

**CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC HERITAGE OF LOIS: A SCHEDULED CASTE
OF MANIPUR**

Nirupama Seram^{1*}, Dr. Atom Sunil Singh²

^{1*}*Research Scholar, Geography & Resource Management, Mizoram University, Aizawl*

²*Assistant Professor, Pravabati College, Mayang Imphal Manipur*

***Corresponding Author: niru.seram@gmail.com**

This study focus into the cultural legacy and economic roles of the Lois communities in Manipur, India. Despite enduring marginalisation as indigenous groups, the Lois have maintained their unique identity, influencing Manipur's cultural and economic realms through activities like agriculture, crafts, and festivals. The research employs spatial analysis and interdisciplinary approaches to scrutinise various Lois traditions, encompassing pottery, weaving, woodwork, and music. It also explores historical and social dynamics affecting Lois settlement patterns and identity. Focused on understanding challenges and opportunities, the study proposes culturally sensitive strategies for cultural revival, heritage tourism, skill development, and collective efforts to ensure the resilience of this distinctive heritage.

Introduction

Located in the vibrant state of Manipur, the Lois community stands as a testament to the resilience and rich cultural diversity of indigenous groups. Their heritage is woven into the very fabric of Manipur's history, contributing to its cultural mosaic in profound ways. In this article, we delve into the intricate traditions, crafts, and practices of the Lois community, exploring their significance and the challenges they face in preserving their unique identity. The Lois community, residing in Manipur, possesses a distinct cultural identity that sets them apart from the dominant Meitei culture. Their contributions span agriculture, crafts, festivals, and rituals, leaving an indelible mark on Manipur's cultural and economic development. Despite centuries of challenges, Lois traditions have endured, reflecting their resilience and deep-rooted connection to their land and environment.

According to the Directorate of Economics and Statistics in 1981, there were 21 Scheduled Caste villages in Manipur. They are mainly inhabiting in the Leimaram, Moirang, Thanga, etc. of Bishenpur District, Yaithibi of Thoubal District and Kwatha of Chandel District. Khurkhul, Sekmai, Tairenpokpi and Phayeng are in the Imphal West district and Andro, Nongpok Sekmai of Imphal East District and Sellou and Kakching of Kakching District. But the villages, Binselu, Berapak, Nungphou, Chandranathpur, Latingkhal, Latingkhal Makha, Narainpur are in Jiribam District. So, there are seven Scheduled Caste communities recognized in Manipur, which include the Lois, Yaithibis, Namsudra, Patni, Dhobi, Muchi/Ravidas, and Sutradhar. Lois and Yaithibis are indigenous people of Manipur and others are migrants. The Lois are believed to be descendants of ancient Meiteis who were exiled or enslaved by kings for various reasons. They have been subjected to social exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization throughout history. The Lois has a rich history and unique cultural practices, which have been marginalized over time. Using spatial analysis, this study investigates the distribution and cultural heritage of the Lois and highlights their economic importance in Manipur. They are also known as Meitei Ariba (old/indigenous Meitei) or Chakpa. They are believed to be either tributary tribes who were conquered by the Meiteis or outcasted people who refused to adopt Hinduism when the Manipuri king ordered his subjects to do so. Lois has their own culture and dialect that are distinct from the dominant Meitei culture and dialect. They have faced social exclusion, discrimination and marginalization throughout history and continue to struggle for their rights and recognition in Manipur. They have also contributed to the economic and cultural development of Manipur through their agriculture, crafts, festivals and rituals. Some of them have managed to preserve their own culture and language till now.

