

Social Identity of Meetei Community-Crafting

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to study social categorisation among the Meetei people based on types of art and craft produced by crafter, which is deeply rooted in their socio-economic and political life. Occupation of a family or a group is one of the social factors on the basis of which Meetei people are categorized. Meetei community is a patriarchal and patrilineal society which has been formed by political integration of different groups which had their own territories and chiefdom during the reign of Meitingu Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D. It is one of the major indigenous ethnic groups inhabited in the state of Manipur. Their customary laws, belief system and perception are main factors in the categorization of social identity as gender, class, age etc. from the perspective of crafting. The art and craft of Meetei community is the production of objects from natural raw materials, which are alienated from the natural raw materials available in their geographical region. It is produced for a purpose to meet their need and requirement. Crafting depends on their social values and norms constructed by the community that signify personal and social identity of craftsmen. The paper intends to understand gender and social identity in Meetei cultural life manifested through the production of art and craft. The study finds crafting as a vital part for understanding their identity shaped by their social environment among the people. The paper will highlight the social status of craftsmen in relation to their art and craft that shows their social structure since art and craft is used to built identity and distinctiveness in larger society of any group or community.*

Key Words: *Gender, Social identity, Crafting, Social norm and value.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

From time immemorial, art and craft have been produced and consumed in socio-economic and political life of Meetei community. Meetei community is one of the major ethnic groups of Manipur, who are Mongoloid in origin. Even if the myths of seven Clans of Meetei show difference in their origin, the community consider themselves as descendents of Lord *Salailen*. At the same time, it is also found that Meetei community was formed by political integration of seven individual groups/clans under the political dominance of *Mangang/Ningthouja* clan. Each chief of the seven groups ruled over in their respective territory. A composite culture has been developed by amalgamating all the norms, custom, language and material culture of each group and has been legitimized under one political power, identifying Meetei community as a one homogenous group. Verbal (myths, legends, epics, ballads, folktale, poetry, proverbs, riddles, folk speech etc.) and non-verbal expressive behaviors (tangible and intangible dimension of the cultural objects i.e. the beliefs, practices and ideologies associated with the cultural objects) distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups and have been cultural knowledge for showing its identity. All such cultural knowledge is being transmitted orally from one to another generation. The worldview and perception of Meetei community is reflected through their verbal and non-verbal expressive behaviours which are constructed with a deep belief system associated with inhabited geographical region, socio-political and economical life.

In this community, crafting is found to have been a vital part for understanding identity shaped by their social environment. In addition, crafting depends on the social values and norms that signify gender and social identity of craftsmen. So, art and craft is the manifestation of both their social structure and communal and individual identity in Manipur. From their oral narratives, it is found that tradition of production and consumption of various art and craft have been being practiced from the time immemorial through their generations. It is evident that numbers of old manuscript texts (*Puya*) that contain pictorial design and form of human, animal, flowers, trees etc. depicting ideas of cultural notion and socio-political and economical life have been sources of cultural knowledge. Moreover, archaeological evidences such as several remnants such as relics, artifacts (spear head, scrappers, blade, burins, knives), engraved images on the wall of caves, various type of earthenware found in different sites such as *Khangkhui* cave, *Songbu*, *Kngakhui*, *Machi*, *Singtom*, *Napachik*, *Laimanai*, *Phunan*, *Wangoo*, *Sanghaiten*, *Kamang*, *Mongjam*, *Moirang*, *Langmeidong*, *Tharon* caves have proved the use of various art and craft in different aspect of socio-political and economical life of the Meetei Community since time immemorial reflecting cultural affinity with other culture.(1)

As a tradition, Meetei community's primary engagement to the making of various art and craft has been an important household economical activity for meeting their requirement. As the division of labour among the members of a family, which in turn among the people of the Community is governed by the established social norms and values and is in the

line of gender and social status, the occupation of an individual is an important factor for identifying the social category to which an individual belong. From birth, the skill of art and craft is learnt and developed through acculturation. Crafting itself is gendered and the assignment of craftwork to craftsmen depends on types of craft which may require crafters of either femininity or masculinity. The ideal character of being a woman or a man is socially assessed and recognized from her/his mastery in the gendered occupations.

