

Interrogating the Potential of Poumai and Mao Women's Collectives from the Context of Aenon Village, Imphal

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ABSTRACT

Imphal, the capital city of Manipur in India's North Eastern Region (NER) exhibits a vibrant multitude of ethnic diversities, tradition and cosmopolitanism, religions, languages, among others. Apart from the Meiteis who constitute the largest demographic group in the city, the various tribes under the Nagas and Kuki--Zo groups (until the Manipur Conflict of 2023) also contribute to the tapestry of the mix of populace of the city. The present paper examines the contribution of women's collectives of Poumai and Mao tribes residing in Imphal in socio-economic affairs of their communities. The study also attempts to draw a comparative analysis of Mao and Poumai women's collectives with those of Meitei women like the *Meira Paibis*. Based on the findings that pertain to the abysmal underutilization of Mao and Poumai women's collectives in areas like financial cooperatives and economic upliftment/empowerment and lower level of political participation despite a moderately robust social participation, the paper finally infers on the implication on social work professionals and suggests ways to define scope of their intervention in materializing the potential of such women's collectives in community development and social transformation.

Keywords: Mao, Poumai, women's collectives, Imphal, community development

Introduction

The Poumai and Mao are among the major Naga tribes of Manipur residing primarily in Senapati District of the state. They are also considered brother-tribes in popular folklore and local narratives and are collectively called either *Shiipfomei* (in Mao dialect) or *Shepoumai* (in Poumai dialect). Both their dialects are generally agreed to be mutually intelligible though huge variations existing among Poumai villages remarkably disrupt that

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flow of intelligibility; and their traditional costumes, food habits, folk cultures, mores and norms display similar attributes. With a population of almost 200,000, the Poumais are demographically more dominant than the Maos and also extend their circles of settlement to Nagaland (in Razeba range of Phek District) where they are grouped under the Chakhesang tribe. Interestingly, the Poumai tribe was erroneously grouped as one with the Mao tribe owing to the translation and interpretation dilemma between the Poumai informants and the British administration. It was only in 2002 that the Poumai tribe became officially recognized as a separate tribe as per the Constitution of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Amendment) Act 2002 under the Government of India (Leo, 2017). Today, both the tribes maintain their own distinct identity and territorial demarcation although both still share similar attributes and continue to retain certain historical ties, inter-marriage bond, and in Imphal, often share space of habitation and social affairs. For example, there are several fellowships and associations that foster Mao-Poumai affinity such as Mao-Poumai Baptist Church in Langol, Imphal. In Imphal's major Poumai enclaves, the ethnic or tribal compositions usually encompass the significant presence of Mao households. More than ghettoization, this could be due to the urge to foster closer cultural ties, social relationship and inter-tribal amity as minorities from faraway villages trying to settle in a new place aftermath the migration of white collar service groups and student communities from the hill villages to Imphal Valley for want of better education and job opportunities in the state capital city, followed by those from other sectors too. In Aenon Village which is primarily a Poumai enclave along a lush foothill range in Imphal's outskirts, the earliest families to purchase land and settle would buy more plots and sell off to their relatives, fellow villagers and friends and in course of time, the settlement would fully grow and imbibe a distinct ethnic composition. It is also not unusual for Poumai and Mao people to intermarry between the two tribes and Imphal's Poumai enclaves like Aenon Village thus comprise households from both Poumai and Mao tribes. For the present study, I'm considering Aenon Village in order to examine the contribution and role of women's collective in their community affairs by understanding the activities of women's society and groups existing in the enclave. Aenon Village comes under Luwangsangbam Gram Panchayat (GP) in Imphal East District nestled between Langol Hills and lush paddy fields adjacent to National Highway (NH) 2. Today, Aenon Village has grown to become an affluent colony displaying more fervour of cosmopolitanism with a handful of households belonging to tribes and communities other than Poumai and Mao such as Tangkhul, Maram, Meitei, Rongmei, Anal, etc. Christianity is the major religion being followed and the infusion of cultural landscapes in the recent lustrum displays influence of globalization and consumerism

amidst the mushrooming of western styled cafés, leisure parks, recreation zones, contemporary architecture among several houses, etc.