The population of the Scheduled Caste communities in Manipur varies across different villages. According to the Directorate of Economics and Statistics in 1981, the population of some of the Scheduled Caste villages in Imphal

District is as follows:

According to the Directorate of Economics and Statistics in 1981 was

Sl. No.	Village	Population
1.	Andro	5239
2.	Sekmai	2993
3.	Phayeng	2390
4.	Khurkhul	1348
5.	Narainpur	152
6.	Berbak	197
7.	Binselu	35
8.	Chandranathpur	192
9.	Chhotabakra Bengali	305
10.	Durgapur	421
11.	Jakudhor Part I	1188
12.	Jakurdhor Part II	497
13.	Kamu Yaithibi	38
14.	Koutruk	347
15.	Lema Bhutangkhall	138
16.	Latingkhal	1012
17.	Latingkhal Makha	253
18.	Nungphou	179
19.	Baibooi Bengali	378
20.	Tairenpokpi	470
21.	Tupidor	86

It is important to note that these figures are from 1981 and the population of these villages may have changed since then. Nevertheless, these figures provide a snapshot of the demographic profile of these villages. The government has implemented various policies and programs to uplift the Scheduled Caste communities in Manipur, including reservation in education and government jobs, financial assistance for economic development, and special provisions for land ownership. However, despite these efforts, the Scheduled Caste communities in Manipur still face various challenges. Many of them live in poverty and have limited access to basic facilities such as healthcare, sanitation, and electricity. Moreover, they continue to face discrimination and social exclusion.

Background

The northeastern state of Manipur, India, is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups and cultures, each contributing to the region's rich tapestry of traditions and customs. Among these groups are the Lois, indigenous communities that hold a unique position in Manipur's social, cultural, and economic landscape. Hinduism influenced Meitei society to treat the non-Hindus as a lower caste called Lois and an untouchable class called the Yaithibis. The number of the Yaithibis is difficult to find (mainly) because they hide their identity.

By analyzing the geospatial data, the research reveals valuable insights into the historical, social, and economic factors that have influenced the settlement patterns of the Lois. In addition to the spatial analysis, the study delves into the cultural heritage of the Lois, exploring their unique traditions, languages, and social structures. Recognizing the importance of understanding the context in which these cultural elements have developed, the research also examines the historical events and socio-political factors that have shaped the Lois' identity and their place in Manipuri society. Understanding the link between the Lois' cultural heritage and their experiences throughout history provides a more comprehensive view of their significance in the region.

Despite facing marginalization and discrimination, Lois communities have played a vital role in the local economy through traditional occupations, agriculture, and trade. Analysing their economic contributions not only enhance the understanding of their significance in Manipur but also underscore the need for policies and initiatives that support their continued growth and development. Recognising the cultural and economic significance of the Lois necessitates a discussion on the preservation and conservation of their traditions, and heritage. The study explores the challenges faced in maintaining and promoting their unique cultural elements while suggesting strategies and initiatives aimed at fostering the well-being and cultural preservation of the Lois communities. Loi villages find mention in Manipuri chronicles, often documented by royal pandits. King Pakhangba, during his reign from 33 AD to 154 AD, designated 15 villages as Loi. Under King Kongyamba (1324–1335 A.D.), four more Loi villages were established. King Ningthoukhomba (1404–1432) added three, and King Kiyamba (1467–1508) introduced four new Loi settlements. Subsequently, King Khagemba (1597–1652) founded five more villages. King Khunjaoba (1652–1666) added Arong to the list. Kwatha and Lairenpokpi were incorporated later. Altogether, there are 34 villages that make up the Loi village community.

Andro is a town in Imphal East district in Manipur located 25 kilometres east of Imphal, Manipur's capital city, Andro is nestled within the forested foothills of the Nongmaiching range. It is inhabited by one of the Lois communities, a Scheduled Caste group distinct for their customs, traditions, and beliefs, setting them apart from other Manipuri communities. They venerate various deities such as Panam Ningthou, Sanamahi, and Leimarel Sidabi. Andro boasts a vibrant cultural heritage and artistic ingenuity that mirrors Manipur's diversity and history. The region showcases its cultural richness through a complex-cum-museum, displaying a plethora of Manipuri culture facets like paintings, dolls, stone figurines, and wood carvings. Especially renowned is Andro's unique style of pottery, crafted from black clay mixed with powdered shells and kiln-fired. The vessels are adorned with motifs inspired by nature and mythology.

