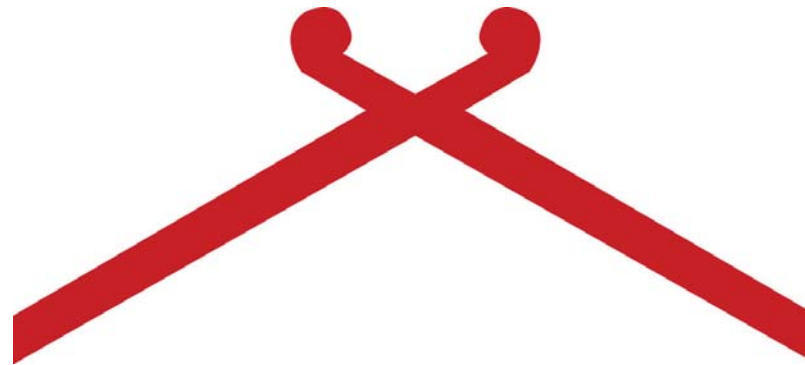


EMA KEITHEL

The mothers' market







# EMA KEITHEL

The mothers' market

Hikom Ulemba Meetei,  
146130010  
Industrial Design Centre,  
Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay

Documentation on  
Ema Keithel : The mothers' market  
December 2015  
Guide : Prof. Nina Sabnani



# Acknowledgment

The Project would not have its own spirit as it has without those invaluable support from both academic as well as field side, provided by the following people .

Prof. Nina Sabnani , IIT Bombay (IDC)

I would like to express my deep sense of thanks and gratitude for being my mentor , and also the keen interest she had put in this project in the first place . Her guidance and encourage help me in many ways to orient this project in the right direction.

Prof. Rowena Robinson. IIT Bombay (humanities social sciences )  
My sincere gratitude goes to her for giving me the first knowledge about ethnography and its study in the beginning of the project .

My heartfelt thank you note goes to all the “Ema” in the market who have patiently shared their story despite of their hectic schedule, throughout the interview process.

I also wish to thank my classmates Saurabh Vashistha, Shyama.V.S, Ameya Narvankar and Boski Jain for their help and suggestions in making this report more profoundity.

Lastly, I take this privilege to thank my parents and family for being an unconditional pillar of strength and support throughout.



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# Abstract

Broadly speaking , a market can represents many things. When we are young we grew up learning market is a place where selling and buying happened . But as time passed by, it started revealing its own nature of relationship between people and its surrounding, and also behaviour and attitude toward the society. Thus, marketplace literally become a storyteller of that particular society. Yes, In this project, I'm trying to find out what Ema market actually tell us .

Ema in manipur means “mother”, named as mother market, this market has been providing livelihood for the entire Manipur from generation to generation. Being run only by the women , this market has perform a significant role in empowering the women in the Manipur society.

Its traditional and culture bonding with people have make this market one of the biggest market of its own kind in the entire country

The project mainly focus on the daily activity of the women and their perspective of the market. It also try to cover some of the untold story of the women whose unbeatable power in bringing up their family .



## Introduction

# Ema keithel

“Ema” is a word which every people from Manipur use to call their mother, with their deepest love for them. It wouldn't be much to say that the role played by the mother in this part of the region is quite an extraordinary one. Despite being a patriarchal society, many women have shown that they have equal capability of supporting their family in the worst time of their life. Also, women groups like “Meira Paibi” take a major lead in fighting whether it is for alcohol and drug abuse, stood for civil rights or to protest against draconian AFSFA.

One substantial evidence of how significant and crucial the role of women in this society can be only translated through “Ema Keithel” - a unique market which is run only by the women. In Manipuri, ema means mother, khei- means storage and -thel means to spread out or to sell which literally means mothers' market or women's market.

Situated in the centre of Manipur's capital city Imphal, it is the only market run by the women in the entire country possible in the world too. Traditionally, in Manipuri society women mainly do all the buying for the family from household items like vegetables, children clothes etc. to items for many occasions like marriage and festival.

And soon Ema Keithel became the platform for a large number of women to join the economic responsibility of the state through trade and commerce.

The beautiful part of this unique market is the fact that it's not just a mere market, more than that it is a family, a society, an identity, a tradition and most importantly a way of life. Most of the products available here reflect the true spirit of local people whether it is the skilled local craftsman or hard-working farmer. Regardless of its continuous threat from new market strategies like online shopping, one can always say that the market survives until today because of all the indigenous products which are hard to get in any other shop.

Today, due to the influx of many products and technologies from neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh, the real charm of this market is degrading at a faster rate. Many local productions are now being replaced due to lack of support. Many micro-bankers use many tactics to take advantage on the ground of poor education and financial condition of these women. But one should know, each day each woman finds their own courage and strength to save their family and Keithel for a better future.

