

# PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL DOLL SELLERS OF IMA MARKET: A CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study illustrates the relationship between ongoing pandemic crisis and the economic impact on a small section of women of Ima market, Manipur, whose livelihood depends on making and selling of traditional dolls of the Meiteis, known as *laiphadibi*. In many significant ways, *laiphadibi* is also a socio-cultural element of Meitei society. In this particular study, the participants are all women as the *laiphadibi* making, selling, and playing is culturally conditioned as roles of women in Meitei society since antiquities. This case study is based on unstructured interviews and conversation analysis of four women who were engaged in traditional doll business in Ima Market before COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that the shutdown of Ima Market for more than seven months due to pandemic crisis-related lockdown adversely affected their livelihood. The art of *laiphadibi* making is already on the verge of losing as only a small section of women engages in this business in present-day Meitei society, and Ima Market is their primary point of business. Furthermore, the pandemic ensued lockdown paused their livelihood as they cannot sell *laiphadibis* in conventional shops as dolls are not included as essential items according to the guidelines of the Government. Therefore, at this critical juncture, it is crucial to analyse the discourses on the future of this socially and culturally significant artefact and the livelihood of those women engaged in this business.

**Keywords:** *Ima Market; Laiphadibi; Lockdown; Pandemic; Traditional-Doll; Women*

## INTRODUCTION

Various economic sectors around the globe are experiencing the massive impact of ongoing COVID-19 outbreak in their business. One of the severely affected sections of this current global economic crisis is those engaged in small scale business and trade. According to government guidelines, most of the small scale sectors falls under the category of non-essential items. Furthermore, the livelihood of this small section of the economic group is highly dependent on the daily earning from the business from a small number of customers. High reduction in demand, disruption in supply, shortage of raw materials and difficulty in transportation are the major issues faced by them (Statista Research Department, 2020).

The study attempts to highlight the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on a section of small scale business group whose livelihood is exclusively dependent on the selling of traditional dolls commonly known as *laiphadibi*. *Laiphadibi* is a traditional doll of the Meiteis (Meiteis are an ethnic community of Manipur, a North-eastern state of India. They are dominant population of Manipur and dwellers of valley region) (COVIDIndia.org, 2020). In many significant ways,

*laiphadibi* is also a socio-cultural folk element of the Meitei society. The literal meaning of *laiphadibi* in *Meiteilon* (*Meiteilon* is the language of the Meiteis, also considered as the official language of Manipur. This language fall under the Tibeto-Burman language family) is “a doll made from shabby clothes”. It comprises of three words- *lai* means deity, *phadi* means shabby clothes, and *bi* indicates a woman in *Meitei* society. The business of *laiphadibi* is traditionally handled by all women, since making and selling of this folk object is mainly conditioned as women’s role in Meitie culture.

Furthermore, *laiphadibi* as a plaything is culturally expected to be used only by the girls. Hence, traditional dolls are always addressed as eta *laiphadibi* by the person who owns them. Here eta refers to female friends in *Meiteilon*. Apart from using *laiphadibi* as a plaything, this folk object is also used in many ceremonial rituals by magico-religious functionaries of the Meitei society (Functions of *laiphadibi* are also visible in death ceremony, saroi-*ngaroi khangba*, in making of *satra* etc). Main raw materials used for making *laiphadibi* are dry straw, pieces of clothes, papers (mostly old newspapers) and threads. The

primary trading point of selling this folk object is the Ima market, situated in the heart of Imphal, the capital of Manipur. This market is considered as the largest indigenous market in Asia entirely run by women.

Pandemic ensued lockdown resulted in the indefinite halt of business in Ima Market and the prohibition of selling non-essential items. Consequently, women traders of this market face unprecedented adverse effect on their livelihood. Therefore, *laiphadibi* sellers plea for the protection of their livelihood along with the safety from coronavirus infections (Shereen *et al.*, 2020).