Beyond its cultural appeal, Andro's allure lies in its scenic beauty, agreeable climate, and warm hospitality. The region boasts natural attractions such as waterfalls, caves, lakes, and hills, complemented by festive celebrations like Lai Haraoba (ritual dance), Cheiraoba (new year), and Heikru Hidongba (boat race) that capture Manipur's culture and spirit. The Lois community maintains a close relationship with the Meiteis, the principal community of Manipur valley. Sharing cultural and religious aspects, like worshipping Sanamahi, Lois are celebrated for their diligence and creativity. Chakpa's pottery, one of Manipur's oldest crafts, reflects culture and identity. Utilizing hand-moulding techniques without a wheel, potters fire their creations in open kilns, incorporating stone into clay for durability and a distinct red ochre hue called uyan. However, modernization and metal utensils have eroded demand and value, forcing many potters to seek alternative livelihoods.

Sekmai, within the Meitei ethnic subgroup, showcases its pottery craft, producing vessels for cooking, storage, and ceremonial use. Like Andro, Sekmai's pottery tradition has faced challenges with modernisation, leading some potters to explore new income streams. The Lois people's traditional customs and beliefs, including the Nahut Narang Thouram (piercing to put ear ring ceremony) of Phayeng, paint a vivid picture of their cultural richness. These customs, rituals, and practices emphasize the deep connection between the Lois and their environment, rooted in sustainable agriculture and livelihood practices.

The Lois communities have a rich cultural heritage that encompasses various aspects of life, from religious practices to traditional dances and crafts. They uphold their indigenous religion, customs, festivals, dances, music, and folklore. The Lai Haraoba, a traditional ritual that venerates the universe's creation and the interconnectedness between humans and nature, holds particular importance. Traditional dances like Khamba Thoibi Jagoi and Pung Cholom are integral to their cultural expression.

Methodology:

This study employs a systematic approach to analyse the cultural and economic heritage of the Lois communities in Manipur through spatial analysis. Spatial analysis involves the investigation of social, economic, and cultural patterns based on geospatial data, encompassing location, area, shape, and more. The methodology integrates geographic techniques, statistics, and interdisciplinary research to comprehend the Lois people's significance within Manipur's cultural and economic context. Primary data is gathered through fieldwork, interviews, and surveys, while secondary data is derived from published literature, maps, and government records. Information on Lois settlements, population, land use, agriculture, and cultural activities is acquired.

The main objectives of this study are:

1. Identify factors influencing their spatial distribution.
2. Assess their socio-economic status relative to other groups.
3. Explore their cultural and economic heritage's significance.

Economic Contributions:

Despite facing marginalization and discrimination, the Lois communities have made substantial contributions to Manipur's economy. They are known for their skilled craftsmanship, producing items like pottery, silk textiles, and ironwork. One of the notable economic contributions of the Lois communities is their involvement in various traditional occupations. They engage in agriculture, crafts, and trade, which have sustained their communities and contributed to the local economy. For instance, pottery making is a distinctive skill among the Lois, with pottery products being marketed locally, showcased at festivals, and even exported to other regions and nations. This craft not only serves as a source of income but also reflects their cultural heritage. The Lois communities also practice collective farming, irrigation, harvesting, and marketing of produce. This sense of community and resource sharing demonstrates their close-knit nature and the resilience of their traditional practices. Additionally, their participation in festivals, dances, music, and rituals contributes to Manipur's cultural richness.

Symbolism and Motifs in Lois Pottery:

Pottery making is a significant aspect of the cultural heritage of the Lois community in Manipur. For generations, pottery has been a traditional craft that holds both utilitarian and cultural value. The Lois people's pottery-making techniques, styles, and motifs are emblematic of their identity and way of life. Let's delve into the world of traditional pottery making among the Lois in Manipur. Pottery making has a long history among the Lois community, dating back to ancient times. It has been an essential skill passed down through generations, with knowledge and techniques transferred orally and through hands-on experience. Pottery served various purposes, from cooking vessels to storage containers and ceremonial items, making it an integral part of everyday life. The pottery-making process involves several stages, each requiring specific skills and knowledge.