*“...it’s not just a mere market, more than that it is a family, a society, an identity, a tradition and most importantly a way of life”*



## Project

## Purpose

### How it started ?

Being born and raised in Manipur for more than 20 years, I have spent enough time of my life around this market. The fact that it is situated in the centre of the Imphal bazaar gives full advantage to the people to explore this market . Here you will literally get everything about Manipur , from local vegetables to Nagri (fermented fish a much for every kitchen in Manipur ) , jewellery to ritual items , handloom and handicraft products to home-made food .

But this is all about the markets and what is available there , I have never thought until this stage that why this market is so special ? like many other people from this region , never ever I ask myself why this market still remains intact its value even after so many changes happened in modern marketing strategy . Suddenly, it seems all the questions in my head popped out which were once not been answered for long time . Thus, the first phase of this project started - “looking Ema market more than a market” , by it means to critically analyse the impact of the market toward the people especially the women who are sitting there and also the society as a whole .

The project also gives the opportunity to revisit the market and see beyond the normal daily process of selling and buying .

“looking Ema market more than a market”

### Discussion

Before going to the field , a small group discussion was held in IIT Bombay with my mentor Prof. Nina Sabnani and Prof. Rowena Robinson on the exception of the project and also talked about the understanding of difference between physical science and human science, where the latter is mainly based on meaning of culture , historical facts and partial subjectivity .

Some of the inputs are as follows :

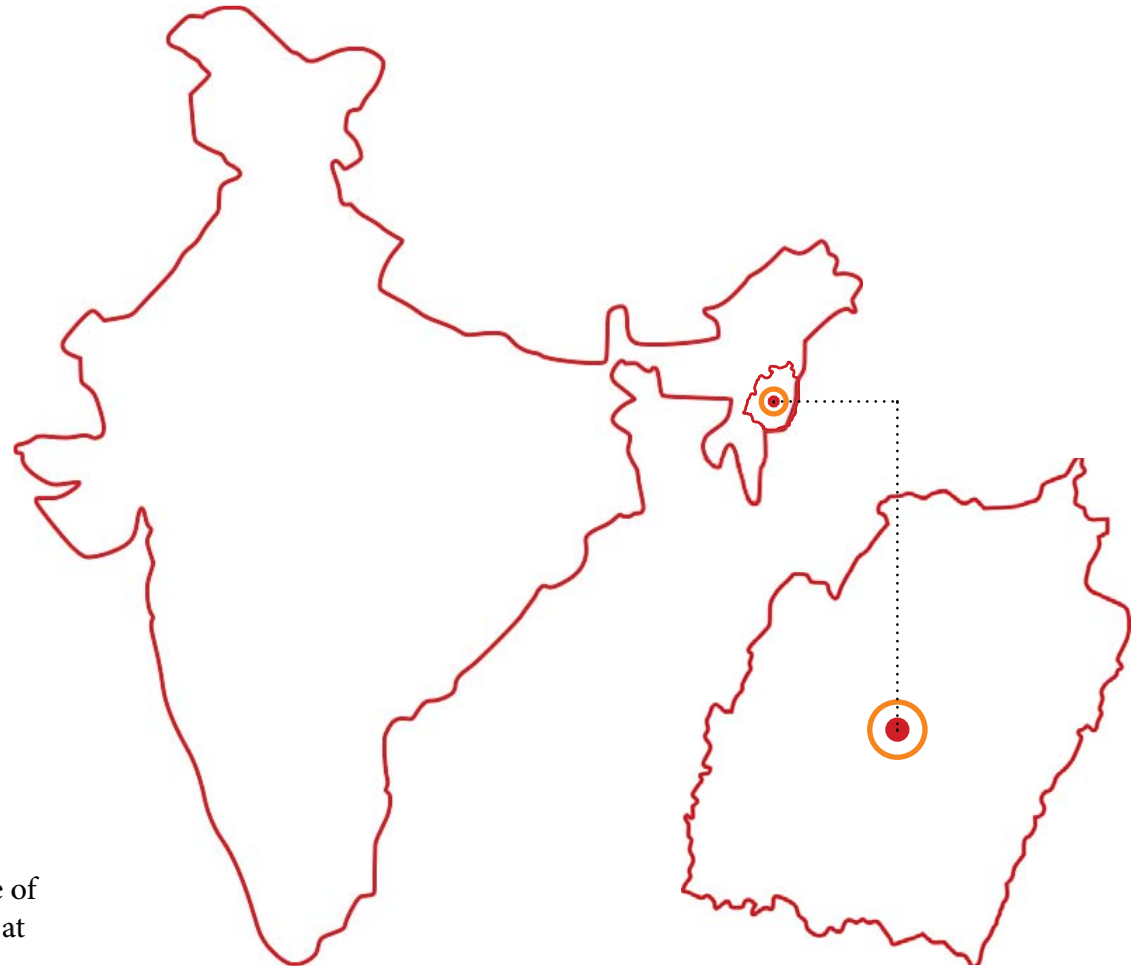
- Proper collection of resource before going to the field
- Maintain a field diary with date and time
- Prepare a list of question for next day
- Observation of people behaviour

