



Between Traditions And Transformation: The Struggles For Dignity Among Meitei Pangal Women's In Barak Valley

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Abstract

This study provides historical and contemporary experiences of Meitei Pangal women in the Barak Valley that highlights the way cultural traditions, socio-economic pressures and patriarchal norms that have shaped their lives. These women have long been the essential contributor to their family and community survival through agriculture, weaving, and informal labor, their dignity has been often constrained by practice such as child marriage, dowry and restrictive interpretations of marriage laws. Drawing the field observation, community interaction, Primary and secondary research paper, the paper traces the consistency of such challenges and the gradual shift taking place. This study unfolds the complex issues of the education inconsistency the prevalent practice of child marriage, Burdens of dowry, Misuse of word Polygamy and the societal pressures related to physical appearance and family status. It also documents the silent, ongoing revolution that sees a new generation of women reclaiming their worth challenge such long standing barriers and open pathways towards a more dignified future through education and professional achievements, despite a steady generational gap.

Keywords: Meitei Pangal, Barak Valley, child marriage, dowry, women's empowerment, gender roles, economic contribution, education inconsistency, Polygamy, cultural traditions.

Methodology: This research was completed using mixed data such as secondary and primary. While much of the data was collected through extensive personal observations and informal interviews conducted within the Meitei Pangal communities of the Barak Valley. These on-the-ground accounts, gathered from community members, educators, and women of various ages and professions, provide vital, anecdotal evidence of lived experiences and prevailing societal mindset. It is crucial to acknowledge a significant limitation in the available data. There are no official, accurate, and up-to-date records on the specific population and literacy rates of Meitei Pangal women. Therefore, the findings and conclusions presented here are a blend of scholarly findings, community-based surveys, and the rich narrative of personal accounts.

Introduction: The narrative of the Manipuri people is deeply connected with their land, culture, and resilience. For a significant portion of this community, however, that story also involves a profound journey of migration and settlement. The Manipuri Muslims were also known as Meitei Pangals. The word 'Pangal' was historically used by the Meitei people to designate Meitei Muslims, and their history is well-documented in royal chronicles. The Pangals are a small Manipuri speaking community whose root can be traced to the Manipur Valley. During the reign of King Khagembba (1597–1652), Muslim groups entered Manipur and were gradually incorporated into society. Their expertise in crafts and trade made them valuable to the local economy, and they were permitted to settle permanently through land allocations and social integration, including intermarriage with local women (Ahmed, 2011; Gait, 1967).

The relocation of many Meitei Pangals to the Barak Valley is closely tied to the turmoil of the Burmese invasions of Manipur (1819–1826). During this prolonged conflict, sections of the Manipuri population, including Muslims, sought refuge in neighbouring regions such as Assam, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Some communities eventually settled in the undivided Cachar district, where they became a permanent population group (Bhattacharjee, 1986; Ahmed, 2011). At present, Cachar has the largest concentration of Manipuri Muslims outside of Manipur, with an estimation of population around 80 thousand. The Barak Valley, being a neighbouring region, had close political, commercial, and cultural connections with Manipur and served as a gateway to the west for the Manipuris. The Pangals have a number of customs and traditions that are similar to the Meiteis. This is evident in their food habits, dress, and habitation. They have adopted Meiteilon as their mother tongue and integrated local customs and traditions into their daily lives. The women's of the community wear traditional dresses like Khudei, Phanek, and Khwangnam Phi. Among the pangals, marriage ceremonies referred to as Luhongba, combines ritual elements from both Islamic law and Meitei cultural traditions. Gold is an important ornament during pangal marriage. They share food habits with the Meiteis, such as Uti, Eromba, and Ngari. They also have a similar pattern of house construction. Most of the Meitei pangals of Barak Valley reside in parts of Cachar such as Lakhipur, Sonai, and Barkhola constituency. Within these constituencies in villages like Singerbond, Sapormoina, Banskandi, kontha, Tarapur, Moiching, Dolugram, Bairabnagar, Badripar etc (Barbhuiya D. S., 2025)

