



## WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THOUBAL DISTRICT: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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### ABSTRACT

The women of Manipur have played a vital part in shaping the politics of the state. The roles played by women in the Nupi Lan, Meira Paibi group, and the famous all-female Ima Keithel market represent the historical tradition of Manipur. This paper focuses on the status of political representation of women in Thoubal District of Manipur. The Thoubal district of Manipur is the most populated valley district of Manipur. In addition, it has a positive female to male sex ratio of 1002 females per 1000 males. Through an analysis of census statistics, electoral commissions reports, scholarly sources, and public policy studies, the present paper highlights some major barriers to the participation of women in politics in the Thoubal district. However, despite their significant presence in civil society, women are underrepresented in the State Legislature.

**Keywords** – Women's political representation, Thoubal, Manipur, gender equality, elections, Women's Reservation Bill, Northeast India



## **1. Introduction**

Women's participation in the political process is one of the pillars of democratic governance. There is a need for women's representation in legislative and executive bodies to address the interests and aspirations of the female population. In India, despite a long and vibrant tradition of women's activism since the independence struggle, gender parity in formal political institutions has remained elusive. In the northeastern state of Manipur, particularly in the Thoubal district, this paradox is strikingly visible, as women have a formidable social and economic presence, yet their participation in electoral politics is disproportionately low.

The district of Thoubal is one of the fertile tracts located in the eastern part of the valley region of Manipur. Over the years, Thoubal has been one of the most socially dynamic and demographically important parts of the state. Created as a new district in May 1983 from the old district of Manipur Central, Thoubal has an area of about 324 square kilometres and its major inhabitants include the Meitei community. As per the data from the Census of India in 2011, there were about 422,168 people living in the district before its division into Thoubal and Kakching in 2016, having a sex ratio of 1,002 women for every 1,000 men slightly above the national average. The literacy level in the district was 74.47% in which male literacy was 85% and female literacy was 64.09% (Census of India, 2011).

Regarding the political geography of this district, it includes several constituencies for the Manipur Legislative Assembly, such as Thoubal, Lilong, Wabgai, Wangjing Tentha, and Hiyanglam, to name just a few. Despite the district having an active presence of women's organizations and markets controlled solely by women, its history has seen only male members being elected into the Manipur Legislative Assembly.

## **Historical and Socio-Cultural Background**

In order to contextualise the women's political participation in Thoubal, one needs to first explore the wider socio-cultural and historical background of women's political activism in Manipur. This state has a long history of women's political activism spanning several centuries, and Thoubal, being at the centre of Imphal valley, has been a vital part of this tradition. Two Nupi Lan ('women's war') movements, occurring in 1904 and 1939 respectively, have marked some of the most important events in the history of women's political awareness in Manipur. The first Nupi Lan emerged in response to a directive issued by the British authorities to gather teak wood, while the second one was triggered by the forced rice exports, which led to starvation throughout the province. Both times women united into a single collective body to challenge the authority of the colonists (Singh, 2004). Such episodes are an integral part of the history of Manipur and have often been referred to as the origins of women's political awareness in this territory.



Since the late 1970s, there is the emergence of the Meira Paibi (“Women Torch Bearers”) as the most significant example of women’s political activism in Manipur. Initiated as the Nisha Bandi campaign to oppose substance abuse, Meira Paibi transformed itself into a major civil society organization opposing such issues as the AFSPA, abuses by the military, as well as different types of injustices. According to Arambam (2021), “Meira Paibi women have played a key role in civil society campaigns for human rights and justice,” although their impressive political activism at the grassroots has been devoid of participation in elections.

The Ima Keithel (Mother’s Market or Nupi Keithel) located at Imphal is yet another symbol of the economic and social power of the women in Manipur. The market is entirely managed by women who act as vendors, with men explicitly prohibited from being vendors there by the government since 2018. This is one institution where women are economically active without parallels elsewhere in India. Similarly, in Thoubal district, women’s participation in economic activities such as agriculture, weaving, and local trading practices is a well-established tradition.

In spite of the wealth of traditions, William McCulloch’s observations made back in 1859 in his book, “An Account of the Valley of Munnipore,” prove relevant after all these years: “Though the women of the valley take charge of the whole of their domestic affairs and sometimes have to support whole families, their influence stops short of any political action.” Women’s involvement in economic and social processes did not translate into political empowerment.