## Location

Situated : Manipur , north eastern side of India

Location: in the middle of capital city , Imphal

Mode of transportation : Auto-rickshaw is the main mode of public transportation in the Imphal area . The fair is fixed at Rs 10 anywhere inside Imphal





Ema kheithel has been a part of the tradition of the Manipur from a long time. Until now, this unique market remains the identity of the Manipur because of its close traditional and cultural bonds. Even though, it is not clear when did the market established, evidence has been found dating back in 16th century. In the past, traditionally, women are mainly responsible for taking care of the household and men earns for the family . But during British rule , most of the family men are converted into soldier and are directed to fight in the war against Chinese and Burmese, many of them were employ as slave. That was the time when women put all the responsibility on their back and came out from their house for earning to feed their family .

*“...two most important movement in the history of Manipur took place - first “Nupi lal” or second Nupi lal”*

British rule , most of the family men are converted into soldier and are directed to fight in the war against Chinese and Burmese, many of them were employ as slave. That was the time when women put all the responsibility on their back and came out from their house for earning to feed their family .

It wouldn't be forgetful , during this period of time , two most important movement in the history of manipur took place - “Nupi lal” or women's war. The

first nupi lal broke out in 1904 against the sending of manipur men to remote area of Kabow valley for fetching timber and the second nupi lal occurred in 1939 against the indiscriminate export of rice from Manipur which lead to famine in the region . In the beginning the market was built out of thatch and mud as seen in picture and it was more like a morning bazaar, where all the women came in early morning both buyer and seller and return back before their morning meal. But as the demand peaked up and inconvenient to return for those who are far away , women started following the present full day market .

After this many changes has gone through in term of the market area and building , the recent building were built in 2005 after demolishing the old ema market .Today , this new market become the most important part of Manipur .