The historical course of Meitei Pangal women in the Barak Valley is a story of endurance forged in the hardship of both economic necessity and deeply ingrained tradition. From their earliest days of settlement, women were not merely domestic figures; they were active, indispensable participants in the community's survival and growth. Their labor was central to the family economy, often without formal recognition or respect. In the fields alongside their husbands, they engaged in crucial horticultural activities. The cultivation of kidney beans, locally known as kolihawai, and other kind of vegetable, fruits, along with rice, became particularly popular, contributing significantly to the family's sustenance and income. This direct involvement in agriculture demonstrates that from the very beginning, these women were capable of earning and contributing, often becoming the primary breadwinners of the family. Beyond the fields, their homes served as hubs of production. Weaving, a cultural art passed down through generations, was a major source of income. Women would spend hours weaving the traditional Cloth worn by women called "Phanek", embroidery works on traditional veil called 'khudei' and traditional carpet which they would then sell in local markets. This practice of weaving and selling provided many uneducated women with a path to financial independence. In a society that largely undervalued their domestic labor, their ability to be the sole breadwinner for their families was a quiet, yet powerful, assertion of their capability and strength. This capacity for independent earning is a historical point of immense pride, though it was often overlooked by a society that judged their worth by other metrics.

Despite their vital economic contributions, the dignity of Meitei Pangal women was systematically eroded by a patriarchal social structure and a relentless cycle of outdated customs. This erosion was most visible in the institution of marriage and the accompanying devaluation of female education. The belief

that a girl's sole purpose in life was to get married and raise a family was a cornerstone of this worldview. Parents often think that if their daughters don't marry just after reaching puberty she would not find suitable man to marry later. This societal anxiety led to the widespread and tragic practice of child marriage. Girls were married off while they were still children, a fate many mothers had also endured. This cyclical trauma created a painful legacy; the "torture" endured by a woman at the hands of her mother-in-law was often passed down, with her in turn inflicting similar mental and emotional abuse on her own daughter-in-law. While this cruel practice is less visible today, it remains a painful memory and a part of the community's historical reality.

This relentless focus on early marriage had a catastrophic impact on education. While boys were given priority in schooling as the future breadwinners, girls' education was seen as secondary. This systemic neglect created a significant educational disparity, as evidenced by a 2004 report that highlighted a particularly low literacy rate among Meitei Pangal women compared to their male counterparts(S & Sahani, 2014). This lack of education trapped women in a cycle of dependence and vulnerability. The uneducated woman was often seen as a burden, as her domestic work was unvalued and her ability to contribute economically was restricted. Her dignity was further stripped away by the perception that she was solely dependent on her father, brother, or husband. In a cruel twist, this lack of education also meant that she was unaware of her rights, leaving her powerless against oppressive traditions.