### Objectives of the study

The key purpose of the study is to examine the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the livelihood of *laiphadibi* sellers of Ima Market. The three main specific objectives of this study are:

- To examine the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the *laiphadibi* sellers.
- To look into the impact of lockdown on the existence of *laiphadibi* as a folk object.
- To study the economic impact of the shutdown of Ima market.

### The Impact of Pandemic: Globally, In India and the State of Manipur

The Covid-19 outbreak first emerged in Wuhan, China. According to a WHO report, around December 31, 2019, there were notified cases of pneumonia of unknown aetiology in Wuhan. By January 7, 2020, Chinese authorities identified the cause as a novel coronavirus (2019-nCov) (WHO, 2020a). Later on, January 30, 2020, WHO first declared COVID-19 a world health emergency. Within a short span of time, the reported cases grew exponentially all over the world. WHO officially announced the viral outbreak as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020b). According to the November 2020 report of Congressional Research Service, this outbreak has spread over 200 countries and affected more than 56 million people. Thereby, the economic crisis associated with this pandemic has affected the \$90 trillion global economies, which is believed to be experienced for the first time in a century (The given statistic retrieved from Congressional Research Service (CRS) report, which was prepared on November 19, 2020) (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

In the case of India, the first case of COVID-19 is reported in the southern state of Kerala in late January 2020. On March 22, 2020, Government of India under

Prime Minister called for a 14-hour voluntary public curfew popularly known as “*Janta curfew*” (Ordered by Prime Minister of India on March 22, 2020, it is a voluntary public curfew in the form of a trial for lockdown to contain the COVID-19 outbreak in India). *Janta curfew* was a trial run for the lockdown implemented later that week on March 25, 2020. The sudden announcement of lockdown also resulted in the suspension of all travel in and out of the country. People most affected because of Lockdown are daily wage workers, migrant workers and farmers who lost their job overnight and were left stranded with no mode of transportation to reach their safe place. The crisis situation also resulted in the mass exodus of migrant workers in the country during the four phases of lockdown that lasted till May 31, 2020. In India, until late November 2020, more than 9.1 million people are affected by this pandemic outbreak; nearly 8.5 million recovered and around 133 thousand perished (National Informatics Centre, 2020) (The statistics was drawn from mygov.in COVID-19 Dashboard, November 22, 2020 report). A large population of India are still struggling for livelihood, mainly migrant workers, small scale entrepreneurs and many others who depended on daily wages.

Since the main focus of this paper is largely on a small section of people engaged in *Laiphadibi* business at Ima Market. Therefore, this study is significant to understand the relationship between the current pandemic situation in Manipur and the adverse impact faced by this small section of people. So far, the reported cases of COVID-19 infection in Manipur by November 2020, is 23,018 and 233 deaths and recovery ratio reached up to 86.08% (Statistics retrieved from mygov.in, COVID-19 state-wise status). The first case of COVID-19 reported in Manipur on March 24, 2020 and official lockdown started from March 25, 2020. Since then, Manipur Chief Minister ordered the closure of all main markets of Manipur including Ima market, which left the women traders of Ima market impossible to make ends meet.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, and the main empirical work for this study utilises case study approach to produce an in-depth understanding of the issues of respondents.

Data collection depends on unstructured interviews and conversation analysis (Includes interviews through telephone). This study also consults Relevant literature, reports, research papers and policy documents. This study uses the snowball sampling technique to select

respondents. Through different means, necessary data for this research was collected during October and November 2020. A total number of four key respondents participated in this case study. All four respondents engaged in *laiphadibi* business before the pandemic, and their sole earning was this business. Their willingness to share opinion and experiences are central to the success of this case study. Complete confidentiality was assured to all four respondents, and a descriptive analysis approach was employed for data analysis.

