

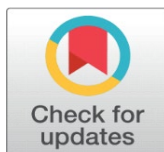
SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS AND EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AMONG MEITEI PANGAL WOMEN IN MANIPUR: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the socio-cultural barriers and educational aspirations of Meitei Pangal women in Manipur, a northeastern state of India. Despite consistent demographic growth and policy interventions, this Muslim minority, comprising 8.4% of the state's population, faces significant educational marginalisation, especially in higher education. Utilising census data from 1951-2011, socio-economic surveys, and qualitative focus group discussions across five colleges in Thoubal and two universities in Manipur, the research applies an intersectional framework to explore the interplay of patriarchal norms, economic constraints, and minority status in shaping educational trajectories. The findings reveal that while Meitei Pangal women possess strong educational aspirations, they encounter substantial structural barriers, including financial hardship, spatial segregation, gender-based social control, and inadequate institutional support. The study challenges narratives that attribute educational backwardness to religious conservatism, demonstrating that socio-economic factors are the primary impediments to educational advancement. This research contributes to academic discussions on minority education, gender equity, and regional development, while providing policy recommendations for targeted interventions.

Keywords: Meitei Pangal, Women's Education, Minority Rights, Higher Education, Patriarchy, Northeast India, Educational Aspirations, Intersectionality

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely acknowledged as a powerful instrument for individual empowerment and social transformation, yet disparities in educational access and attainment persist across cultural, religious and regional lines in India (Drèze and Sen, 2013). Among the Meitei Pangal, Muslim Manipuri communities concentrated in the Imphal Valley, literacy rates and higher-education enrolments remain significantly below the state average (Office of the Registrar General, 2011). Despite progressive growth in overall educational indicators in Manipur over the past six decades, the Meitei Pangal have experienced slower gains in both basic literacy and tertiary participation, reflecting the complex interplay of socio-cultural norms, economic constraints and minority-status dynamics.



Growth trajectory of the Muslim population in Manipur from 1951 to 2011

Patriarchal norms within both the wider Meitei society and the Pangal community impose gender-specific expectations that often relegate women to domestic roles and constrain their educational trajectories (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994; Agarwal, 2000). Furthermore, spatial marginalisation illustrated by the high concentration of Pangal populations in certain districts such as Thoubal and Imphal East exacerbates disparities in school infrastructure, language resources and safe mobility for female students (Sachar, 2006; Gayer & Jaffrelot, 2012). Economic hardship further limits subject choice, quality of instruction and continuity of studies, as families with limited means prioritise the education of male siblings perceived as future breadwinners (Basant, 2012; Abidi & Kazmi, 2019).

Previous qualitative inquiries into minority women's education in India have highlighted how intersecting barriers, financial, geographical, gendered and communal, shape educational aspirations and outcomes (Jeffery & Jeffery, 2002; Hasan & Menon, 2004). However, little systematic research has examined these dynamics among the Meitei Pangal of Manipur. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the socio-cultural barriers and educational aspirations of Meitei Pangal women. Drawing upon census and socio-economic survey data (2004; 2011) alongside enrolment records from Manipur University (2015–2020), we interrogate patterns of literacy and higher-education participation. We then employ qualitative focus-group discussions across eight colleges to unpack the lived experiences, motivations and constraints of Pangal women pursuing tertiary education.