These stages include:

- a. Clay Collection and Preparation:** The process begins with the collection of suitable clay from specific locations known for their quality. The clay is then thoroughly cleaned, kneaded, and mixed to achieve the desired consistency and remove impurities.
- b. Shaping:** The potter shapes the clay using traditional hand-building techniques. Coiling and pinching are commonly used methods to create the basic form of the vessel. The potter's hands play a crucial role in shaping and refining the vessel's structure.
- c. Decoration:** Lois pottery is often adorned with intricate patterns and motifs. Various tools and techniques, such as incising, stamping, and appliqué, are used to create decorative elements on the vessel's surface. These designs hold cultural significance and reflect the community's artistic heritage.
- d. Firing:** Once the pottery has been shaped and decorated, it is left to dry before firing. Traditional firing techniques, such as open pit firing or using simple kilns, are employed. The firing process is a critical stage that transforms the clay into durable pottery through the application of heat.

Lois pottery serves both utilitarian and cultural purposes. In daily life, these pottery items are used for cooking, storing water, and other domestic needs. Their craftsmanship ensures that they are functional and durable. Additionally, pottery plays a vital role in cultural ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations. Certain pottery items may be created specifically for ritual use, reflecting the community's spiritual practices and beliefs.

While traditional pottery making remains an integral part of Lois culture, it faces challenges in the modern era. Factors such as changing lifestyles, urbanization, and the availability of modern alternatives have led to a decline in the demand for traditional pottery. Moreover, the knowledge and skills required for pottery making are often passed down within families, which can result in limited dissemination of the craft. Traditional pottery making is a valuable cultural heritage among the Lois community in Manipur. This craft is a manifestation of their artistic expression, practical needs, and connection to their roots. By recognizing and promoting the significance of traditional pottery, the Lois people are not only preserving their history but also ensuring the continuity of their rich cultural legacy for future generations.

Weaving and Textiles:

Weaving and textiles hold a significant cultural, social, and economic importance among the Lois community in Manipur. The Lois people are known for their intricate weaving techniques, vibrant textiles, and traditional garments that reflect their rich cultural heritage. Weaving is not just a craft; it's a way of life, deeply interwoven with the community's identity, history, and daily routines. The Lois women are the custodians of the art of weaving. They skilfully create textiles using traditional techniques that have been passed down through generations. The weaving process often involves using handlooms, where threads of different colours and textures are meticulously interlaced to form intricate patterns and designs. The Lois textiles are characterized by their distinctive patterns and motifs. The use of vibrant colours, geometric shapes, floral designs, and intricate borders are common elements in their textiles. Each design has cultural and symbolic significance, representing aspects of nature, beliefs, and social identity. Traditional Lois attire consists of garments like the "Innaphi" and "Phanek" for women, and the "Pheijom" for men. The "Innaphi"

is a wrap-around shawl, often adorned with intricate patterns and worn over the shoulder. The "Phanek" is a cylindrical skirt, woven with great precision. These garments are not just clothing items; they embody the Lois cultural ethos and are often worn during festivals, ceremonies, and daily life. Weaving is deeply intertwined with Lois society. It's not only an artistic expression but also a means of preserving cultural heritage and passing down ancestral knowledge. Weaving is a communal activity that brings women together, fostering social bonds and camaraderie. It's also a rite of passage for young girls, as they learn the art of weaving from older generations.