**1 Sample description**

The sampling universe of the study is Ima Market, Manipur. Four key respondents participated in the case study; who are official vendors of Ima Market, engaged in *laiphadibi* business. All the respondents belong to the female gender as the *laiphadibi* making, selling, and playing is culturally conditioned as roles of women in Meitei society since antiquities. The demographic profile of the respondents presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

Age/frequency		Educational Qualification	Marital Status	
31-40	1 respondent	12 <sup>th</sup> passed	Married	4 respondents
41-50	Nil	-	Unmarried	Nil
51-60	2 respondents	1- Graduate 2- Matriculation		
61-70	1 respondent	Under-matriculation		

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

According to the response of the participants, the discussion is categorised into two sections:

**1. Issues Faced by Traditional Doll (*laiphadibi*) Sellers Amidst Pandemic and the Impact on Their Livelihood.**

Based on the empirical evidence, the pandemic has a significant impact on the traders of Ima market due to the shutting down of this market for more than seven months. As mentioned earlier, the main trading centre for the *laiphadibi* is the Ima market. This 500-year-old market constitutes stalls of 5000 women traders and is considered as an important meeting ground or trading hub of Manipur. Most of them are sole bread earner and their family dependent on their daily earning. A more clear view of this fact is seen in Dr. Vijaylaksmi Brara’s paper Culture and Indigeneity: Women in Northeast India, 2017. Brara claims that most of the Imas are the sole wage-earners as their husbands either died of drugs abuse or AIDS or due to conflicts between the state and the non-state actors. Moreover, stalls that sell *laiphadibi* are comparatively less than other crafts in this market

(Brara, 2017).

On June 15, 2020, Manipur State Government under Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs fund for the “Pradhan Mantri Street Atmanirbhar s Atmanirbhar Nidhi” (This scheme was launched by Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs, Government of India to assist and empower the street vendors of India. The purpose is for economic upliftment by facilitating a working capital loan of up to INR 10,000/- to help resume their business) announced the provision of loans for women vendors of Manipur (National Portal of India, 2020). Under this scheme, the government provides working capital loan up to Rs.10,000 for approximately 20,000 street vendors (PTI, 2020; Mukherjee, 2020). However, one of the respondents reveals that, so far around a hundred vendors received the said loans. Many of the vendors are yet to receive loans, even after submitting the required documents to the municipality. In order to survive, all four respondents informed that they shifted to an alternative source of income to make ends meet. One respondent claims she set up a vegetable stall in the premises of her home. Another started making candles and selling them in her neighbourhood. The third respondent reported that before the outbreak, she was an established trader in *laiphadibi* business and even generated employment for a few of her locality people in the said business. Now her business is completely frozen, due to various reasons. One of the reason is to avoid gathering people to minimise the chances of viral infection. Another reason is the very low demand for *laiphadibi* amidst the pandemic. A respondent claimed that “nobody feels the need for using *laiphadibi* during this time of crisis when people are fighting for their survival”. But, respondents are still hoping for the market to open soon. The fourth respondent was not from Imphal and claimed that her biggest hurdle was the disruption in transportation amidst the lockdown. She further claims that the disruption in transportation also affected in gathering raw materials which are required for *laiphadibi* making (Chakrabarti & Longkumer, 2020).

**2. Appeal to the government for assistance by the *laiphadibi* sellers of Ima Market.**

This small section of vendors are performing a significant role of the Meitei society by preserving the art of *laiphadibi* making, which are on the verge of extinction. The socio-cultural functions of *laiphadibi* in society are also declining. At present, very few artists prefer to follow the authentic way of crafting and using original raw materials. Therefore, it is high time to

protect and revive this endangered folk object and preserve this rich tradition.

Upon asking, a respondent reveals that due to a shortage of raw materials, many a time they replaced the dry straw with a sponge, as the sponge is easily available in the market these days. Another respondent also claims that she used to sell plastic dolls dressed up like traditional dolls alongside *laiphadibi*, and the demand for the latter is higher than the authentic. On November 5, 2020, women vendors of Ima market including the *laiphadibi* sellers, appealed to the Manipur State Government to permit them to open the market for few days prior of *Ningol Chakouba* festival (*Ningol Chakouba* one of the main festivals of Manipur. Celebrated on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Hiyangei month according to Meitei calendar, which usually falls on October/November in Gregorian calendar). Despite agreeing to follow proper precautionary guidelines, the government refused to grant permission (Vangamla, 2020).