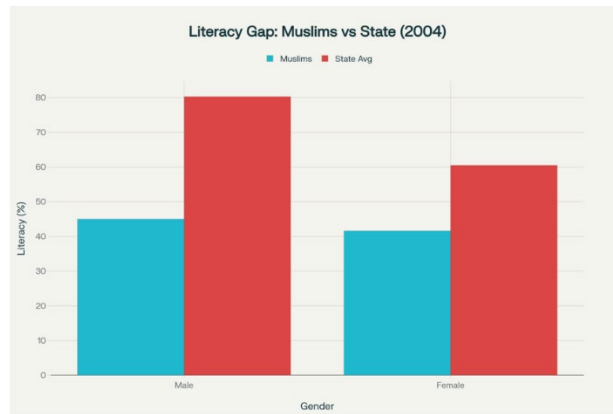
By situating Meitei Pangal women's educational trajectories within broader debates on minority rights, gender equity and regional development, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how intersecting forms of disadvantage hinder the realisation of educational aspirations. It further advances policy discussions on targeted interventions, spanning financial aid, community-based support and infrastructural improvements that could foster greater inclusion of Meitei Pangal women in higher education.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The educational marginalisation of minority women in India represents a multifaceted challenge requiring careful examination of historical, cultural, and structural determinants. In the northeastern state of Manipur, this challenge takes on particular significance given the region's unique ethnic composition, geographical isolation, and complex socio-political dynamics (Singh, 2023). The Meitei Pangal community, constituting the largest Muslim population in Manipur, provides a compelling case study for understanding how intersectional identities, being both religious minorities and women, compound educational disadvantages.

Manipur's educational landscape reflects broader patterns of regional inequality within India's federal structure. While the state has achieved notable progress in overall literacy rates, rising from 11.4% in 1951 to 76.94% in 2011, significant disparities persist across gender, community, and geographical lines (Office of the Registrar General, 2011). The gender gap in literacy, though narrowing, remains substantial, particularly among minority communities where traditional gender roles and economic constraints intersect to limit women's educational opportunities (Ningomban, 2023).

The Meitei Pangal community's demographic profile reveals both growth and persistent challenges. Census data indicate a steady population increase from 37,197 in 1951 to 239,836 in 2011, representing approximately 8.4% of Manipur's total population. However, this demographic expansion has not translated into proportional educational advancement, particularly for women. The 2004 Socio-Economic Survey of Meitei Pangal documented literacy rates of 45% for males and 41.6% for females, significantly below the state averages of 80.3% and 60.5% respectively.



Comparison of literacy rates between Muslims and the state average by gender in Manipur

These disparities are not merely statistical artefacts but reflect more profound structural inequalities that shape lived experiences. The concentration of Meitei Pangal populations in specific districts, particularly Thoubal (22.75%) and Imphal East (18.06%), creates spatial patterns of segregation that influence access to educational institutions, quality of instruction, and broader social mobility prospects. This residential clustering, while providing cultural security and community solidarity, also limits exposure to diverse educational and professional networks that facilitate advancement in contemporary India's knowledge economy.

The intersection of gender and minority status creates what Crenshaw (1989) termed "intersectionality", the ways in which multiple forms of disadvantage compound to create unique patterns of marginalisation. For Meitei Pangal women, this manifests in restricted mobility, limited career aspirations, early marriage pressures, and reduced family investment in their education. These constraints operate within broader patriarchal structures that prioritise male education while viewing female education as secondary or potentially disruptive to traditional family arrangements.

Contemporary policy frameworks, including the National Education Policy 2020 and various minority welfare schemes, acknowledge these challenges but often fail to address their intersectional nature. Generic interventions targeting either gender inequality or minority disadvantage may miss the specific ways these identities interact to create distinct barriers for Meitei Pangal women. This study seeks to illuminate these complex dynamics through both quantitative analysis of educational trends and qualitative exploration of lived experiences.

2.2. HISTORY OF MEITEI PANGAL (ORIGIN)

Understanding the contemporary educational challenges facing Meitei Pangal women requires situating their experiences within the community's historical and cultural evolution. The origins of the Meitei Pangal community in Manipur trace back to the early 17th century, representing a unique case of religious minority integration within an indigenous cultural framework.

2.3. EARLY SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION (1597-1652)

The foundational narrative of Meitei Pangal settlement begins during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652), a pivotal period in Manipur's history. According to historical accounts, the first significant Muslim presence emerged following a military conflict between the Manipuri kingdom and joint Cachari-Muslim forces from Sylhet (present-day Bangladesh). When King Khagemba successfully defeated and captured approximately 1,000 Muslim soldiers, rather than treating them as temporary prisoners, he made the strategic decision to integrate them into Manipuri society (Singh & Singh, 1989).