Weaving has also been a source of economic sustenance for many Lois families. The textiles produced by Lois weavers are not only used within the community but also traded in local markets and beyond. The sale of these textiles provides income to weaving households, contributing to the local economy. While traditional weaving practices have persisted for generations, they have faced challenges due to modernization, changing consumer preferences, and the availability of factory-made alternatives. However, there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional textiles, both within the community and beyond. Efforts are being made to promote and preserve Lois weaving traditions. Local organizations, government initiatives, and cultural institutions have taken steps to support and promote Lois weaving. Training programs, workshops, and exhibitions have been organized to empower weavers, improve their skills, and showcase their creations. Additionally, the use of social media and e-commerce platforms has expanded the market reach of Lois textiles.

Kouna Products:

Kouna, also known as water reed or sedge, is a type of aquatic grass that grows abundantly in the wetlands of Manipur. Among the Lois community, kouna has played a vital role in their traditional way of life, serving as a versatile material for crafting a wide range of items, from household essentials to decorative and functional products. Kouna grass is typically harvested from the wetlands during its peak growth season. The harvested grass is then carefully sorted, cleaned, and dried before it can be used for crafting. The Lois people have developed age-old techniques to ensure the grass is properly treated to achieve the desired quality for weaving and crafting.

Kouna grass is used to create various traditional items that cater to both practical and artistic needs. The grass is skilfully woven to produce items such as mats, baskets, bags, hats, and even larger products like fishing traps and boat-like structures. Mats woven from kouna grass are commonly used in Lois households. These mats are placed on the floor and serve multiple purposes, from sitting and sleeping to social gatherings. They are known for their durability and insulation properties, making them suitable for the local climate. Kouna bags and baskets are used for carrying agricultural produce, vegetables, and various household items.

Kouna weaving is not just a practical skill; it holds cultural significance among the Lois community. It's a heritage craft that has been passed down through generations, connecting the present with the past. Kouna items are often used during traditional ceremonies, festivals, and rituals, showcasing their role in preserving cultural identity. Kouna weaving also contributes to the economic livelihood of many Lois families. The products crafted from kouna grass have a market both within the community and beyond. Local markets and exhibitions provide platforms for artisans to showcase and sell their kouna products, contributing to their income.

The Lois community's reliance on kouna grass has led to a deep understanding of wetland ecosystems and the need for sustainable harvesting practices. Over the years, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of preserving wetlands and the environment, which are closely linked to kouna production. Modernization and changing consumer preferences have posed challenges to traditional kouna crafting. However, efforts are being made to promote and sustain this traditional craft. Artisans and organizations are working together to create awareness about the cultural and environmental significance of kouna weaving. Local initiatives, workshops, and training programs are conducted to empower artisans, enhance their skills, and create innovative designs that appeal to contemporary consumers. These efforts not only ensure the continuity of kouna weaving but also elevate its status as a unique cultural heritage.

Wood Carving:

Wood carving is a traditional craft that holds deep cultural and artistic significance among the Lois community of Manipur. This intricate craft involves the skilled manipulation of wood to create a wide range of functional and decorative items, reflecting the community's heritage, beliefs, and creativity. Wood carving has been a traditional art form among the Lois of Manipur for generations. The skilled craftsmen of this community have mastered the art of carving intricate designs on wood. It is fascinating to see how they turn a simple block of wood into a beautiful piece of art. Their work is not limited to just decorative items, but they also create functional objects like furniture, utensils, musical instruments like drums, and agricultural implements. The designs they carve are inspired by nature, religion, and their culture, which makes their work unique and meaningful. The Lois of Manipur take great pride in their wood carving skills, and their work is highly sought after in the local markets. Many tourists also visit the region to witness the craftsmen at work and to purchase their beautiful creations. It is impressive to see how the Lois of Manipur have managed to keep their traditional craft alive in the modern age. Their dedication to preserving their cultural heritage is truly admirable, and their wood carving skills are a testament to their commitment.

Wood carving plays a significant role in adorning traditional Lois architecture. Elaborate carvings are incorporated into pillars, lintels, door frames, and roof structures of traditional houses, community halls, and temples. These carvings not only enhance the visual appeal of the structures but also serve as a testament to the community's artistic heritage.