When asked about the assistance required from the government, all the respondents appeal to open the market or provide any other alternative means to run their business. A respondent questioned the government that "If the government allows the street vendors to sell essential items outside the market area, they should also allow them to sell indigenous crafts at least on alternate days". Another respondent questioned the loopholes of State Government in conducting of the by-poll election, that violated COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). The by-poll election resulted in large scale spread of the virus in the state. Despite, violation of SOP for by-poll elections, there was no initiative to reopen Ima market.

In addition to that, all the respondents reported that they could not survive if the shutdown of the market and restriction on non-essential items lasted for more than two-three months. So, it is extremely necessary to mitigate not only the ongoing crisis but also long term cause-effects on the lockdown.

### **Recommendation and Suggestions for Policy Makers and Practitioners**

The findings of the study generate few suggestions and recommendations to ease the difficulties faced by women vendors of Ima market in general and *laiphadibi* sellers in particular.

#### **1. New Opportunities**

New opportunities can be introduced, such as online ordering and home delivery services which are already followed by many enterprises like restaurants, grocery

stores and pharmacies. Authorities should take initiatives to create a co-operation between e-commerce enterprises and traditional handicraft sellers so that both ends can take benefit from such opportunities (Shafi, Liu & Ren, 2020).

#### **2. Allow Commerce to Function with Proper Protection and Hygiene**

Protection is very important for all. But, for survival and free from hunger amid the pandemic is also a significant concern for a larger section of the society. Therefore, authorities should allow the functioning of the market during a pandemic with a hygienic work environment and proper awareness to adhere to COVID-19 guideline of physical distancing.

#### **3. Financial Assistance and Other Subsidies**

The findings of the study reveal that most of the respondents received some kind of assistance from government such as receiving of rice and a few other items on a monthly basis. But, respondents also claimed that only ration items alone are not sufficient for their survival and livelihood. They are still hoping for proper financial assistance and other subsidies from the side of state government until normalcy returns and market opens.

#### **4. Social dialogue between Women Vendors of Ima market and Policymakers**

From the empirical evidence of this study, social dialogue between women vendors, including *laiphadibi* sellers and policymakers, is essential in the current time to bridge the gap. Since June 2020, the unlock phase started for many institutions. Henceforth, policymakers must also listen to the voices of small scale vendors.

### **CONCLUSION**

The particular concern of this study is to examine the social and economic impact of COVID-19 on a small section of people whose sole earning is from *laiphadibis* at Ima Market. This study brings forward various issues faced by the *laiphadibi* sellers amidst the pandemic. The study brings into light the outcry of the hardship faced by *laiphadibi* sellers, and to let policymakers and people of Manipur be aware of their role in the society. To preserve this socially, culturally, and the historically significant folk object, it is our duty to preserve the art of *laiphadibi* making by supporting and assisting this small section of people engaged in this field. Furthermore, the recommendations and suggestions of this study are relevant for policymakers to assist and provide guidance to manage the livelihood and survival of this section of people during the hard times.

There exist very few research papers and reports on the shutdown of Ima market and appeal by the women vendors during the crisis time. Correspondingly, the decline of the art of making *laiphadibi* is least studied and reported. In many significant ways, this paper is an attempt to provide a first-hand in-depth report of information on the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the *laiphadibi* sellers and their livelihood.

Although, this study provides insightful implications concerning pandemic crisis and impact on *laiphadibi* sellers, yet there exist some limitations that provide room for further research. Due to various constraints faced during the pandemic crisis, the sample size was not sufficient to represent the whole section. Many of the *Imas* are the sole bread earners; the pandemic crisis situations forced them to pursue an alternative source of income for their survival. Henceforward, future studies may consider examining the issues discussed in this paper to provide more in-depth knowledge about the consequences of the ongoing pandemic on the *laiphadibi* sellers of Manipur.

#### Conflict of Interests

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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