This integration process was remarkably comprehensive for its time. The soldiers were granted land for cultivation, encouraged to marry into Meitei families, and gradually adopted the Meitei language as their primary medium of communication. The term "Pangal," meaning "strong" or "robust," was bestowed upon them by King Khagemba in recognition of their military prowess and subsequent loyalty to the Manipuri crown. This nomenclature reflects not marginalisation but rather acknowledgement of their valued contributions to the kingdom's defence and development. (Irene, 2010, p 51)

2.4. CULTURAL SYNTHESIS AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The early Meitei Pangal community developed what scholars term a "syncretic identity", one that maintained Islamic religious practices while adopting local cultural norms, social organisation patterns, and linguistic preferences. This cultural synthesis was institutionalised through the establishment of the Pangal Loishang, a community council headed by a Kazi who adjudicated internal affairs while maintaining allegiance to the Manipuri monarchy (Ahmed, 2024).

The community's integration into Meitei social organisation extended to the adoption of the "Sagei" system, kinship networks based on patrilineal descent that formed the foundation of traditional Meitei society. Meitei Pangal families were assigned specific Sageis, creating formal recognition of their place within the broader social hierarchy. This institutional inclusion facilitated intermarriage, economic cooperation, and gradual cultural assimilation while preserving distinct religious identity. (Irene, 2010, pp. 15-16)

2.5. SUBSEQUENT MIGRATION WAVES AND CONSOLIDATION

Following the initial settlement, Muslim migration to Manipur continued intermittently through the 18th and 19th centuries. The most significant secondary wave occurred in 1724, when political upheavals in Bengal and Burma prompted further Muslim families to seek refuge in Manipur. The kingdom's reputation for religious tolerance and the established Pangal community's success created attractive conditions for these later migrants. (Irene, 2010, p. 41-43)

During this period, Meitei Pangal communities expanded beyond their initial settlement at Moirangkhom and Yaiskul to establish a presence in multiple districts. Their skills in weaving, particularly silk production, metalwork, and trade, contributed significantly to Manipur's economy. The community also played crucial military roles, participating in the kingdom's defence against Burmese invasions and later British colonial expansion. (Irene, 2010, pp.51-60)

2.6. COLONIAL PERIOD CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

The advent of British colonial rule in 1891 marked a significant transformation in Meitei Pangal status and identity. The colonial administration's communal classification systems, legal frameworks, and educational policies created new challenges for communities that had previously operated within indigenous governance structures. The introduction of modern education, while creating opportunities, also generated tensions between traditional Islamic learning and secular British curricula. (Irene, 2010, pp. 51-54)

Colonial census operations beginning in the early 20th century documented Meitei Pangal population growth but also formalised religious categories that had previously been more fluid. This bureaucratic categorisation, while necessary for administrative purposes, contributed to more rigid community boundaries and potentially reduced inter-community mobility and intermarriage that had characterised earlier periods.

2.7. POST-INDEPENDENCE IDENTITY FORMATION

Independent India's secular constitutional framework provided new opportunities for minority communities while also creating fresh challenges around identity assertion and political representation. For Meitei Pangal communities, this period witnessed increased political consciousness, educational aspirations, and demands for recognition of their distinct cultural contributions to Manipuri society.

The community's unique position as Muslims who spoke Meiteilon as their mother tongue and participated fully in Meitei cultural practices while maintaining Islamic religious identity created both advantages and complications in post-independence India. Unlike Muslim communities elsewhere that often maintained separate linguistic and cultural

identities, Meitei Pangal integration into Manipuri society was so complete that their primary ethnic identification remained Meitei, with Islam representing religious rather than ethnic distinction.

This historical trajectory of integration, adaptation, and identity formation provides crucial context for understanding contemporary educational patterns among Meitei Pangal women. Their current challenges cannot be attributed to cultural isolation or resistance to modern education but rather reflect the complex interplay of economic constraints, gender norms, and minority status within contemporary Indian society.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of demographic and educational trends with qualitative exploration of lived experiences and aspirations among Meitei Pangal women. The research design draws upon multiple data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of educational participation patterns and underlying barriers.