Ironwork:

Lois artisans also engage in blacksmithing to create tools, implements, and ornamental items. Ironwork holds a special place in the cultural and economic landscape of the Lois community in Kakching, Manipur. Kakching, a district of Manipur, is known for its rich tradition of ironwork, and the Lois people in this region have been practicing this craft for generations. Ironwork encompasses a wide range of activities, including blacksmithing, toolmaking, and the creation of ornamental and utilitarian objects. This craft not only reflects the community's artistic skills but also plays a significant role in their livelihoods and cultural identity. The art of ironwork in Kakching has a historical legacy that dates back centuries. Iron tools and implements have been essential for agricultural practices, daily life, and trade in the region. The Lois people, with their indigenous knowledge, have mastered the techniques of working with iron, transforming raw metal into items of utility and beauty. Blacksmiths among the Lois community in Kakching are skilled craftsmen who work with iron to create a diverse range of products.

Ironwork goes beyond mere craftsmanship for the Lois community. It holds cultural and ritualistic significance as well. Iron items are often used in traditional ceremonies, festivals, and rituals. Ironwork has also been a source of economic sustenance for many Lois families. The crafted items are not only used within the community but are also sold in local markets and beyond. This economic dimension has helped preserve the craft and pass it down through generations. While ironwork among the Lois community has a rich history, it has faced challenges over the years due to factors like changing lifestyles, modernisation, and the availability of factory-made alternatives.

Salt Production:

This practice not only provided a vital seasoning ingredient for their cuisine but also held cultural and economic significance. The Lois people's unique method of salt production reflects their resourcefulness and adaptability to their local environment. Salt holds cultural importance among the Lois community in Manipur. It is used not only as a seasoning but also as a symbol of purity and hospitality. Historically, salt was a valuable commodity and played a role in trade and exchange with neighbouring communities. Traditional salt production among the Lois of Manipur exemplifies the community's resourcefulness and connection to their environment. By embracing opportunities for cultural revival, sustainable practices, and cultural tourism, the Lois people can continue to celebrate and preserve their unique salt production heritage.

Cane and Bamboo Craft:

Cane and bamboo craft is another traditional art form that the Lois of Manipur have perfected over generations. Skilled craftsmen use the natural materials to create a range of products, including baskets, mats, hats, and even furniture. Like their wood carving, the designs of their cane and bamboo craft are inspired by nature, religion, and their culture. The craftsmanship is meticulous, with each piece being carefully woven and constructed to create durable and functional items. The Lois of Manipur take great pride in their cane and bamboo craft skills, and their work is highly sought after in the local markets. Tourists also visit the region to witness the craftsmen at work and to purchase their beautiful creations.

The skilful manipulation of these natural materials results in a wide range of functional and decorative items that reflect the community's creativity, traditions, and connection with nature. Cane and bamboo craft involves the weaving, bending, and shaping of cane and bamboo stalks to create various products. The process requires a deep understanding of the materials, as artisans carefully select, cure, and prepare the cane and bamboo before starting the weaving process. Techniques like splitting, boiling, and drying are employed to enhance the flexibility and durability of the materials. The craft produces a diverse array of items that are both utilitarian and ornamental. Utilitarian products include household items like baskets, mats, trays, containers, and furniture. Bamboo is often used to construct sturdy furniture pieces due to its strength and flexibility.

Cane and bamboo craft is deeply rooted in the Lois community's culture and daily life. The craft's history dates back to ancient times when these materials were used for constructing homes, tools, and utensils. Many cultural and religious ceremonies incorporate cane and bamboo items, such as baskets for offerings, traditional musical instruments, and decorative elements in festivals and rituals. Cane and bamboo craft contribute significantly to the economic livelihoods of Lois artisans. This craft provides income generation opportunities, especially for women who often play a central role in weaving and crafting cane and bamboo products.