Thus, as Poumai and Mao settlers in the Valley create their own microcosm of living space along with changing landscapes and diverse ethnic infusion, women of the tribes also extend their role beyond their homes and engage actively in their daily community affairs and activities. The present paper thus seeks to delve deeper into the functioning of women's collectives from the perspective of Aenon Village and understands the potential of their role and contribution in community development. With this, I could specifically enumerate the problem statement, objectives and rationale of the study as being described below.

Nature and Scope of the Problem Statement

While ample research has been done and literature documented on women's collectives in India including those of Meitei women, mainstream scholarship certainly needs inclusion of the case of less understood indigenous experiences and tribal narratives like those of Mao and Poumai. While India's NER has garnered unique interests to scholars and researchers endeavoured to investigate more on such cases like Meghalaya's predominant matriarchal societies, Manipur's Meira Paibis, women's groups in peace mediation like Naga Mothers Association, *Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl* (MHIP), Assam's Asom Mahila Samiti, among others; so far, not much has been documented about the case of Poumai and Mao women's collectives despite numerous presence of active women's groups like the existence of women's society in most colonies and villages, religion based fellowships like Poumai Catholic Women's Association, groups like *Poumai Naga Naotumai Me*, Mao Naga Women's Welfare Association, etc. However, for the present paper, the scope of the study is limited to women's collectives from Aenon Village, Imphal. Such women's groups reflect the tribal ethos of trying to bring with themselves the remnant of their social norms existing in their villages to new towns and cities. The various multifaceted roles in various socio-economic and political affairs are also being described in the next sub section viz. objectives.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of the present study is to understand the potential of Poumai and Mao women's collectives in the socio-economic and political milieu of their community from the context of women's society and collectives in Aenon Village, Imphal. Accordingly, the following points can be considered for the study:

- The study seeks to examine the functioning of Poumai and Mao women's groups in Aenon Village and if they are actively contributing

in economic and social affairs of their community and in political participation

- The study also attempts to draw a comparative analysis with the Meitei counterparts like the Meira Paibis which refer to the widely known network of Meitei women's groups
- Finally, I position my research endeavour to trace the implication for social work practitioners and academicians in critically examining the socio-cultural dynamics of Mao and Poumai women's society and appraise their collectives' potential in community rebuilding and development.

Rationale of the Study

Alongside the nuances surrounding migration, inter-tribal bonding and ties, cultural assimilation and inter-tribal/ethnic shared and borrowed norms, minority issues, etc., the present study tries to redefine women's space of articulation in the context of the Mao and Poumai tribes. I have done and reviewed several research works on Meitei women and thus, it is also equally imperative to traverse the corollary of such studies for other groups like the Mao and Poumai tribes. Ultimately, the present study has been conceptualized with the rationale towards mainstreaming the experiences of Mao and Poumai people, specifically women in contemporary academic literature. Such an incorporation must/can open up new avenues for discourse and critique on the case of Mao and Poumai women's collectives as they strive to imbibe their strength of resilience and readapt their identity formation in a different cultural setting as they negotiate their role through the intersection of gender, tribe, religion, region, class, etc. Encompassing such tribal experiences can also provide pathways for social work researchers to rediscover, promote and re-adopt egalitarian norms of tribal people particularly in the context of gender and redefine it as a model for the rest of the country in redesigning certain women empowerment strategies as distinguished from neoliberal market based model of empowerment.

