wide array of

local crafts and handloom products, as well as fresh produce. Unlike Chandni Chowk's diversified and somewhat disoriented atmosphere, *Ima Keithel* has a very ordered structure, where the spirit of solidarity among the vendors is strong. Both bazaars signify heritage, the empirical platform upon which Delhi and Manipur's cultural canvases have been built.

The Grand Bazaar in Istanbul serves as a comparative market and reveals hallmarks of a jewellery production cluster, including a robust assemblage of small businesses with a deep subcontracting network that specialize in specific tasks. This entails labour-intensive production involving highly skilled, unskilled, and technologically illiterate workers, where creativity and originality are valued more than technical proficiency (Köroğlu and *et al*, 2009).

In addition to other regional crafts, the *Ima Keithel* in Manipur is a historic market that is run entirely by women and sells jewellery and textiles. Like the Grand Bazaar, the *Ima Keithel* is typified by tiny, niche vendors that use conventional production techniques and operate in a very limited geographic area.

This jewellery cluster in the Grand Bazaar is the result of historical events and the mass migration of talented Armenian craftsmen. The historical developments and the influx of talented Armenian artisans had a significant impact on the Grand Bazaar's growth as a jewellery cluster. Due to this, the cluster was able to develop over centuries and share knowledge and techniques related to jewellery production (Köroğlu and *et al*, 2009).

Similar to this, the *Ima Keithel* has a rich cultural and historical past, having served as a marketplace for Manipuri women to sell their handcrafted goods for centuries. The Manipuri people's cultural identity and traditions are intimately linked to the market. The Grand Bazaar demonstrates a robust institutional framework, wherein the cluster's structure and functions are governed by both official and informal regulations and standards.

The manufacturers of jewellery share a feeling of camaraderie and collaboration. The *Ima Keithel* also boasts a robust institutional framework as well, with vendors arranged into associations that establish

guidelines and norms for the industry. For the ladies of Manipur, the market serves as a centre for social interaction and cross-cultural learning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the *Ima Keithel* of Manipur recounts a rich and long history, reaching back several centuries, signifying economic autonomy and cultural heritage among women in Manipur. It has been accommodated for traditional trade, self-sufficiency among women, and served as a platform where they can share their stories and mobilize political activities. Gradually, over time, *Ima Keithel* has evolved and adapted to new situations, demonstrating its perseverance and handling change graciously. *Ima Keithel*, present today, has developed from an old market to a modern yet cultural one; the market only operated by women. While it retains its original character as a centre of women's economic freedom and social empowerment, it is also adapting to current needs. The business illustrates modern features while incorporating traditional products such as handloom items, crafts, vegetables, and food.

Some recommendations for *Ima Keithel*'s general improvement include infrastructure upgrades. Improved facilities feature better lighting, signage, and sanitation, all of which contribute to making visitors and vendors feel at home. Digital interventions will make it easier for vendors to list their products online, which will be important for them to market their products and attract travellers looking for authentic Manipuri experiences. Benefits that will accrue to vendors include training in financial management, product development skills, and business skills. This aims to enhance the competitiveness of vendors so that the market grows steadily. There is also a need to preserve cultural heritage. Such initiatives would help preserve traditional Manipuri handloom skills and crafts and make them more viable within *Ima Keithel* as a place for the preservation and showcasing of these cultural assets. Thus, linking guided tours with cultural events and educational opportunities can be further integrated within local tourism authorities' tourism boards to help grow market share and engender economic vitality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor for their guidance, and intellectual support throughout the course of this research. Their insights and knowledge broaden the depth of this study.

I am also thankful to my institution and department for providing the necessary academic environment and resources for the successful completion of this work.

Finally, I acknowledge the support of all those who assisted me during data collection, the participants who generously shared their time and experiences and my family who provided me with materials to peruse and for their unwavering support and understanding throughout this research journey.

REFERENCES CITED

- Arambam, Sophia 2020. Women and work in Manipur. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 8(11): 429–443.
- Barua, I. and D. Anita 2004. Women market of Manipur: An anthropo-historical perspective. *Journal of Human Ecology*, 15(2): 129–133.
- Hirrom, Ulemba 2015. *Ema Keithel, The Mothers' Market*. Indian Institute of Technology.
- Köroğlu, B. A., E. Tanyel and U. Aysu 2009. The story of a jewelry cluster in Istanbul metropolitan area: Grand Bazaar (Kapalıçarşı). *G.U. Journal of Science*, 22(4): 383–394.
- Laishram, Somananda 2002. *Status of Market Women and their Role in the Socio-economic life of Manipur*. Department of History, Manipur University, Canchipur.
- Naoroibam, Indramani 2015. *The Socio-cultural and Historical Accounts of Manipur*. N.I. Publications.
- Oinam, K. T. and A. Jayashree (2023). The historical and cultural tradition of Ema Keithels of Meitei in Manipur, India. *South Asian History, Culture and Archaeology*, 3(2): 247–254.
- Schmitt, Thomas 2005. Jemaa el Fna Square in Marrakech: Changes to a social space and to a UNESCO masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity as a result of global influence. *The Arab World Geographer*, 8(4): 173–195.
- Shandilya, Stuti 2018. Memoirs of a traditional market: The survival and resistance of Katras in Chandni Chowk, Delhi. *International Research Journal of Management, Sociology & Humanities*, 9(2): 34–42.
- Dey, Panchali 2026, March 1. Ima Keithel: Inside the world's only all-women market in Manipur that defied colonial rule. *Times of India*.