Traditional Musical Instrument Making:

The Lois community of Manipur has a rich tradition of crafting musical instruments that reflects their expertise in traditional craftsmanship. Using natural materials like bamboo and wood, skilled artisans produce a variety of instruments, including drums, flutes, and stringed instruments. Influenced by nature, religion, and cultural heritage, these instruments are meticulously designed and crafted, resulting in both artistic and functional pieces. This practice is deeply ingrained in the Lois community's cultural heritage, rituals, and artistic expressions.

Significance of Traditional Musical Instruments:

Music occupies a central role in Lois society, serving as a vital component in rituals, festivals, celebrations, and daily life. Beyond creating melodies, traditional musical instruments play a crucial role in storytelling, passing down oral traditions, and connecting the community with its roots. Crafting these instruments requires a profound understanding of woodworking, carving, and acoustics. Lois artisans often utilize locally available materials like bamboo, jackfruit, and teak, which are carefully selected and seasoned to enhance sound quality and durability.

Diverse Range of Instruments:

The Lois artisans' skilful craftsmanship and intricate techniques yield a diverse array of traditional musical instruments, each possessing a unique sound and purpose. Notable examples include:

1. **Pena:** Resembling a lute, this intricately carved stringed instrument plays a vital role in storytelling and traditional ballads.
2. **Pung:** A barrel-shaped drum made from wood and animal skin, the Pung is central to Manipuri classical music and dance forms.
3. **Basi:** Lois artisans craft basi of various sizes, producing haunting melodies that accompany storytelling and traditional performances.

Cultural and Spiritual Significance:

These traditional musical instruments extend beyond their musical utility, holding deep cultural and spiritual significance. They are integral to religious rituals, cultural festivals, and traditional ceremonies, serving as vessels that maintain a strong connection to the community's history. Passed down through generations, these instruments preserve their authenticity while sometimes incorporating modern designs and materials to adapt to contemporary demands.

Challenges and Opportunities:

The Lois communities have preserved their own distinct culture and dialects, setting them apart from the dominant Meitei culture. Their contributions to Manipur's cultural and economic development are significant, spanning agriculture, crafts, festivals, and rituals. The Lois' history is interwoven with Meitei society, and their unique traditions have persevered amidst centuries of adversity.

Challenges such as land degradation and soil erosion threaten their economic stability, but also present opportunities for eco-friendly initiatives and cultural tourism. Lois communities' distinct heritage and contributions underscore their significance in Manipur's history and future. Their crafts, customs, and sustainable practices shape not only their identity but also the region's cultural and economic fabric. Efforts to preserve their heritage and promote sustainable development can pave the way for a resilient and vibrant Lois community in Manipur.

The Lois community in Manipur, like many indigenous groups, faces a combination of challenges and opportunities that impact their history, traditions, crafts, textiles, economic means of livelihoods, and overall well-being. These factors shape the present and future of the Lois people, influencing how they navigate their cultural heritage and socioeconomic prospects.

Challenges:

- i. **Cultural Erosion:** The rapid pace of modernisation and exposure to external influences poses a significant challenge to the preservation of Lois traditions and cultural practices. Younger generations might be drawn towards more mainstream lifestyles, leading to a potential loss of traditional knowledge.
- ii. **Economic Pressure:** The shift from traditional livelihoods to modern economic activities can lead to a disconnect from traditional crafts and practices. Economic pressures might discourage individuals from engaging in time-intensive crafts like pottery, weaving, and instrument making, as these may not provide immediate financial benefits.
- iii. **Education and Awareness:** As education becomes more accessible, there's a risk that traditional skills and knowledge might be devalued among younger generations. Ensuring that education includes a strong cultural component is essential to maintain a balance between modern and traditional knowledge.
- iv. **Market Access and Demand:** Traditional crafts, textiles, and musical instruments face competition from mass-produced alternatives in the market. Lois artisans often struggle to find a sustainable market for their products, which can lead to financial instability.
- v. **Environmental Factors:** Deforestation, climate change, and environmental degradation can impact the availability of raw materials required for crafts like wood carving, bamboo weaving, and pottery. This affects the sustainability of these traditional practices.