# History



Image : Ema market in olden days with bamboo and thatch roof

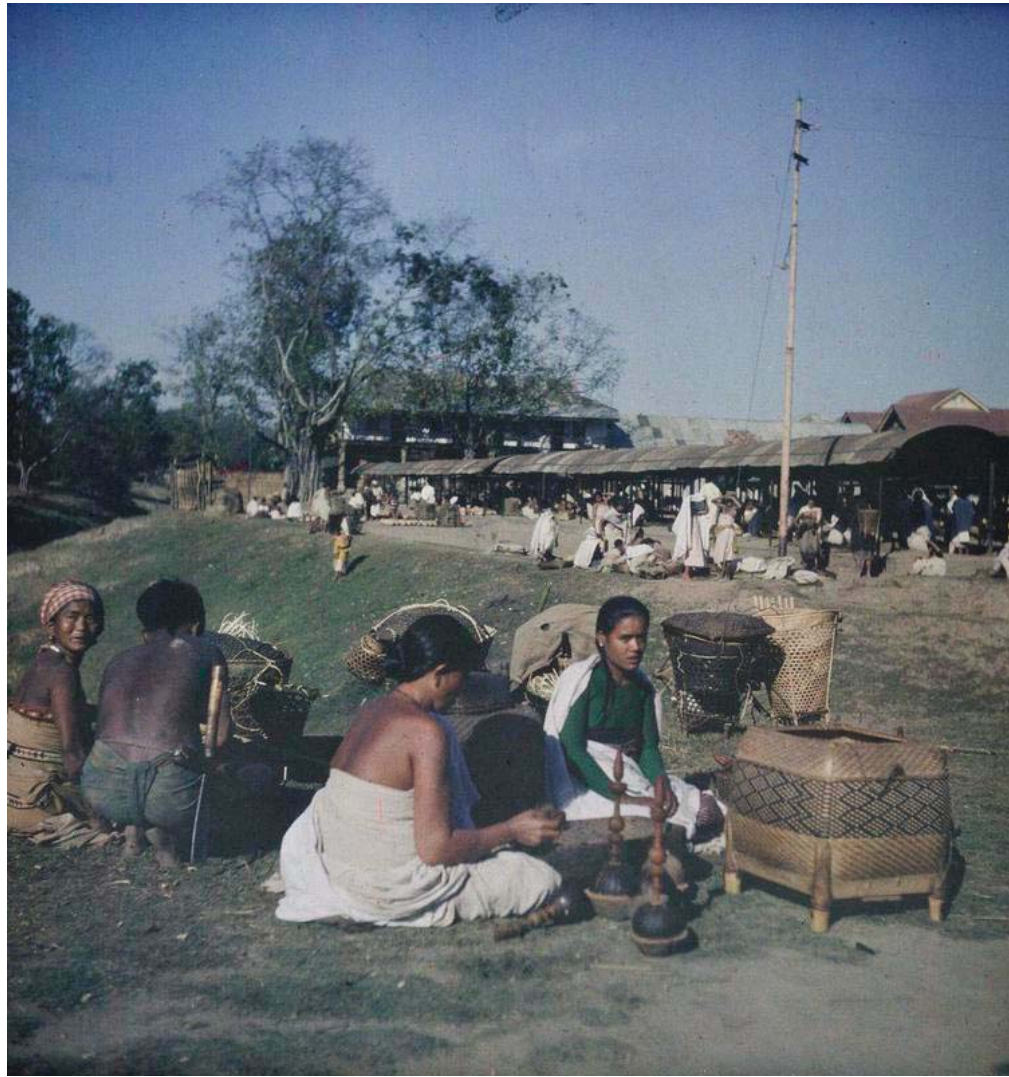
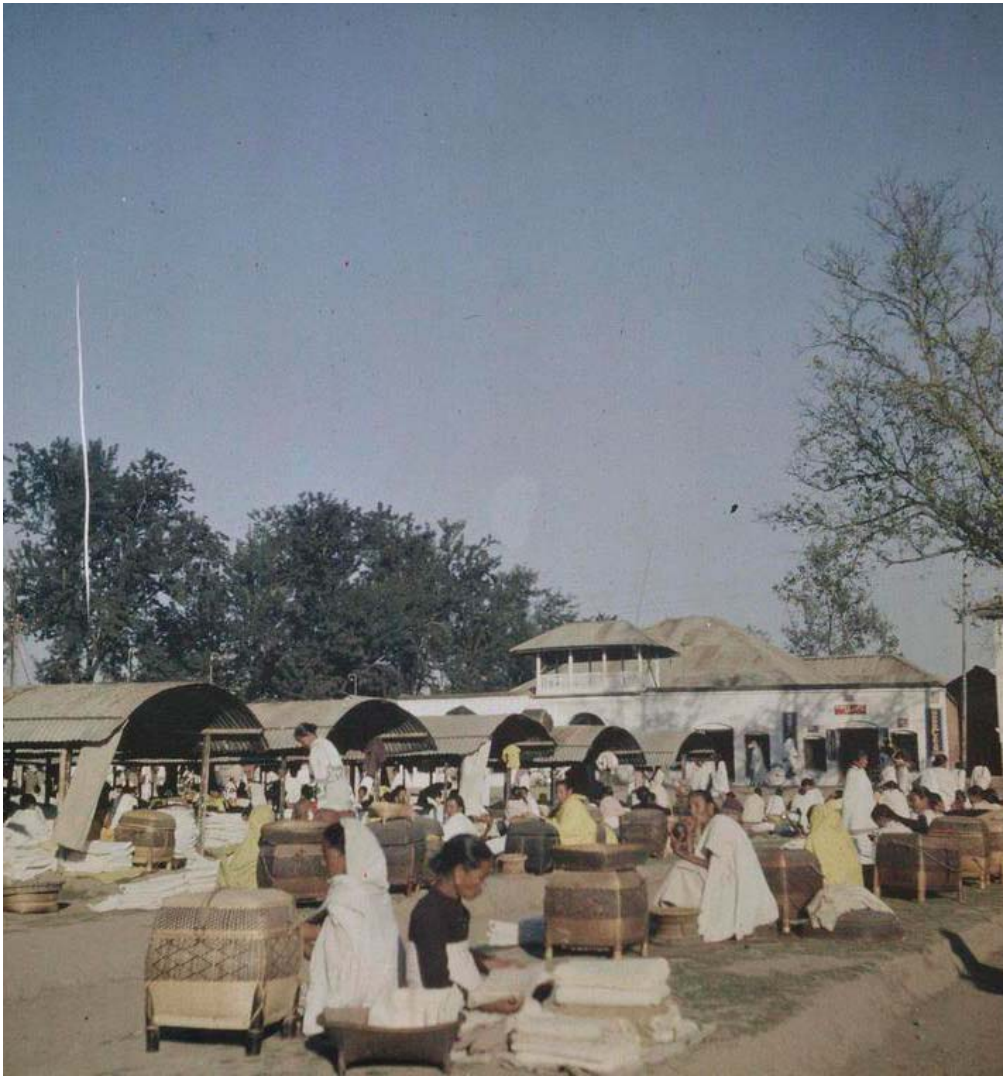


Image : Women with their basket in front of old ema market in past time.