The social status of an individual may be static or dynamic. Occupations are also categorized into different groups which are organised in hierarchical order. In some cases, the vertical movement of one's status is associated with change in occupation from one category to other category. But in a few cases, as some occupations specifically belong to a particular sub-group of Meetei Community, their social status remains static. So, identity of an individual may be considered as a personal identity in one context, and as a social identity in another. Such cultural notion is clearly shown in the production of art and craft.

2. SOCIAL IDENTITY:

Historically, there were three social classes in their society to identify an individual's status- *Achou- Asang Macha* (Kingship, Aristocrat lineage, *Meetei* who are closest to the King), *Meecham* (Common Meetei lineage) and *Hanthaba Mee (Loi/Chakpa and Yaithibi)*. (2) It is believed that *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* introduced *Lallup*(3) system, a well-established division of labour.(4) In the system, men were engaged in the outdoor and venturous activities/duties for the welfare of the state, so, women were compelled to engage themselves in domestic activities. Such division of labour on gender line has been found inherited and became a basis for hierarchical classification from the perspective of occupation.

From the *Puya* (old text) *Loiyumba Shilyen* (5), the division of duties among the family or *Yumnak* (sub-group of a lineage) was seen during the reign of King *Meitingu Loiyumba* (1074-1122 A.D.). The system of *Loiyumba Shilyen* projected a picture of well-organized economy of Manipur in which agrarian economy was supplemented by handloom and handicraft. The king *Meitingu Loiyumba* distributed different works among some *Yumnak* (6). Among these *Yumnak*, the work of weaving of clothes and dying had been allotted to 13 *Yumnak*. During his time, royal clothes were weaved by some selected men who were assigned in weaving of royal clothes. According to their work in the weaving, they were named as *Charei Phisapa*, *Naotam Phisapa*, *Yangnu Phisapa*, *Heisu Naha Phisapa* and *Khoiriyen Phisapa*. *Charei Phisapa* or *Charei Phisahanpa* was the head of royal weaver. *Naotam Phisapa*, *Yangnu Phisapa* and *Heisu Naha Phisapa* were those who were assigned in the work of spinning, twisting and kneading the thread etc. *Heisu Naha Phisapa* performed duty of cutting off woven royal clothes from the loom. It reveals that men were engaged in weaving activities in the royal court and considered in higher social status. From the historical records, it is found that the occupations assigned to some *Yumnak* were not of hierarchical character in social status. However, at present, such occupations assigned to some specific *Yumnak* are no more restricted to the particular *Yumnak* i.e. anybody can be engaged in such occupations.

The social hierarchy among the people from the perspective of occupation was more visible after conversion of Meetei into *Vaishnavism*. Those people who do not accepted *Vaishnavism* as a religion were considered as lower in social status and the occupations of such people like pottery, silk rearing, blacksmith, bell metal casting, goldsmith etc. has been considered as of lower status. They were known as *Lois/Chakpa* (7), a group which is considered as lower status in their social structure. T. C. Hodson also mentions that craftsmen like weaver, carpenter, blacksmiths, jeweller, worker in brass, metal casters, bone setters and house builders were from *Loi* communities.(8)

Wood carving is also notable work among the works of Art and Craft of Manipur. Historically, boat construction was one of the hierarchical occupations, which was given to men crafter only. A boat was made under the supervision of *Hiyangloi Hanjaba* and *Hisaba Hanjaba*. The *Hiyangloi Hanjaba* and *Hisaba hanjaba* were exempted from the *Lallup* services.(9) The menfolk of *Hiroi – Lamgang* village (a *Loi* Village) made distinctive boats for the kings.(10) In addition, oral narratives, historical texts, archaeological findings and literary texts mention that blacksmiths were found in *Kakching* (a *Loi* village).(11)

From their narrative and historical record, it is known that pottery categorically belong to *Chakpas*, a specific ethnic group in Manipur who were inhabited at dispersed location across Manipur valley.(12) *Loi* (sub-group of Meetei) to which *Chakpa* (an ethnic group) belongs is considered as lower in class. Among the sub-groups of *Chakpa* group, pottery is done only in the *Chakpa* villages such as *Thongjao*, *Andro*, *Chairel*, and *Nongpk Sekmai* by married women. Culturally, pottery is also entwined in female aboriginal culture and the occupation itself is gendered and characterized as femininity. The techniques used by each Pottery villages are different. As the techniques of Pottery village cannot be shared with other pottery villages, the techniques itself become an element of their social identity.