### **Women’s Political Representation in Thoubal and Manipur: A Statistical Overview**

Manipur can be said to be one of those states in India where the representation of women in the state legislature is very low. According to information obtained from the website of the Election Commission of India, there have been only two instances out of twelve instances since 1967 till now when more than one woman candidate became the MLA of the Manipur Legislative Assembly. There have been twelve rounds of elections to the Manipur Legislative Assembly, but there have been just four instances when women got elected to the legislature and in eight rounds of elections, no woman candidate managed to win. Hangmila Shaiza is known to be the first woman who got elected to the Manipur Legislative Assembly in the year 1990 from the constituency of Ukhrul. This was considered to be a sympathy vote for Hangmila Shaiza in light of the fact that her brother-in-law had been assassinated while campaigning for the elections (BehanBox, 2022). Three women were elected to Manipur Legislative Assembly in the year 2012, and their names are Nemcha Kipgen, Okram Landhoni Devi, and Akoijam Mirabai Devi.

However, despite an unprecedented increase in the participation of women in terms of numbers, the representation of women in the election process was very poor, where 6% of the total participants were women as compared to just 3% in 2007 (BehanBox, 2022). It is important to note that for the very first time in its history, more women than men have been registered in the



state electoral roll, as 55,000 extra women voters were registered in the 2022 assembly elections. In the most recent assembly elections held in 2022, just nine women stood against 181 contestants from the five leading political parties contesting for the 60 seats available. The number of contestants included 3 women each from BJP and INC, 2 women from NPP, and one woman from JD(U) (Outlook India, 2022).

The 2022 Manipur Legislative Assembly election saw the greatest number of women contestants, but their representation among the candidates was a meagre 6% against 3% recorded in 2007 (BehanBox, 2022). Notably, in this year's election, there were more women voters in Manipur compared to any other period in its political history, with about 55,000 more women voters than men voters. A look at the figures from the 2022 election shows that while there were more than 181 contestants from five main political parties running for the 60 seats, only nine of them were women. Three contestants each were nominated by the BJP and Congress, while two and one were nominated by the National People's Party and JD(U), respectively (Outlook India, 2022).

### **In case of Thoubal District**

As is the case with the state's political history in general, that of Thoubal district has shown a pattern of women being excluded from formal legislatures in terms of elected seats within the region's numerous assembly constituencies in the 21st century. Although it is possible to obtain constituency-level results from sources such as the Election Commission of India and Association for Democratic Reforms, the trend that emerges in the case of Thoubal is that the region experiences almost total dominance of male politicians. In this context, one event involving Thoubal worth mentioning is the participation of Najima Phumdreimayum in elections held in the state during 2017. Representing Irom Sharmila's political party, People's Resurgence and Justice Alliance (PRJA), Najima is notable for becoming the first Muslim woman to enter the electoral fray in Manipur. Moreover, she had participated in organizing protests against gender-based violence in Thoubal district. Her candidature, however, faced heavy resistance from local conservative Muslim leaders, resulting in her receiving just 33 votes (BehanBox, 2022).

The following table shows the list of women candidates who contested election from Thoubal District in Manipur Legislative Assembly Election since 1972:

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Name</b>  | <b>Constituency</b> | <b>Party</b> | <b>Total Votes</b> | <b>Result</b> |
|-------------|--------------|---------------------|--------------|--------------------|---------------|
| 1990        | T. Ibemhal   | Hiyanglam           | IND          | 1364               | Lost(4th)     |
| 2000        | P. Damayenti | Wabgai              | FPM          | 2211               | Lost(5th)     |
| 2017        | Najima Bibi  | Wabgai              | PRJA         | 33                 | Lost(7th)     |
| 2007 (bye)  | O. Landhoni  | Khangbok            | INC          | -                  | WON           |
| 2012        | O. Landhoni  | Khangabok           | INC          | 18339              | WON           |
| 2017        | I.Sharmila   | Thoubal             | PRJA         | 90                 | Lost(5th)     |



|      |         |          |     |     |           |
|------|---------|----------|-----|-----|-----------|
| 2022 | Y. Roma | Kakching | CPI | 676 | Lost(6th) |
|------|---------|----------|-----|-----|-----------|

There are four Constituencies in Thoubal District with no women candidates recorded in Manipur legislative assembly elections since 1972–2022 are Lilong, Wangkhem, Wamngjing Tentha, Sugnu.