3.1. QUANTITATIVE DATA SOURCES

Census and Survey Data: Primary quantitative analysis utilises decennial census data from 1951-2011 obtained from the Office of the Registrar General, India, focusing on literacy rates, educational attainment, and demographic trends disaggregated by gender and religious community. The 2004 Socio-Economic Survey of Meitei Pangal, conducted by the Government of Manipur, provides detailed community-specific data on education, occupation, and economic status.

Institutional Enrollment Records: Higher education participation patterns are analysed using enrollment data from Manipur University's College Development Council spanning 2015-2020. This dataset includes gender-disaggregated enrollment figures for undergraduate (B.A., B.Sc., B.Com.) and postgraduate (M.A., M.Sc., M.Com.) programs, enabling examination of disciplinary preferences and participation trends over time.

Administrative Records: District-level population distribution data from the 2004 survey illuminates spatial concentration patterns and their relationship to educational infrastructure access. This geographic analysis helps identify areas of the highest Meitei Pangal concentration and corresponding educational facility availability.

3.2. QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Focus Group Discussions: The primary qualitative component comprised focus group discussions conducted across five colleges in Thoubal and two universities in Manipur since November 2022. This qualitative research involved 600 Muslim girls enrolled in arts and science courses at universities and colleges. Participants were from Thoubal District, with an income bracket of Rs. 70,000 to Rs. 100,000 and an age range of 18 to 35 years. Among the 600 respondents, some were married, while others were unmarried or divorced. Data were gathered through focused group interviews and discussions. The FGDs were semi-structured and included questions regarding access to college and university, family dynamics, cultural and religious norms, financial difficulties, and assistance from organisations. All discussions were documented, and thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes that reflected shared experiences.

Interview Protocol: Semi-structured focus groups explored five key themes: (1) perceived value of higher education; (2) financial constraints and their impact on educational choices; (3) safety concerns and mobility restrictions; (4) gender bias and social control mechanisms within families and communities; and (5) role of religious conservatism in shaping educational attitudes. Each session lasted approximately 80 minutes, allowing detailed exploration of participant narratives and experiences.

3.3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employs intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989) to examine how multiple forms of disadvantage (gender, religious minority status, class position, and geographic location) interact to shape educational outcomes. This framework enables an understanding of how seemingly separate barriers compound to create unique patterns of marginalisation for Meitei Pangal women.

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics, trend analysis, and comparative assessments examine enrollment patterns, literacy rates, and demographic changes over time. Gender parity indices and participation ratios provide standardised measures for comparing Meitei Pangal educational outcomes with state and national averages.

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis of focus group transcripts identifies recurring patterns, narratives, and explanatory frameworks used by participants to understand their educational experiences. Particular attention is paid to how participants navigate competing demands, family expectations, and personal aspirations within constrained circumstances.

4. LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Data Limitations: The study's scope is constrained by the limited availability of longitudinal educational data specifically disaggregated for the Meitei Pangal community. Most administrative datasets aggregate Muslims as a single category, obscuring intra-community variations. Additionally, the qualitative component focuses on women already engaged with higher education, potentially missing perspectives of those who never entered the higher education system.

Ethical Protocols: All participants provided informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Given the sensitive nature of discussions around family dynamics, religious identity, and gender relations, particular care was taken to create safe spaces for open dialogue while respecting cultural norms and participant comfort levels.

Positionality: The research team's position as academic researchers required ongoing reflection on power dynamics, cultural sensitivity, and the potential for research to either reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes about Muslim women's education. Regular debriefing sessions and participant feedback mechanisms helped address these concerns throughout the data collection process.

This methodological approach enables triangulation of findings across data sources while maintaining sensitivity to the complex, intersectional nature of Meitei Pangal women's educational experiences. The combination of quantitative trends and qualitative narratives provides a comprehensive understanding of both structural patterns and individual agency within constraint.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Trends and Educational Participation Patterns

The analysis of six decades of census data reveals a complex picture of Meitei Pangal demographic growth accompanied by persistent educational disadvantage. Between 1951 and 2011, the Muslim population in Manipur increased from 37,197 to 239,836, representing consistent growth rates that slightly outpaced overall state population expansion. However, this demographic vitality has not translated into proportional educational advancement.