Review of Literature

I'm primarily interested in gathering insights on the interplay of tribal ethos and women's space of articulation in tribal societies. Several studies have demonstrated that tribal societies in the context of India displays comparatively more egalitarian fervour and that women's position enjoy a certain level of relaxation from the rigid hierarchical order of higher castes groups. Conversely, others suggest for more attention to be redirected to tribal women's marginalization, noting that tribal women tend to be more disadvantaged in education and political participation compared to non-

tribal women. When it comes to Poumai and Mao tribes, the review shall include the cultural legacy of women's collectives, political discourse of their collectives, maternal politics as related to Mao and Poumai women's groups, and so forth. Finally, the review strives to encompass policy implications and the scope of social work in mainstreaming Mao and Poumai women's experiences and in defining the schema for empowerment and social transformation. Accordingly, the review for the present paper includes the following themes.

Tribal Egalitarianism and Women's Collectives

It is generally agreed among many scholars that tribal societies display greater fervour in inculcating the ethos of collectivism, egalitarianism and liberty. So, on the question of whether such a social foundation favours for more space of articulation for women's collectives, I could mention the work of Ghosh and Chaudhuri (2024) based on various engagements carried out with Adivasi women in India by an NGO called Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN). Based on PRADAN's intervention, the authors engaged with the inter-relationship between indigeneity and gender dynamic, and concurred that Adivasi women enjoy fairly better position than their non-Adivasi counterparts citing absence of dowry-related violence, absence of *purdah* system, higher mobility, less gender violence, etc. despite lower land ownership; this connotes to restructuring the question on gender in appraising the role of women's collectives like SHGs formation in such tribal societies. However, this perspective was countered by the reading from Gupta (2016) who shed light on the instances of oppression and sexual harassment faced by Santhal tribal women within their own so-called liberal tribal societies and by those who are non-tribal. I could also mention the review of Mal and Saikia's (2024) comparative research between matrilineal and patrilineal tribal societies from Meghalaya and Assam in India's NER; though variations exist among them in various attributes of gender empowerment, the important inference is that women from both societies were found to be marginalized when it comes to social independence. In a related tone, Jajo (2022)'s study on the Tangkhul Naga tribe emphasized on soliciting structural approach in understanding tribal societies that would reveal the similar level of social stratification existing among non-tribal mainstream societies and hence the need to critically appraise the role of women amidst the traditional elites of such tribes.

Poumai Society, Women, Customary Practices and Collectives

To start with, the reviews for this sub section includes the reading from Trumy (2018) who dealt with the varying position of women in a patriarchal society of Poumai tribe from giving case examples of traditional

Poumai rites, social norms and festivals like *Lounih* that depict evidences of women's respectable position in the society and women taking important economic roles in their communities to subordinate position of women in various spheres of life including divorce, inheritance, social affairs, political participation and leadership, etc. Meanwhile, Stephen (2021) offered a more skeptical examination of traditional customary laws and practices of Poumai tribal society that denote many areas of gender bias and restrictions for women despite the observation that women in India's NER enjoy higher status when compared to those in the rest of the country. Despite this, the insights from Weapon (2020) pertains to some evidence of Poumai women's resilience and collectives in their commendable role as peace maker and mediator during the bygone era's practice of head hunting culture and violent wars among villages. Finally, I could reiterate a comprehensive study done by Thomas and Stephen (2017) on the complex dynamics of self-governance among the people of Poumai tribe that also encompass multiple critical arenas of women's marginalized position in various social spheres and absence of women in local governance despite the provision of reservation for women in village councils as per Manipur Hill Village Authority Act, 1956.

