

Indigenous Women Movement: A Study of Crime and Violence in Women's Journals

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Abstract—*Manipur, a north-east Indian state, is well known for its women's movements, agitation and counter agitations since pre-independence. The first (1904), the second (1939) 'Nupi Lal' and demonstrations against British and central government are events that people may look up. When we talk about violence in Manipur, the conflicts between underground groups and state comes to mind. We hardly think about internal violence that civilians face every day, mentally and physically. Example: repeated curfew and imposition of CrPC 144. These conflicts lead to agitations, counter agitations, curfews and demonstrations. The psychological status of people is disturbed repeatedly because of constant nervousness, anxiety and aggression. In such situations it is women who come forward and demonstrate their dissatisfaction, maneuver from market to government departments and provide welfare and security to family.*

In my paper, I have observed that apart from violence faced by Manipuri women in public domain, woman also faces domestic violence or mental harassment in private space from male counterparts. Considering this, NGOs have been set up as a helping hand "Young Woman Help Organization", and "Organization for Indian Crimes against Woman", are two organizations that focus on crime and violence against women and girl child in Manipur. They also circulate journals – 'Nupigi Punshi' and 'Woman and Crime', dealing with the crimes and violence faced and perpetuated by women and men both.

In self-narratives of these journals, we see a different woman - a victim, a passive helpless woman desperate for a way out. This is a counter narrative of the provider and the protector recorded in the history of Manipuri women's movement. The courage and valor of these women exercise only at the public space and not in private space. In the domestic space they are the victims of the one whom they are protecting.

Introduction

Manipur is north-east Indian state lying at an altitude of 23°83'N – 25°68'N and a longitude of 93°03'E – 94°78'E, covering an area of 22,327 square kilometers. Its capital, Imphal, is an oval-shaped valley surrounded by blue mountain ranges. As per the 2011 census, the population of Manipur is 2,570,390, bearing 1,736,236 as rural population and 834,154 as urban population. Apart from Meitei, Kuki, Naga, Pangal, Manipuri Brahmins, other tribes and Mayang (outsiders) the population also comprises of the militants and government armed forces.

There are at least 28 insurgent groups in Manipur as well as on its border; and 9 government security forces units. There is a long history of violence between these two-armed groups irrespective of the scenario. For instance: *Heirangoithong Masacre* on 14th March 1984 where 13 people were killed and 31 were injured; *Operation Blue Bird* at Oinam on 10th July 1987 where 30 villages faced the terror of this operation, 14 civilians were shot dead and many died of hunger; the *Malom Massacre* on 2nd November'2000 in which 10 civilians were killed due to indiscriminate firing. When we talk about violence in Manipur, these incidents and the conflicts between the underground groups and the state comes to our mind. We hardly think about the internal violence that every civilian is facing on daily basis, both mentally and physically.

During armed conflict, the men in Manipur tend to avoid the public spaces as they are more likely to be attacked, conscripted or taken hostage.[1] In Manipur, women have always played an important role in the social as well as the political sphere of the society. They had expressed their dissatisfaction and discontentment against British colonizers, Indian government, state government, society, etc. Since pre-independence of India they are fighting and protecting their love ones and their land. The two women's agitations – the first (1904) and the second (1939) *Nupi Lal* and the various demonstrations against the British as well as central government are some of the milestones that people may look up for.

Many historians, sociologists, and political scientist had sung the praises of courage and gallantry of Manipuri women. Sociologist R.K. Helen Devi in *Women and Socio-political movement in recent Past & Present Manipur* (2012) also said that from the very beginning the women in Manipur have been enjoying a high status and play an important role in the society. They have been never confined within the four walls as compared to many other Indian societies. They are financially independent and are very industrious. E.W. Dum in *Gazetteer of Manipur* (1975) said that Manipuri women both married and unmarried are not confined to their zenanas, and they neither cover their face in front of strangers. Moreover,

their management skills are remarkable as they manage the entire household work, marketing and night guard shift.

However, it is unconvincing to say that Manipur is an egalitarian society where men and women enjoy equal rights, no doubt the women have enjoyed a privileged status as compared to any other Indian society. Like the women in other states, the women in Manipuri are also a prey of the various crimes against women. The women in Manipur have experienced numerous violent acts both in public and private spheres in the hands of the security forces and their families respectively. The case of Ima Sarojini, where she was compelled to stay away from her daughter and granddaughter after she along with 11 Imas (Mother) stood naked before the Assam Rifles protesting the brutal killing of Thangjam Monorama.[2] Irrespective of the intense solidarities she had to cope up with the social and emotional costs, leading to serious family discord. Ima Sarojini is an example of such women who are stuck between their solidarity towards their society and the disharmony with their family. Further, Teresa Rehman had pointed out the health issues faced by the *Meira Paibies*, which she encountered in her visit in 2013.