Literacy data from the 2004 Socio-Economic Survey demonstrates substantial gaps between Meitei Pangal and state-wide rates. Muslim male literacy (45%) lagged 35.3 percentage points behind the state male average (80.3%), while Muslim female literacy (41.6%) trailed the state female average (60.5%) by 18.9 percentage points. These disparities persist across rural and urban contexts, though the gaps narrow slightly in urban areas where Muslim male literacy reaches 82.2% compared to 88.7% for the state average.

The gendered dimension of these disparities reveals critical patterns. While the state-wide gender gap in literacy was 19.8 percentage points in 2001, declining to 13.3 points by 2011, the Muslim community exhibits a smaller but more persistent gap. Among Muslims, the male-female literacy difference was only 3.4 percentage points in 2004, suggesting that gender inequality, while present, operates differently within this community compared to the broader population.

5.1. GEOGRAPHIC CONCENTRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL ACCESS

District-level analysis illuminates how spatial concentration patterns influence educational opportunities. The Meitei Pangal population is heavily concentrated in Thoubal (22.75% of the district population) and Imphal East (18.06%), with minimal presence in hill districts like Ukhrul, Senapati, and Tamenglong. This geographic clustering creates both advantages and disadvantages for educational access.

Concentration in valley districts provides proximity to higher education institutions, with Manipur University and affiliated colleges primarily located in the Imphal area. However, this clustering also limits exposure to diverse educational environments and may reinforce social insularity. The absence of Meitei Pangal populations in hill districts reflects historical settlement patterns but also suggests limited geographic mobility and potentially restricted access to specialised educational programs or institutions located outside traditional settlement areas.

5.2. HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLLMENT TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Analysis of Manipur University enrollment data (2015-2020) reveals fluctuating but generally positive trends in Meitei Pangal women's higher education participation. Undergraduate enrollment shows volatility, ranging from 511 students in 2015-16 to a peak of 631 in 2019-20, with significant year-over-year changes including a 21.72% increase in 2016-17 followed by declining enrollments in subsequent years.

Disciplinary preferences demonstrate intense concentration in arts and science streams, with no recorded enrollment in commerce programs throughout the study period. Arts programs consistently attracted more students (1,471 total over five years) compared to science programs (1,431 total), possibly reflecting career perceptions, family expectations, or preparatory education quality. The absence of commerce enrollment may indicate limited exposure to business and professional career pathways or cultural preferences for traditional academic disciplines.

Postgraduate enrollment remains extremely low, with only 313 total enrollments across five years. The dramatic increase from 20 students in 2015-16 to 39 in 2019-20 suggests growing aspirations for advanced education, but absolute numbers remain minimal relative to the community's size and undergraduate completion rates. This pattern indicates significant attrition between undergraduate and postgraduate levels, requiring investigation of intervening factors.

5.3. INTERSECTIONAL BARRIERS: FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS AND ECONOMIC MARGINALISATION

Focus group discussions reveal how economic hardship functions as the primary constraint on educational aspirations. Participants consistently identified financial insecurity as limiting not only access to higher education but also educational quality and subject choice. One participant from Seelampur articulated this challenge: "I want to study further because if you do not have a higher education, I mean a Master's degree, then you cannot get a good job. So, I have to do my graduation first, then post-graduation, but I am not sure whether I will be able to."

The economic barriers operate through multiple mechanisms. Direct costs, including tuition fees, examination charges, and learning materials, create immediate obstacles, particularly for families dependent on informal sector employment. Opportunity costs represent additional challenges, as families may require daughters' economic contributions rather than continued educational investment. The prevalence of private examination enrollment reflects both financial constraints and geographic limitations, as regular enrollment requires consistent attendance and associated expenses.

Economic marginalisation intersects with spatial segregation to compound educational disadvantages. Meitei Pangal concentration in specific localities often correlates with lower-income neighbourhoods lacking educational infrastructure. Poor housing conditions limit study environments, as one participant noted: "In our bedroom, there is no window, and it's very dark; I can't even study inside the room. There is no separate place for me where I can study."