Above image : the roof of the building showing the tapering conical structure and the two projections on the top of the entrance

## Building & Architecture

In olden days, a raised platform was built out of mud for women to conduct trade. It was only during the reign of Maharaj Bheigyachandra singh in 1789 , a proper place was chosen and the first keithel shang or market sheds was constructed using mud , bamboo and thatch. Later on , in 1905 the British governor-Shakespeare Saheb completed the shang with iron beam and galvanized tin roof with a capacity to accommodate 1763 women . Each woman was allotted a space called “Potpham”, to store, display and promote their merchandises .

After demolishing the old building , the present three-storey building was constructed on the same spot which was inaugurated in 2010. The new building takes inspiration from the architectural elements of traditional Manipur style . For instance the tapering conical structure and the

two projections on the top of the entrance on four side of the building , symbolizes the spiritual and religious connections of the people with their deities. It is believed that even the deities themselves come to the market to be with human.

This strong traditional connection can be observed in the names given to the buildings of the market. The area around this market is called Kwairamband Keithel and it is comprised of three building named -

- Leimarel Shidabi ema Keithel (also called Purana Bazar). It is named after the Goddess of supreme household.
- Emoinu ema Keithel (aslo called Laxmi bazar) named after the Goddess of of prosperity, wealth and kitchen
- Phouoibee ema Keithel(aslo called new market named after the Goddess of bounty .
- and a temporary market .

## Socio-culture





Left image : A woman offering flower to Keithel Lairemba and Lairimbi  
 Right image : Women arranging for morning ritual in front of the Keithel Deities.

## Keithel deities

In Manipuri tradition particularly in Meitei community, in every house the day starts with a prayer and flower offerings to God. Similarly, in ema keithel, every morning the women perform their ritual by offering flowers to the Keithel idols- Lairemba and Lairimbi (God & Goddess) before starting their whole business activity. Not only the women in this market but also the local people come here for praying the deities, in believes that the prayer will bring peace and prosperity to their family

Every year all the women vendors come together and celebrate the periodic renewal of the deities marked by replacing the old clothes with new ones. Usually this occasion is accompanied with lot of entertaining programs like Sumang Leela (a form of skit play), musical concert, Thabal chongba ( a form of dance perform at night ) etc.

Thus, the keithel deities become not only one of most crucial part of the market but also for the entire society .



## Inside Ema keithel

Purana Bazaar building is the largest among all the three of it. They don't have any doors and windows, everything is open. For now, women vendors are only allocated at the ground floor. The entire floor is divided into many sections and rows according to the available trade goods. Each row is raised from the ground level to form a concrete platform which can accommodate around twenty women.

Other than the size of the building, Laxmi bazaar and new market also follow the same layout with different trade goods.



Above : Fish market inside ema keithel

Below : Scene of Ema keithel at night .



# Available Products

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## Purana Bazaar

Most of the items in this market are more confined to the household chores and kitchen utilities. Entering the building from the east side, the women in the first rows mainly sell rituals products like small mirror, pure cotton threads, bamboo comb, chandon (a solid sandalwood lump use for putting as tikka), clothes for deities and traditional jewellery. Most of them use yangkok- a large flat-circular bamboo basket used mainly for winnowing, as a container to spread out all the goods. The others rows include, line for Kabok khoidum (sugary rice puff ladoo) and other home-made snacks, Nagri (fermented fish) and Nga Ayaiba (dry fish) line, the earthen pot and kitchen tools

row. There is also line dedicated only to banana leaves and beetles (pan). It can be seen that these two items are the most essential item to start any Meitei's ceremony whether it's marriage or birth of a child or a funeral.

At the amidst of the southern most side lies the idol of Keithel Lairamba and lairembi, most of the vendors near to it sells flower, fruits and hand-made manipuri dolls.

On the other side which is the left most part, one will find different kind of fishes, rice with fish being the staple food of Manipur.

Known for its rich handicraft products, this market didn't miss out a line dedicated only to handicraft product like bamboo basket, souvenir etc.