Opportunities:

- i. **Cultural Revival:** Despite challenges, there is a growing interest among Lois youth in rediscovering their cultural roots. Efforts to document, celebrate, and transmit traditional knowledge through cultural events, workshops, and educational programs can aid in the revival of Lois traditions.
- ii. **Heritage Tourism and Cultural Exchange:** The unique cultural heritage of the Lois community can be a draw for cultural tourists and enthusiasts. Establishing community-based tourism initiatives that showcase traditional crafts, textiles, and practices can provide economic opportunities and support the preservation of these traditions.
- iii. **Value of Handcrafted Products:** As the world becomes more conscious of sustainability and ethical consumption, handcrafted products hold greater appeal. Lois crafts, with their authenticity and cultural significance, can find a niche market that appreciates the craftsmanship and stories behind each piece.
- iv. **Skill Development and Innovation:** While traditional practices are important, there is also room for innovation. Lois artisans can experiment with modern designs, techniques, and materials to create products that retain their cultural essence while appealing to contemporary consumers.
- v. **Collective Efforts and Advocacy:** By forming cooperatives, associations, and networks, Lois artisans can collectively address challenges such as market access, fair pricing, and sustainable sourcing of materials. Advocacy for the recognition and protection of their cultural heritage can also yield positive results.

vi. Education Integration: Incorporating traditional knowledge into formal and informal education systems can ensure that younger generations value and appreciate their cultural heritage. This can be achieved through cultural education programs, workshops, and awareness campaigns.

Conclusion:

The Lois community in Manipur faces a delicate balance between preserving their rich cultural heritage and adapting to modern realities. While challenges persist, the opportunities for cultural revival, economic sustainability, and meaningful engagement with their traditions are also present. Through collaborative efforts, innovative approaches, and a strong sense of identity, the Lois people can continue to navigate these challenges and leverage the opportunities to ensure the continuity and vibrancy of their unique heritage.

The Lois communities of Manipur, belonging to the Scheduled Caste category, stand as living testaments to the resilience of indigenous cultures in the face of adversity. Their history, traditions, and contributions to the state's cultural and economic heritage deserve recognition and preservation. The Lois' journey has been one of perseverance against marginalization, discrimination, and challenges. They have faced historical and contemporary obstacles that threatened their way of life, yet they have managed to maintain their unique identity. The customs, rituals, and practices of the Lois stand as powerful symbols of their cultural distinctiveness. The Mahut Narang Thouram ceremony, the Lai Haraoba ritual, and the pottery-making traditions exemplify the rich heritage they have carried forward through generations. These practices are not just rituals; they are repositories of knowledge, wisdom, and history that connect the Lois people to their roots. These villages, each with its own specialties and contributions, collectively paint a picture of a people deeply connected to their land and environment. From pottery-making to silk textiles, from salt production to martial support, the Lois have shaped the economic activities of Manipur.

It is imperative to recognize that the challenges faced by the Lois are not just a part of their history; they continue to grapple with issues that impact their livelihoods and well-being. Land alienation, lack of representation, and social stigmatization remain pressing concerns. As Manipur moves forward in the modern era, it is crucial to ensure that policies and initiatives are inclusive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the Lois communities. The Lois' economic contributions and potential avenues for sustainable development must be acknowledged and nurtured. The revival of traditional crafts, such as pottery and weaving, can not only preserve their cultural heritage but also provide economic opportunities. Additionally, exploring eco-tourism, forest conservation, and sustainable energy can create new avenues for income generation while safeguarding their environment. As Manipur seeks to build a future that is inclusive, diverse, and sustainable, the Lois communities must be integral to this vision. Their history is intertwined with the history of Manipur itself, and their unique identity enriches the state's cultural mosaic. Policies that address their challenges, promote their well-being, and celebrate their contributions can pave the way for a more just and harmonious society.

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