Considering the various crimes and violence prevalent in Manipur, many organizations and NGOs have been set up as a helping hand. Among the various woman help organizations "Young Woman Help Organization" and "Organization for Indian Crimes against Woman", are the two organizations that focus only on the crime and violence against women and girl child in Manipur. The "Young Woman Help Organization" was founded on June 2011 by Th. Shanti Devi as its president. The objective behind the foundation of this organization is the belief that, "It is important to protect the women from crime and violence prevailing within the society." [3] The day the organization was founded, the members also started a journal called *Nupigi Punshi*, which can be translated as 'life of woman'.

Due to internal conflicts between the members, in 2013 some members of "Young Woman Help Organization" left and formed a new organization called 'Organization for Indian Crimes Against Woman' with Arambam Ongbi Robita Leima as its president. It is a national level organization and its head office is located at New Delhi. The objective of this organization is to help the deserted and downtrodden women inside as well as outside Manipur. The day the organization was founded, the members also started a journal called *Woman and Crime*.

These journals are not collectable as they are not entertainment magazines. Many people do not prefer to keep a magazine, journal or a book that comprises the pictures and story of burnt or a mutilated female body. In Meitei culture, it is inauspicious to keep such pictures. When I reached out to the organizations' president regarding the crime and violence against women in Manipur they readily and generously donated the journals from 2011 to 2017. I interviewed the presidents and some members of the two organizations and

enquired about the reason behind the publication of such journals. Both the organizations' presidents believe that reading about these cases will open the eyes of the women who are going through the same situation. One of the members of 'Young Women Help Organization' said that most of the cases that they deal with are registered as complaints by the victims through the contact details that have been provided in the journal. She further said that women are afraid and at the same time ashamed to reveal the violence and crime that they are bearing, and they don't know where to reach out for help.

In the recorded history and books of Manipur, women are presented as courageous and hardworking. However, while recording these brave and courageous women, we are forgetting the one who is burnt for being infertile, the woman who was raped and discarded by unknown, the girl who was abducted and married before she reached her age, the mother who was abandoned by her husband and what not? There are many women both in urban as well as rural who are facing the same scenario but left unnoticed or unrecorded. These two journals bring forward the other side of the status of Manipuri women leaving behind the local censorship of the social stigma.

Women's movement and organizations in Manipur

The basic objective behind any women's movement in the world is for the upliftment of their status in their society or demanding equal rights as their male counterparts. However, in Manipur the various women's movements and agitations carried out have had different objectives. Their demands are of eradication of exploitation of the state or society by the rulers or any social evil. Manipur, a state which has undergone various layers of rupture under different forces, experiences a history where the collective women influence the society through activism. They had protected and rescued innocent people during critical situations as leaders or participant of *Nupi Lan*, members of *Nisha Bandh*[4], or *Meira Paibies*[5].

They had served and helped the menfolk during the 'Seven Years Devastation' caused due to war against Awas, now Myanmar, in 1817 [6]. They had also protected and safeguarded the political and economic discourses after British colonized Manipur in 1891. Pre as well as post-Independence of India, Manipuri women had never raised a voice for equal rights or liberty. Their protest and agitations were more about socio-political issues, economical protection and safeguarding of the state and its people.

Post British colonization of Manipur, the history of Manipur is famous for two women's agitations, *Nupi Lans*. The first *Nupi Lan* or the First Women's Agitation broke out in 1904, against the rapid change in the administration of Manipur under the British rule. Later, in 1939 a similar women's agitation broke out - generally known as the Second *Nupi Lan*. Rise in the price of rice and the scarcity of it due to excessive export outside Manipur led to the outbreak of this agitation.

After Independence, during 1950s and 1960s, the women protested and fought along with their male counterparts against the central government demanding self-government. This movement was largely known as the 'Statehood Movement', a movement for self-government. In 1950 when India became a Sovereign Democratic Republic, Manipur became a Part C state, within the Union of India without a Legislative Assembly of its own. Subsequently, the administration was run at the district level by the appointed District Judge and the District Magistrate. This deeply disappointed the people of Manipur who started voicing their dissatisfaction and hence marked the beginning of the Statehood movement. The women's participation in the Movement was marked with the meeting held on 20th July 1952, by the Manipur *Mahila Sammelain*, where hundreds of women, both from the hills and plains attended and passed a resolution demanding for Legislative Assembly and a separate government for the people of Manipur.