1. Sugar coated rice puff ladoo which are literally used any formal occasion



2. Purple water lily for sale



3. The small turban meant for deity. these are mainly use during rituals and festival.

## Observation

Most of the products which are selling in this market are mostly related to the culture and tradition of Manipur . For each occasion whether it is a festival or ceremony there is different requirement which range from a cheap cotton thread to a high price hand-made jewellery . Each items which are selling here have there own importance when the time comes. Once they are done of the day ema packs all the trade goods to a huge metallic trunk and handover to the person who take care for the night with some small amount around Rs 10 per trunk.



Above : Selling of rituals items and traditional jewellery on yangkok

Below : Chandon





Left : Two women buying phanek at new market (Phouoibee ema Keithel)

## New Market

Most of the products in this side of the market are related with women and kids. One will find piles of colourful Phanek stacked up for selling. Phanek is a traditional wraparound piece of cloth worn by the manipur women. It comes in different varieties according to the occasion, example phanek mayak neiba, a strip embroidered one is mostly worn

during wedding ceremony. Other type of clothes include women's half sarees, blouses, shawls, towels, scarf , bedsheet etc. Kudai-a piece of cloth mainly used by the men during cultural events is another popular item in this market. Almost all the clothes are woven using traditional loom by women from different part of manipur. Knitted clothes and shoes are

also in much demand among for women and kid during the winter time . There are few women vendors who sells only commodities related to rituals and festivals like tiny glitter shoes and fans , small traditional knife and sticks , wooden sandal, clothes for deities, thread garland etc.





Left : A woman selling all the items for ritual and festivals

Below : Tiny glitter shoes and fans which are used in ritual or festival like lei Haraoba .



## Observation

By now it is not hard for anyone to imagine that the handloom industry is not merely a family business anymore but an indispensable aspect of socio-economic life of Manipur. Many women still continue this traditional skill of handloom weaving either individually or by forming groups in cluster level.

It is also observed that the cultural and religious bonding play a very significant role in reviving the market

Festivals are another reasons for these women to both enjoy and earn money for their family .Lai haroaba, which can be translate as the merry making of God, is one of the most popular festival in Manipur celebrated by meitei community .During this time lot and lot of women come to buy new dresses specially for their daughter as these festival is associated with Manipuri dance , and also ritual's things for God .





View of Laxmi keithel from the west side of New market .  
The market is located on the



## Laxmi Keithel

It is the smallest among the three keithel. Generally this Market is famous for the tribal shawls and scarfs. Here, one will get all the vibrant colour shawls made by different community and tribes of manipur . Some of the famous are meitei's shawls, Kuki's shawls , Naga shawls, Tangkhul shawls . Each shawl have their own motif which are rooted to their ancestor .

## Observation

Laxmi keithel is situated on the other side of the B.T road( the main road which run in between the Market buildings ).

Due to its isolated location and size of the building many women vendors complains about having less customer , compare with the other market.

Nevertheless , many tourists come here to buy the traditional tribal shawls because of its rich traditional value .

Some of the original shawls are weaved using traditional method of waist weaving . Accordingly the price range from around Rs. 200 to more than Rs1000.

Many of them tells story about of the motif and patterns as they show the shawls to the customer .This not only adds value to the items but also can reflects the hardship done by the women of different community to bring it to the market . Another things which is quite interesting is each shawls is not confined to any community when it come to the selling .



Above : A fully hand woven clothes shown to us .





women vendor.

## People

*"No matter what their ages are all the women sit together and help each another as they try to support their family"*

In general , the people in the Ema Market can be broadly divided into three groups , apart from the buyers. They are 1) The women folks who are selling the goods, 2) the people who supplies the commodities to the women, and 3) the younger people who look after the things for the women at night .

Most of the women in this market are at the age groups of 30 to 70 years. But one also see some

few younger women who often come to help their mother business when they are ill or busy . For many of them , this market is much more than a business but a part of their family. Everyday maximum of them come to the market in morning around 8.30 am or 9.30 am morning, depending on the season, and return back to their house at around 7.30 pm .When asked, all of them hint that they are quite pleased to get a space here even though it doesn't serve all the needs for their family





Clothes especially phanek are bought from the nearby clothes vendors( shown in the left ) and are given to the tailor which sits near to them ( shown in the right). Thus, one can see the flow of complementary business among the women.

## Complementary business

Alongside, there are also complementary business which runs parallel with the commodities business .For instance , In between there are small food courts which are run by the women. They provide vegetarian to non-vegetarian thali for lunch and in evening one will get all the popular Manipuri snacks like Singju, Bora , khangou and tea . This tradition of bartering items between them also help them to supporting each other in the long run of their trade. Another example is the female tailor who is sitting in the amidst of all the clothes vendors. Many people reach out to her for stitching the clothes they have bought from the nearby vendors .