The panchayat level of Manipur's valley districts like that of Thoubal has a mandatory provision of 33% reservation for women in the local body according to the Constitution of India's 73rd Amendment Act of 1992. But studies on reservation for women in panchayats in various parts of India have established that their mere presence in the elective body is insufficient for them to acquire any real power (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). In several instances, women elected to local bodies have been mere puppets in the hands of their male relatives who wield real decision-making powers—the 'Sarpanch Pati Syndrome'. There is absolutely no reservation for women in local governance in the hill districts of Manipur managed by Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) (BehanBox, 2022). Thus, Thoubal's valley district status makes its 33% panchayat reservation a relatively better position in comparison with other districts, albeit with limitations.

### **Obstacles to Women's Political Representation in Thoubal**

Patriarchy and the dilemma of public and private sphere one of the deepest challenges to women's political representation in Thoubal and the state of Manipur generally is the working of patriarchy in which political power for women is distinguished sharply from their acceptable public functions. A women's rights activist from Imphal captured the essence of this situation in her succinct comment that "women are permitted to make a lot of noise, but in the end, the men decide" (Outlook India, 2022). The point to appreciate here is that Manipuri women are expected to be visibly active both economically and politically.

Mirabai Akoijam is a relevant example. One of the rare women politicians in the Manipur assembly, who won a seat in the state legislature without the help of any men in her family, she once said, 'While men in Manipur allow and encourage women to take up socio-economic roles and functions, they don't allow and discourage them to take part in politics. Even families wouldn't allow a woman to be given an election ticket' (Outlook India, 2022). The above statement, which was made by one of the few women in power, highlights the fact that despite the liberal nature of the society, there are certain barriers that keep women out of politics. However, in the case of Thoubal district, the gatekeeping role played by the patriarchy is further reinforced by the fact that most of the women politicians in Manipur are in politics because of their relationship with male politicians, be it their husband or their sons or other male relatives.

### **Financial Challenges and Resource Inequalities**

Indian electoral politics requires large sums of money, and this aspect represents one more major



hurdle for women contestants. According to ADR data from the 2022 Manipur elections, only 6.5 percent of candidates with property worth over Rs. 1 crore were women, while more than 53 percent of all contestants had property worth more than this amount (BehanBox, 2022). This demonstrates the existing inequality in wealth between men and women not only at the district but also at the state level, as the active economic participation of females in Thoubal is higher than the national average; however, women's economic activity usually does not provide them with such funds. Moreover, women running for office in Thoubal encounter difficulties related to resource mobilization. Party structures, networks of donors, and the financing of campaigns tend to be controlled by men, which means that women candidates must raise the required funds using their own money or the help of a powerful male supporter. Absence of independent financial resources hinders women's ability to conduct an adequate campaign.

### **Culture of Political Parties and Denial of Tickets**

An important structural barrier that should be discussed is the tendency of political parties to refuse tickets to female candidates in constituencies where they have a realistic chance of success. These parties continue to give tickets to women in 'difficult' or 'unwinnable' seats, which results in low win rates among women and further stereotypes them as incapable of being serious political contenders. In the 2022 Manipur elections, there were only nine female nominees from five different parties out of the 60 seats, thus proving how difficult it is for women even to get their names on ballots (Outlook India, 2022). Similarly, the culture of ticket allocation in Thoubal in all of its constituencies shows a pattern that is no different. While male candidates with local connections and money, as well as caste/community ties, are favoured when allocating tickets, many women candidates who may have gained local popularity through NGOs are overlooked.