5.4. GENDER-BASED SOCIAL CONTROL AND FAMILY DYNAMICS

The research reveals complex gender dynamics within Meitei Pangal families that both support and constrain women's educational aspirations. Contrary to stereotypical assumptions about Islamic conservatism, participants emphasised strong family support for education, particularly from fathers. However, this support operates within gendered frameworks that prioritise male education and impose behavioural restrictions on women.

Social control mechanisms include family surveillance, community monitoring, and marriage-related pressures. Participants described how relatives and neighbours actively discourage higher education for young women, fearing it

may make them "outspoken" or expose them to inappropriate influences. One participant shared: "My neighbours see me on the road and immediately complain to my parents. When I reached home, my parents asked me where I had gone."

The marriage market creates additional pressures, as participants noted expectations that women should be less educated than their husbands. This dynamic particularly affects Muslim families where men's educational levels may be constrained by discrimination and limited employment opportunities, creating a ceiling effect on women's academic aspirations. The fear of producing "unmarriageable" daughters influences family decisions about educational investment.

5.5. SAFETY, MOBILITY, AND PUBLIC SPACE ACCESS

Concerns regarding safety in urban areas significantly hinder women's participation in higher education. Participants repeatedly pointed out that harassment and security risks limit their ability to travel and engage in educational activities. The intersection of gender, minority status, and socio-economic position contributes to specific vulnerabilities in public urban spaces. A participant from Thoubal stated, "I can't definitively say whether it's safe or not for girls to walk alone on the street. I always prefer going out with friends or cousins; otherwise, I feel frightened," emphasising the daily stress related to harassment while commuting to school. Another participant mentioned, "My parents won't let me leave the house after dark, even if I need to study for an exam or work on a project. They always warn me that something might happen on the way, so it's safer to stay home." Such parental worries about their daughters' safety often led to limitations on their mobility and, in some instances, a halt to their education. One respondent explained, "My mother says, 'If you have to go somewhere for college, let me know beforehand. If you go alone, someone might tease or follow you. It's better to go in a group.'" The presence of Meitei Pangal families in certain neighbourhoods may offer a sense of community security. Still, participants noted that this also limits their exposure to various social and educational settings. As one student articulated, "We are advised not to go far from our neighbourhood because everyone here is familiar with one another. My family believes this is safe, but sometimes I wish I could attend a better college outside." These family discussions about safety and aspirations highlight a complex decision-making process, balancing educational goals with protective instincts. "My parents genuinely want me to complete my studies," shared another participant, "but if any reports of incidents occur in the city, they quickly urge me to refrain from going out for a few days." Although families generally support education in theory, persistent fears regarding safety often lead to restrictions that impact the quality or continuity of educational pursuits. This situation reflects larger issues of urban governance rather than limitations specific to the community, yet it is minority women who bear the brunt of these educational barriers.

5.6. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND EDUCATIONAL ATTITUDES

Contrary to popular narratives attributing Muslim educational backwardness to religious conservatism, this study finds no evidence that Islamic beliefs or practices inherently oppose women's education. Participants universally emphasised the importance of education and received family support for their educational aspirations. As one young woman stated plainly, "My parents never stopped me from studying because of religion. They always say, 'Islam tells us to learn, it does not tell us to sit at home.'" Religious leaders and community institutions were not identified as barriers to educational participation.

Many participants actively challenged the stereotype that religious beliefs restrict their career choices. "If there was any rule in Islam stopping girls from working, how come my aunt is a teacher and my cousin is in police service?" one participant asked during a group discussion, underlining that women from the Pangal community can be found in respected public roles. Another respondent noted with pride, "In our locality, so many girls are teachers. We even have women who joined the police. Nobody tells them they are against religion; in fact, everyone respects them."

The absence of religious opposition to education aligns with broader Islamic traditions that emphasise learning as a religious obligation. However, participants did mention that social attitudes sometimes act as indirect constraints, not religious doctrines. "People gossip if a girl talks with boys in college. They say it's not our culture, it's not about religion," explained one student, highlighting how communal expectations, rather than religious tenets, impose limits on mobility and self-expression.