## Street vendors

There are lot of women who sit around the surrounding of the markets. These are the women who don't have their license to sell in the keithel or the main building . Due to their low economical status, most of them are compelled to do their business outside .Many of them come as far as 30 km away from the market .

Unfortunately , these women are the one who get lot of pressure from police sides they have to clear the pavement . For them chasing game with policeman become a daily routine .That's why most of the things are either spread out in a plastic sheet and paper which can be easier to wrap up and go. Some of them also use big tin container and plate but sells only things which they can carry in limited quantity like dry fishes , vegetables and fruits , flowers , home-made ladoo etc .

Although, they might not have the license to do their business inside but this market is as much as for them as any other women in the market. They also an undeniable souls of this beautiful market .

Left : Streets vendor selling varieties of dry fishes and vegetables in plastic wrap and traditional tin container .Most of them even fixed their space which can be changed later.





Image 1 - A woman selling fresh local fish on the side of the staircase in front of the market building . Everyday she brings all her things inside that tin container .



Image -2 Women selling dry fishes on the pavement . These fishes are either dried at their home or bought from someone who do the business of traditional fish Drying .



Image 3 : Women trying to sells their goods before winding up their business for the day (night time). Often It is be said that during night time, they have to sells their items with more discount as they want to go back home early .







## Social participation

Left : Women setting up their stalls .

In olden days, women are not much free to go outside from their houses as the whole family household relies on them. But as the time passes, Ema keithel breakthrough all this social norms and changed the way of living for these women. They are not restricted to the household chores anymore. Some of them have started building their own business to support their family. They become more aware about their social and economic status. The interaction in the market also help them a lot in

expanding their knowledge. Some of them even said that apart from money, they also feel mentally and physically sound if they stay in the market . Perhaps, the possible reason for their well-being could be due to their continuous exposure to different people both outside the market and inside the market. Many time it is found that they also help each other both in business and personal matter. They also organise lot of chit-fund among themselves . These are called “marup” in local

language , each month they all have to contribute fixed amount which will be follow by bidding of the collective amount on the fix date and the who won take the money away . Next month the same will follow including the contribution from the one who have won previous month. Thus, it will continue until all the members get a chance to take the collective money. Not only it brings fun to them but also a chance to save their money for future





Above: Once the stall is set up and customer started coming , the whole conversation starts automatically . Here in this picture the neighbouring woman join the conversation by helping the customer to get what she want .

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*“..for a while it make us forget all the problems which we have at our houses...”*

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## Ema-gi Story

*“I’m very thankful to my mother-in-law for giving me this place and enjoy almost 40 years of my life”*



Left : A mother narrating her story

## Story

*Name : Ebeyaima  
Section : tribals shwal  
Place : Keisamthong(3 km from market )  
Age : 73 years  
Children: Four daughter and one son  
Husband's occupation : Tailor*

Ema Ebaiyama started coming out to market at the age of 30 years . Her husband works as tailor in nearby shop . They have four daughter and one son, who are all married . Most of the financial support of the family will be carry out by her husband . But the money she earned from here will be mostly use in maintaining the kitchen items and to look after her grand-daughter

Difficult time :

When asked about the difficult time in the market?, Without a hesitation she started narrating the story about her pregnancy and her medical problems .she was not able to come to the market for 4-8 years . during that time she lent her seat to an elder sister from the market whom she knows .

Good time :

when asked about the happy time she said “I’m very thankful to my mother-in-law for giving me this place and enjoy almost 40 years of my life” Since , she have some medical issues she can’t work physical intense work but can come and sit here to sell things .

*Name : Ngakhonam  
Sells : Banana leaves  
Place : Yaingang Pokpi (22.7 km from market )  
Age : 56 years  
Children: Four sons and one daughter*

Ema Ngakhonam started coming out to market at the age of 20 years . She sit at corner of the market and sells only one particular item banana leaves. She told me all the banana come from far places . At early morning she will collected them from auto-rickshaw driver. The banana leaves come in bundles and packed in a rucksack bag . Each rucksack she sells for Rs 200. In the very profitable day, she sells three rucksack, which gives her Rs 600 . But also there was the day were she couldn’t sell any of it

Every morning she reach market at around 7.30 am.from her home. It cost her around Rs 60 for coming and going . She doesn’t have a license so , most of time she sit on the ground at the far end of a corner. Even when she is not there nobody take her place.



## Ema-gi Story

*“She smiled and said “without this market we will not be able to run our family, though it might not be a big business but it has help us in different stage of our life.”*



*Name : Rasheshwori*  
*Section : tribals shwal*  
*Place : Heirangoi Thong (15 km from market )*  
*Age : 55 years*  
*Children: three sons*  
*Husband's occupation : Cashier in a shop*

#### About

Every morning Ema Rasheshwori comes to the market from her locality which is situated 15 km away from the market, by public Auto-rickshaw . Her husband works as a cashier for someone's shop. They have three son who are all married . She bought this space from a neighbouring sister whom she know when she was 35 years old . For last 22 years she has been sitting in this same place selling tribal shawls and scarfs.