Women's collectives and Policy implications; linkages with social work praxis

Policies for empowerment of tribal women invariably encompasses the role of multiple stakeholders including NGOs and civil society. It is pertinent here to examine the role of social work practitioners as facilitators or mediators in offering expertise from grassroots level to policy table in uplifting the rights and position of women within tribal communities and beyond by enabling women's collectives to play an active role in promoting social transformation and gender parity. Sharma's (2024) work could be relevant here that focussed on the multifaceted contribution of social workers in marginalized areas and groups in India including tribal communities. Besra and Sarangi's (2024) work further gives more insights as they attempt to define the role of civil society and NGOs in empowering tribal women at economic, social and political fronts. To substantiate, I referred to Kabeer who discussed the three themes of women empowerment viz. "Resource, agency and achievement" (p. 30). Furthermore, Prabhakaran (2011) dealt with newer perspectives of critical social work practice where he stressed on the approach of bottom-up strategy as he explained praxis social work as a method that tries to make sense of invoking the participation of both the social workers and the clientele.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is descriptive in nature and adopts qualitative methods, incorporating elements of Lefebvre's (1974/1991) concept of space. In examining Poumai and Mao women's collectives, it is pertinent to examine their concept of living space through the lens of everyday social realities and how women attempt to carve their niche within. For the study, I employed semi-structured interview and focus group discussion. Aenon Village which is predominantly a Poumai locality in Imphal with a sizeable proportion of Mao residents had been handpicked for the study and data collection was carried out there with women's society of the colony. Obviously, purposive sampling was considered to obtain study specific information from Poumai and Mao women who are members of women's society in their locale. Sample size for the same was kept at 20.

For data analysis, I incorporated thematic analysis to present the qualitative data topically following the process of coding, theme categorization and conceptualization (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Naeem et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

For the findings, I'm particularly interested in the multifaceted roles played by Poumai and Mao Women's groups from the perspective of Aenon Village. Women's collectives in this locale reflect ethno-religious affiliation. For example, the majority of the residents here adhere to the Baptist denomination under Christianity and the main Baptist church has their own women's group. Similarly, Catholic adherents also have their own women's group. These women's collectives from Aenon Village include the following:

Table 1 : List of Women's Groups in Aenon Village, Imphal

Aenon Village Women's Group	majority of members are Poumai and Mao women followed by Tangkhul and other ethnic groups
Aenon Village Baptist Church Women's Group	Membership based on Church affiliation (Poumai members majority followed by Mao)
Mt. Carmel Women's Society	Members consist of Catholic women from Aenon Village and neighbouring colonies (reflects ethnic diversities although majority are of Poumai and Mao tribes from Aenon Village followed by Tangkhul and other ethnic groups)

The following sub sections shall describe the various activities of these women's groups:

Participation in Economic Affairs

While these women's groups occasionally make monetary contributions for the observance of festivals like Christmas or to organise all-women's

sightseeing trips, there were no active SHGs or similar financial cooperatives among the groups. For the Catholic women's group, members make weekly contributions for fundraising, but these are in the form of non-monetary contributions. For example, members would each contribute one kilogram of rice and then sell the combined quantity at a subsidised rate to buyers from within the church or outside. The cash obtained from this transaction would then be added to the total corpus fund of the women's group and be kept for future activities like organising feasts during festivals like Christmas. The want of SHGs or long-term financial cooperative schemes among the women's groups thus warrants the need for intervention from NGOs and social workers to mobilise the women and optimise the potential of their collectives in enabling economic empowerment and enterprises through financial awareness and participation.

At the individual level, most women members participate in *Marup* which is an informal financial cooperative associated with Meitei people. Having said so, the existing women's groups have not deployed any such financial credit/saving and investment schemes vis-à-vis their collective platforms.

Social Action and Participation

Members of Aenon Village women's groups occasionally become involved in matters related to their social issues. For instance, if there is any case of disturbance in the ambience of the locality because of major altercations or by someone under the influence of alcoholism, women members would intervene right on the spot or hold meetings with male leaders and youth members of their colony. All the women's groups have their own active WhatsApp groups where members coordinate with each other on these issues. During the Manipur Conflict of 2023, women members of these groups also coordinated together to ensure the safeguarding of peace in their locale. **Table 2** also illustrates the involvement of women's groups in comparison with the Meitei groups viz. Meira Paibi groups.