So, within Meetei community, some occupations are hierarchically categorized and some on gendered bases. Occupation based social ranking was found during period of kingdom. But, the post-colonial period witnessed disappearance of social ranking system based on occupation and of confinement of occupations to *Chakpa/Lois* except the pottery. Some occupations and their associated techniques which have been possessed by some particular lineage or sub-group have been important components of social identity.

3. GENDER IDENTITY:

Crafts are often perceived in association with the gender of crafters, culturally and socially constructed. Psychologists assume gender as a social category which can be seen as a social identity. Identity of an individual is not an isolated concept i.e. its meaning is associated with others. Gender-based division of labour is strictly governed by social customs, belief systems, norms and values, and perception of the society. Frank Ellis mentions that manifestation of this concept occurs in many peasant societies because of their patriarchy and patrilineal social structure. This describes dominance of men over women by which men control the property, resources, and income of the farm household. Other common features of patriarchy are control over the labour time of women, over their freedom of movement, and over their levels of consumption. (13)

In Meetei community, basketry is considered as an occupation of men folk particularly who are retired from the agricultural activities in their society. Women are restricted to involve not only in the making of basket but also in the culturing of bamboo. So, basketry is perceived and entwined with manhood occupation and culturally and categorically belongs to occupations of men. Among the men folk, division of works involved in basketry are also based on age or stages of life showing a hierarchical division of work. In fact, plantation and harvesting bamboo are done by old or elder men folk of a family with a belief that if a bamboo plant is planted by a young man then he may not have longer life.

Similarly, weaving culturally and exclusively belongs to women folk. Traditionally, women of all age, unmarried or married are engaged in weaving activities. In every family, elder women used to say- 'Nupa haibasidi sanmi lanmini, Nupi haibasidi phisa lonsa heigadoubani'. Literally, it means men are born as warriors whereas woman should have the knowledge and skill of weaving. Therefore, it is known that weaving is an occupational identity of women folk given by their community. As weaving is done even by the women belonging to royal family, no hierarchical division of labour among women in weaving is seen. However, there is division of labour among the weavers with names such as *Phisabi* (weaver), *Phi houbi* (who make stretching wrap), *Langsungbi* (making/rearing of fiber), *Phimachu sangbi* (dyer), *Phisubi* (bleaching), and *Philonbi* (embroidery) etc. But every woman has freedom of choosing and engaging in any kind work of weaving if she has the skill and knowledge.

4. CONCLUSION:

Form the above discussion, social identity in Meetei Community is a social phenomenon constructed and governed by norms, values and belief system. Crafting, an occupation is the manifestation of individual and communal identity by which social structure of the Meetei community is shown through hierarchical, gender-based categorization in the occupation. Before the advent of Vaishnavism, social categorization, in turn identity formation based on occupation had been of temporal because of an individual's engagement in crafting being non-permanent. Exclusion of women in *Lallup* System may be a reason for women's greater engagement in the crafting. In Meetei Community, religious colonialism through preaching Vaishnavism has impacted in the social categorization among the people resulting in hierarchical categorization of occupations. Occupation based social ranking was found during period of kingdom. But, the post-colonial period witnessed disappearance of social ranking system based on occupation and of confinement of occupations to *Chakpa/Lois* except the pottery.

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3. Literally, *Lallup* is a combination of two words- *Lal* and *Lup*. *Lal* means war and *Lup* means organization. It is a feudal service given by the king to men of age group- sixteen to sixty. It is established for military service for the welfare and defense of the kingdom. Kabui, G. (1991). *History of Manipur: Pre-colonial period*. New Delhi: National Publishing House.
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5. A royal edict for division of occupations or duties to maintain Meetei sociopolitical and economic life.
6. *Yumnak* is a sub-clan of clans of Meetei community.
7. *Loi/Chakpa* is a sub-group of Meetei community who violate the Meetei customary laws and who do not accept Vaishnavism.
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11. *Ibid*, 1908.
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