### **Social and Community Pressure**

Women politicians in Thoubal have to endure much social pressure about matters such as their family commitments, morality, and community reputation, which is not something that is usually seen in male-dominated politics. The example of the Najima Phumdreimayum campaign is relevant here: religious community figures were particularly vocal in discouraging her bid for office, citing conservative norms. Such social pressure from conservative religious and patriarchal sources may be a successful tactic for undermining a woman's political ambitions from an early stage. In the case of the Meira Paibi movement, the contradictions have arisen insofar as its efforts have not always supported the goal of women's political representation. While the strength of this movement cannot be underestimated, it has never been consistently used to promote the political careers of women candidates. The emphasis on social issues – such as opposition to the AFSPA, opposition to drugs, and opposition to human rights abuses – does not seem to be coordinated with a wider feminist agenda of demanding representation in



legislatures

### **Lack of Education and Information**

Although the literacy rate in Thoubal (74.47%) is better than the average at the national level, the disparity in gender literacy, whereby literacy among males (85%) is much higher than that among females (64.09%), creates an inequity in the ability to engage with political activity. Low female literacy levels make it difficult for women to gain information about their political rights, the Constitution, and the process of elections. Women living in rural areas of Thoubal, where the female population makes up 64.15% of the total district population, face further limitations due to their geographical location and lack of access to political networks, as well as being burdened by agricultural labour and domestic chores. Voting in itself is an accomplishment for women in such situations; participating in election campaigns is out of the question.

### **Impacts of Armed Conflict and Ethnic Violence**

The case study in question is located in Thoubal district which has been greatly influenced by several decades of armed conflict, insurgency and inter-ethnic violence. The proximity of the district to conflict zones together with the impacts of displacement, economic turmoil, and gender-based violence related to conflicts have resulted in an additional challenge for women's political participation. The absence of any systematic measures that would help those women to recover from violence was highlighted by the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network (MWGSN) that was founded partly as a response to the violence that occurred in Thoubal district in 2004. According to this network, violence against women requires much of their time, energy, and effort and thus prevents them from political activity (The Better India, 2025). The recent ethnic violence of 2023, resulting in displacement and other severe consequences, has significantly interrupted the political process in the state. Conflicts tend to lead to greater marginalization of women politically as other issues tend to become more important.

### **Possibilities for Change**

One of the important legislative measures that has direct bearing on Thoubal district of Manipur is the passing of the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, also referred to as Women's Reservation Act or Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam in India. Approved by both houses of parliament with an absolute majority in September 2023, the Act mandates a reservation of one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha, the state assemblies, and the Legislative Assembly of National Capital Territory of Delhi for women (Epw.in, 2023; OHCHR, 2023). Women's Reservation Act constitutes a landmark structural change. "Achieving critical mass" of 30% representation of women in parliament has been found to correlate positively with women's empowerment, and the act brings India into the league of 64 other countries who have reserved parliamentary seats for women," says Susan Ferguson, UN Women Country Representative (UN



Women India, 2023). The implication for the women of Manipur's 60-member Legislative Assembly is a reservation of at least 20 seats, which will be a major boost considering their historical representation of 0-3 women MLAs.

Nonetheless, the execution of the Act is conditional on the conducting of a new census followed by delimitation. As it took roughly five years to complete the task of delimitation for the previous commission, it has been pointed out that the likelihood of implementing the law prior to the 2029 Lok Sabha elections is very remote, despite the Union Ministry of Law and Justice releasing an official gazette notification declaring the commencement of the law in April 2026. Such a provision has been criticized by gender activists as it creates unjustified delay in the much-needed structural reform (EPW, 2023). According to Thoubal, the successful implementation of the Act will mark the most important move in improving women's participation in parliament since the introduction of the 73rd Amendment and creation of panchayat-level reservation. Additionally, the Act also ensures reservation for women belonging to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe categories within the reserved seats to address the issue of marginalised women's representation. Nonetheless, it has been observed that such issues as OBC women's representation and 'proxy' representation of women by their family members, which was already encountered at panchayat level, remain very pertinent questions (EPW, 2023).

The most optimistic structural development occurring within Thoubal and beyond is the rise in women's voter power. During the 2022 Manipur assembly election, for the first time in the history of Manipur, the number of women voters surpassed men by around 55,000 voters (BehanBox, 2022). Within Imphal West district, the female-to-male voter ratio was 1,099 women for every 1,000 men. This is a promising development because as women's voter power increases, political parties have greater incentives to woo women voters by fielding female candidates and making women-centric issues part of their manifestoes. While it remains unclear how long it will take for women voters to translate their numbers into political influence, the process will require organisation, awareness, and mobilisation. Civil society organisations concerned with voter education and women's rights in Thoubal, such as Meira Paibi-affiliated organisations, may serve an essential function in guiding this transition

### **Civil Society and Women's Movements**

The longstanding legacy of activism amongst women within the civil society in Thoubal serves as an institutional base for engaging in political mobilisation in ways which lack precedent across much of India. This includes the experience accumulated over decades by groups such as the Meira Paibi and the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, who have demonstrated their proficiency in organising communities and advocating for political causes. As has been observed in scholarship on women's empowerment within Manipur, such as (Arambam, 2021) women elected representatives within the panchayats – whether influenced by men in their families in



the first place or not – tend to build up experience and their own capacity to engage politically over time. In addition, the 33% reservation system for women in the valley panchayats of Thoubal could lead to a generation of political leaders to come.