Table 2 *Comparison of Aenon Village Women's Groups with Meira Paibi Groups*

Meira Paibi Groups	Aenon Village Women's Groups
Regular vigilante activities and night patrolling	No frequent such activities
<i>Nisha Bani</i> (anti-narcotic and anti-alcoholism movement)	No such active endeavours in organized setting although they are arbitrarily involved in resolving issues from time to time caused by issues like alcoholism in their locale

Activism and participation in protests and agitations	No major participation
Pressure groups in major political issues	Occasional meeting and interactions with local MLA but no role as pressure groups as such

Political Participation and Representation

Aenon Village, despite displaying affluent urban cosmopolitan semblance, comes under Luwangsangbam GP. Despite provision of women's reservation in GP seats, none of the women members have contested for the seats and political awareness among most of the members was found to be abysmally low. All the important leadership positions of their colony are also taken up male members.

Discussion

Despite the existence of women's groups in their locale, the findings suggest that Poumai and Mao women's collectives in the context of Imphal's Aenon Village remain underperformed and underutilized given the potential of such collectives in championing economic upliftment and social empowerment and political consciousness of women. Following this, I put forth the important points of discussion below:

Redefining the Value and Potential of Women's Collectives in the Context of Aenon Village

Kumar et al. (2021) recognized the importance of women's groups as social and financial institutions in South Asia. True to this, several SHG groups in India and even informal groups like Marup in Manipur have shown tremendous potential in enabling transformative action based goal setting and augmentation by women members. In the context of Aenon Village women's groups, while much of their potential values remain underutilized, members displaying interplay of mutual trust, reciprocity, unspoken norms and projection of social capital in the course of converging together at their collective platform must be taken into consideration to explore and devise ways for meaningful transformation. Based on the study of Meitei women's collectives, Ningthoujam (2018) inferred that the socio-cultural foundation of such collectives in producing collective solidarity promotes civic actions and social reformation; this has tremendous potentials that translate to ways of achieving gender power sharing and governance. This must imply soliciting the role of social workers in strategizing action based programmes for enabling transformation of such women's collectives.

Implications for Social Work Praxis

Women's collectives in the case of Aenon Village could emerge as important social and financial institutions if the functioning and their relevance could be reestablished in a manner that aligns with emancipatory values embedded in most arenas of social work praxis. A comprehensive study done by Krishna et al. (2024) emphasized the benefit of transforming women's collectives through the introduction of platforms like SHGs that not only promote economic upliftment but also expand to addressing issues like domestic violence, reproductive health, legal rights, education, etc.; however, the challenges posed by factors like socio-cultural barriers are also prominent. Social workers can/must rethink their principles, ethos and methods to address these challenges while strategizing this kind of intervention programmes for women's collectives like those of Aenon Village. Social workers must deploy SHG methods, cooperative models, and grassroots mobilizations for such collectives to not only enable economic empowerment but nurture active social and political consciousness. Women's collectives must be reconditioned to exemplify bottom-up strategies and create platforms for participatory approaches, community organizing and rights-based interventions. Social workers' engagement with women's collectives must serve the objective of facilitating positive transformation in mainstreaming marginalized voices and ensuring gender-just community development.

Practical Implications

There can be several practical implications for the problem statement defined in the present study. Based on the findings, I can suggest the following practical implications:

- More ample action research needs to be carried out to devise newer strategies and policy based recommendations for women's collectives of Aenon Village in consultation with local civil society groups, NGOs, academicians, community leaders, local and state government functionaries, etc.
- I, as a researcher, have also put forth my suggestions to the research participants i.e. the women members of the different collectives of Aenon Village in verbal medium as well as written documents to expand the scope of their functions and explore potential of growth by establishing meaningful initiatives like SHGs.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study could have included other set of respondents apart from women members of different women groups from Aenon Village like male

leaders and members of their locale, youth members, local MLA, and so forth, however due to paucity of time and constraint of frequent travelling from the researcher's current location to the field, this could not have been addressed duly. For the future research directions, these points can be taken up. In addition to this, a more robust comparative research between Aenon Village women's groups and Poumai and Mao women's groups of other Poumai enclaves in Imphal like Sangakpham Poumai Colony could be taken up. Besides, such comparisons can be carried out more meticulously with Meitei women's groups from Imphal as a future scope of research.

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