The conflation of cultural and religious factors in popular discourse obscures the actual determinants of educational outcomes. Economic constraints, spatial segregation, and gender-based restrictions represent structural barriers that

could affect any similarly positioned community regardless of religious identity. "Society makes it difficult sometimes, not our religion," summarised one participant, "and that is what needs to change if more girls are to study further."

5.7. ASPIRATIONS, AGENCY, AND RESISTANCE STRATEGIES

Despite facing social anxieties over safety and mobility, cultural restrictions on behaviour, and persistent financial obstacles, Meitei Pangal women display notable agency in pursuing educational aspirations (see "Safety, Mobility, and Public Space Access"; "Religious Identity and Educational Attitudes"). Participants repeatedly articulated clear reasons for seeking higher education, viewing it as essential for economic independence, greater social mobility, and personal fulfilment. As one young woman explained, "If I am educated, I can stand on my own feet. Today, so many of us want to be teachers or join the police. We know it gives us respect and security."

Their determination is evident in their persistence in seeking higher education through private enrollment, despite social scrutiny and economic limitations. "Even when it's difficult to pay fees, I told my parents: 'If you help me just one more year, I will show you results,'" one participant shared, highlighting how academic achievement becomes a negotiation tool to justify continued investment.

To resist constraints, participants described a range of strategies in negotiating with family members, building trust through academic success, and leaning on institutional or peer support networks. One respondent noted, "When my relatives said I shouldn't study after marriage, my father told them, 'Let her finish. She will bring a good name to the family.'" Success at college often enhanced women's social standing, providing positive feedback that encouraged both individual persistence and broader acceptance within their communities.

Notably, education was widely viewed as "insurance" against marital vulnerability and economic adversity. Several participants described education not only as a path to employment, but as protection: "My mother always says, 'Nobody can predict life. If you are educated and anything happens, you won't be helpless.'" This realistic approach to the gender-based risks of contemporary society motivates Meitei Pangal women to persist in their educational pursuits, harnessing agency and strategic resistance to overcome obstacles that are socially, not religiously, imposed.

6. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the educational marginalisation of Meitei Pangal women in Manipur results from complex intersections of economic constraints, patriarchal social structures, and minority status rather than religious conservatism or cultural opposition to learning. While the community demonstrates consistent demographic growth and strong educational aspirations, structural barriers significantly limit higher education access and completion.

Financial hardship emerges as the most critical constraint, operating through direct costs, opportunity costs, and quality compromises that accumulate across educational stages. The concentration of Meitei Pangal populations in specific districts creates both community solidarity and spatial limitations that influence educational opportunities. Gender-based social control mechanisms, while not unique to this community, interact with minority status and economic marginalisation to create particular challenges for women's educational mobility.

The findings challenge stereotypical narratives that attribute Muslim educational backwardness to religious factors, instead highlighting how structural inequalities and intersectional disadvantages shape educational outcomes. The strong educational aspirations expressed by participants, combined with family support and community engagement, suggest significant potential for improvement through targeted policy interventions.

Key policy recommendations include: expanding financial aid programs specifically targeting minority women in higher education; improving transportation and safety infrastructure to facilitate educational mobility; developing community-based support networks that address cultural concerns while promoting educational advancement; and creating employment pathways that demonstrate the value of women's higher education to families and communities.

Future research should examine the effectiveness of existing minority welfare schemes in addressing intersectional disadvantages, analyse successful educational mobility cases to identify enabling factors, and explore comparative experiences of minority women's education across different northeastern states. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing inclusive educational policies that address the complex realities of India's diverse population.

The Meitei Pangal case demonstrates how minority women's educational experiences cannot be understood through single-factor explanations but require careful attention to how multiple forms of disadvantage interact to create unique patterns of constraint and opportunity. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts across economic, social, and educational domains that recognise both structural barriers and individual agency in shaping educational outcomes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in the conduct of this research or preparation of this manuscript. This study was conducted independently without funding from organisations that might have financial or political interests in the research outcomes.

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