Both international and national development organizations, such as UN Women, have pointed out the need for training programs, mentoring initiatives, and institutional support for the political development of women's leadership. This kind of program, which can be customized for Thoubal district, could serve to convert the social capital women in Thoubal hold into formal engagement in politics (ORF, 2023).

### **Education and Media**

The increase in educational levels of women in Thoubal, as evidenced by increases in the literacy rate for women with each new census, contributes gradually to increasing the number of qualified, confident, and networked women who run for election positions. Various educational institutions, including colleges like Thoubal College, Waikhom Mani Girls College, and Kakching College, produce generations of educated women who enter the world of politics. Social media and digital communications have also started breaking down some of the barriers that once protected the male dominated political networks from scrutiny and competition. Women activists in Thoubal have used social media as a way to establish online followings, post political commentaries, and mobilize people in favour of their cause.

### **Policy Recommendations**

From the above analysis, the following policy recommendations will assist in improving women's representation in politics in Thoubal:

1. There is need for rapid implementation of the Women's Reservation Act in the state assembly. This will involve ensuring that the census and delimitation process are carried out in an efficient manner so that the legislative reservation of 33% of seats for women can be instituted.
2. There should be establishment of internal quotas within political parties that have provisions for the nomination of women candidates. Political parties should come up with criteria that ensure that women are nominated in winnable constituencies.
3. Programs aimed at building the capacity of women to participate in politics such as training in political communication, electoral laws, campaign financing, and leadership should be developed.
4. There is need to increase the number of women leaders at panchayat level by increasing their quota from 33% to 50%. This can be achieved by learning from various states within India where this move has already been affected.
5. Specific campaigns aimed at educating voters in rural areas of Thoubal with a special emphasis on women voters will ensure that women, who constitute the majority of the population, are able to exercise their voting power effectively for themselves.
6. Legal steps could be taken to decrease the costs associated with electoral campaigning, such as expenditure limits that have proven ineffective in the past. This would help level the playing field for female contestants whose social capital cannot match the financial standing of males.



7. Community dialogue campaigns to address the issue of patriarchy within the community, which discourages women's participation in politics, will prove effective in this situation, particularly through the influence of Meira Paibi and other women's organizations.

## **Conclusion**

In the 21st century, women's political representation in Thoubal is characterized by an entrenched paradox. Despite being the majority gender in the district in terms of numbers and displaying a favourable sex ratio, taking an active part in economic activities, and drawing on centuries of experience in women's social movements, women lack formal representation in politics. While there are several obstacles that hinder the advancement of women in Thoubal's politics, including patriarchal culture, poverty, political gatekeeping, social pressures, undereducation, and militarization, they are formidable but not necessarily insurmountable. The situation in Thoubal seems to be gradually changing despite the many obstacles. With the adoption of the Women's Reservation Act in 2023, one can hope that the next decades will bring about a significant improvement in women's legislative representation, even though their actual implementation will have to wait until the district has been redistricted based on the upcoming census. Other encouraging signs include the growing number of women voters, the development of grassroots organizations, increasing educational achievements, and digital political engagement.

It is not simply about the presence of women on the electoral rolls, but about giving women the capacity and power to take part in the political process on equal terms as fellow citizens. It calls for consistent effort at many levels there is also legal changes, institutional help, social transformation, and the continuing efforts of the women of Thoubal themselves, who have proven repeatedly to be amongst the most tenacious and effective agents of change in northeastern India. From the lighted torch processions of the Meira Paibis to the halls of the Manipur Legislative Assembly, it is a road the women of Thoubal can easily travel. The challenge for those in charge is to make sure there are no hurdles along the way that were put in place long ago.

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