Adding to these burdens were the financial practices surrounding marriage. Manipuri muslims have their way of marriage prescribed by Islamic law. The concept of HaqMehr also called Muajjal (Muqaddam), a mandatory Islamic gift from a husband to his wife, was distorted(Maqbul Ali, 2013). Although it was originally meant to guarantee women financial protection within marriage, in practice it was frequently altered and misapplied, at times serving as a justification for excessive financial claims during matrimonial negotiations from Brides family. The settlement of Mehr are done between bride and groom's family and guardians ahead of Nikah ritual. There is no customary obligation for giving of dowry and also not a part of Islamic law despite that one of important thing to point out of this community is dowry itselfbecame a pervasive and destructive practice. Within this community dowry slowly became a show of status among the wealthy, who gave expensive gifts like Motor Bikes, four wheeler, Gold ornaments and lavish household furniture 'Awunpot' to their daughter during marriage. However, this practice was widely copied, turning it into a mandatory demand even for families of modest means now. In many cases, prospective in laws placed heavy dowry expectations on Brides family, at times pressuring them with the threat of cancelling the wedding if their demands were not met. Parents being in fear of their daughter being left unmarried forced to comply, often at great financial and emotional cost. For a woman who brought an insufficient dowry, the indignity continued after marriage, as she would face "mental torture" from her in-laws, making her life a constant struggle against disrespect and devaluation. Not only mental torture even there is number of incidents where women's were physically tortured that even took to death. This unending demand for dowry led to many separated, divorced women within society that remained unreported. One horrific instance, which I have observed is the case of women who was put in a box by her husband and in laws in an attempt to kill her for not meeting their dowry demands. Though she survived, this shocking act but it serves as extreme example of how far some individuals will go down towards women where they are treated as an object. (Authors self Field Interview, 2025).In this patriarchal society, even a woman's physical appearance and her family's status became a commodity. It was a common and painful belief that a beautiful girl would easily find a groom and marry early, while a less attractive girl would face difficulty. This unstated rule added another sheet of pressure and anxiety, judging a woman's worth by her physical appearance rather than her character or intelligence.A girl from a wealthy family was seen as a more desirable match due to the urge for a large dowry called 'Awunpot' further ingrained the idea that a woman was a transaction, not a person.

According to Islamic law all the Muslim men were allowed to have four wives called polygamy system but they were to be treated equally. But Polygamy is very much misused term in pangal society. In practice, certain men misused the allowance for polygamy and marry more than one woman that often cause distress to family members thereby affecting education of children, first wife being left with no care and support that often cause divorce and have negative impact on their children's mental health and education.

The course of this historical narrative is not one of stagnation, but of slow, yet visible, transformation. Before dropout rates were expected higher among Meital pangal girls but accuracy of number cannot be defined due to having no official records of particularly pangal girl's student in Barak Valley. A new generation of Meitei Pangal women is actively challenging these historical norms. Today, we see a promising 85% enrollment of girls in government and private schools, evidence to a growing belief in the value of female education. However, the path is still filled with challenges, as many of these girls do not pursue higher education, often due to the same fear of delayed marriage. Yet, this is a gap that is slowly being filled. A small but growing number of parents are encouraging their daughters to continue their studies, and the results are powerful. Large numbers of meitalpangal girls were now seen studying in high profile universities, colleges, institution's cracking tough competitive exams. Meitei Pangal women are breaking barriers and entering professions that were once unimaginable for them. They are now serving, following their dreams their presence is increasingly felt in the fields of law, medicine, teaching, and academia whether it be within the state or out of state or abroad. They are also taking on leadership roles in local governance, serving as Panchayat and Gram Panchayat ward members. These women are not just earning an income; they are reclaiming their voices and their dignity, proving that their worth is not tied to their marital status or a dowry, but to their intellect, their ambition, and their professional contributions. The road ahead is long, and the generational gap remains a significant challenge, but the historical narrative is moving in a new and hopeful direction toward a future where Meitei Pangal women can live with a dignity that is not a gift, but a fundamental right.

Although all families within this community are not dominated, many are. The silent suffering of women in these households remains a critical issue that must be addressed. It is a daily struggle against outdated norms, and while progress is evident in some areas, it is not a total change. The visibility of successful women in government and private sectors is a beacon of hope, showing what is possible. However, until education is universally valued for girls, until early marriage is fully abolished, and until the burdens of dowry are lifted, the struggle for dignity will continue.

The story of the Meitei Pangal women is a microcosm of a larger human journey. It is a testament to the fact that true dignity and respect are not given; they are earned. They are not found in tradition or in a marriage certificate but in the empowerment that comes with education. For every individual, the path to a dignified life is paved with knowledge, awareness, and the courage to challenge injustice. It is a universal truth that all humans should know their inherent dignity, and education is the main way to get it.

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