#### Difficult time :

Being the wife of eldest son , out of seven , she and her husband took up the responsibility to take care of the other brothers . She said that she used to weaved clothes using traditional loom, day and night to pay the fee for their schooling. Sometime her husband also shared her work by helping in weaving . When asked about the difficulty in market, she smiled and said “without this market we will not be able to run our family, though it might not be a big business but it has help us in different stage of our life .”

During band and blockade in Manipur :

She said that she usually know about immediate band and blockade from her husband, as he read newspaper every morning . During this time she stayed at home and it was one of her hardest time .

Continuing the business:

When asked what she will do if she falls ill or bedridden? She smiled and said “what i will do ? they have to feed me and take care of me, right?” This day she also brings her eldest daughter- in -law in the business . She hopes one day she can replace her if she is not able to come to the market .







*“Before I use to sells only knitted clothes and shoes for kids, that era has gone and the style has changed . Today people like more of this colourful fleece clothes which come from Moreh\* ”*

\* Moreh - a place in Manipur which is in the border of Manipur and Myanmar





A picture showing the traditional bamboo stool (Mora) with the rubber shoes and sandals from Myanmar .

*New products flooding from the neighbouring country slowly replacing the local products*





*Name : Enao*  
*Occupation : Care taker for ema's luggage at night*  
*Student at day time*  
*Place : Sanjenbam(13 km from market )*  
*Age : 23 years*  
*Organisation: Kedo*

Apart from the selling and buying business , many youth also involving in the cleaning and maintaining process of the market .There are some organisation who are register in Imphal municipal cooperation to works for the solid waste management of the market . Kedo is also a small branch of that organisation . Enao, a young lad in his early 20's works as caretaker for women's luggage at night. With his friends , they divided the place which they can cover. As the time come for ema to leave , they will come and help them packing the things in their big metallic trunk . For this they charge a small amount of Rs 20, out

of which they have to give Rs. 5 to the organisation fund. When asked about the difficulty of staying at night , he said sometime when the whether is very bad like in rainy season it extremely difficult to take care because they need to make sure all the things are safe . Also he said they cooked their own food at late night. When asked if the goods are lost , what they do ? he said usually we try our best not to lost anything as it is a huge responsibility, but if happen they kind of give half of the total cost of the goods .He said all the ema also understand the difficulty they faced, so they also don't put more pressure of them





Image :A mother counting the money before leaving for the day







## Conclusion

For century, Ema keithel has been a symbol of hardship, love and prosperity. Not only it has given shelters to thousand and thousands of poverty-stricken women in manipur , it also empower them to fight with dignity. Even though most of them are not properly educated. These women are often know for their traditional skills in managing the trade and commerce. They set up their well being in a very honest and simple way by producing their own products whether it is a handloom products or craft products or the vegetables. Thus, contribute a huge service in promoting the local product .

The market is also a place of unity and integrity, different women from various community come together to do their business without the fear of discrimination. They all speak only one language that is the “ market language “which does have any particular rules. Community participation is something one need to learn from this market . Whether , the women who are selling or the people who are supplying the trade good or the young boy who take care of the goods, each individual have a role to play which they play with utmost care and joy.

In recent time , the continuous invasions of the products from neighbouring country has hit the market with tremendous lose in local production

and economy . Experts often give their views that if the trends continues than it will be hard to maintain the real charm of Ema market as the product which get flooded are quite cheaper and enter in massive number, as compare to the local one.

Another major issue is the entry of chain of micro- banker who systemically take advantage of the women on the basis of their background and education. Snatching of their license card if they are not able to pay the loan is very come problem face by the women in this market .

Apart from natural disaster like earthquake and storm there are also man-made disaster like curfew and bandh which give serious damage to not only market but also to the people who rely on it as many of them depends their daily livelihood from here .

Above all this problem , each day these women come to the market with the hope that one day they can make a better society for next generation .

# Citation

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# Glossary

AFSPA -----Armed force special power Act  
Ema -----Mother  
Keithel -----Market  
Lairemba -----God  
Lairembi -----Goddess  
Meira paibhi - ----Women group  
Nupi ----- female  
Potpham -----a small space or seat  
Saheb -----Officer  
Shang -----Sheds  
Sumang Leela-----a form of skit play  
Thabal chongba-----a manipuri human chain dance

-gi -----of