Post-Statehood, the women's movement took a new turn, their focus shifted to social structure of Manipur, they took up issues related to socio-cultural elevation. For instance, the Nisha Bandh Movement that started around 1970s and the various steps exercised by the *Meira Paibi* Movement that emerged around 1980s. The production and consumption of *Yu* (alcohol)[7] was practiced by the people of Manipur since ancient time both by men and women.

During late 1970s and early 80s the problem of insurgency became prominent. The emergence of insurgency and their demand for forming an independent sovereign state of Manipur attracted many draconian laws. On 8th September, the central government declared the state as disturbed area and Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA), 1958 was imposed. The increase in the unbearable atrocities by the armed forces lead to the emergence of *Meira Paibi* with the sole motto to protect and safeguard the human rights of the people of Manipur. It is a movement started by women to fight against the Government and their military to protect the civilians. Its members are exclusively confined to women only, and these women are generally between 30-60 years of age irrespective of their class.

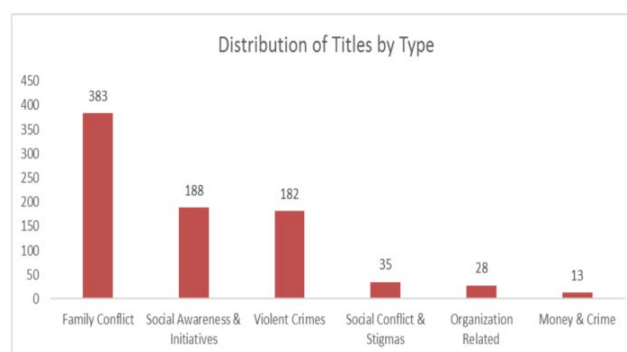
The role of the Manipuri women is not limited to safeguarding and protection of the people from the security forces or insurgent groups but also from any social evils. They had consoled and settled conflict between the families, disputes with the society, domestic violence, prostitution, practice of polygamy, sale of liquor and so on. They also conduct welfare program for women and children with an aim for over-all development of the society. They have dedicated their life for their people and their love ones without being paid or requested. Their actions and demonstrations are spontaneous reaction of any evil done to anyone in the society.

We can also call the women in Manipur as peace builders because of their active role in settling social issues and conflicts both at local and state level. The *Nupi Keithel*, which

can be translated as Women's Market took undeniable part. They have never sat idle or ignored any social unrest. They have responded sharply and showed solidarity when anything hampered the everyday life of all the people in Manipur. Since it lies in the heart of the Imphal valley, shutting down of this place hinders the marketing as well as transportation of the society. Thus, paralyzing the Imphal city whose impact was born by the banks, offices, transportation both public and private, merchants and the exchequer of the state. Therefore, their role is crucial in shaping any Women's Movement in Manipur.

Violence and Crime against Women in Manipur

The articles of the journals – *Nupigi Punshi* and *Women and Crime* (from 2011 to 2017) record the cases of crime and violence that the organization had encountered and solved. These journals are the predominant contributors to such themes in the history of Manipuri journalism. I have clustered the various crime and violence articles recorded in the journals, into four clusters – Social Conflict & Stigmas, Family Conflicts, Violent Crimes & Money related crimes. Based on the data collected from these two journals I have mapped the type of articles (crimes reported, editorials etc.) issued in the journals in Manipur in the following chart:



Out of the 889 articles analyzed in the 53 journals from the period 2011-17, the highest number of articles reported about family conflict incidents (46%), followed by articles about social awareness and initiatives (23%) and violent crimes (22%). The remaining articles talked about incidents related to social conflicts (4%) and money related crimes (2%).

Unlike the glorified women's movement in the history of Manipur, these journals bring forward a different perspective of women's movement in Manipur – who are fighting against crime and violence in the society on a daily basis. These are the faceless women whose struggles and sacrifices would have been buried along with their soul, unheard and unnoticed by anyone unless they are circulated by the organizations as an awareness movement.[8]

In sum, all the crime and violence faced by women in Manipur are interrelated to each other and the root cause of these crime and violence are yet to be cleansed. Many women had protested

against the social – political and economic exploitation by the state or central government, but have not come across any demonstration for domestic violence or sexual exploitation, except for few cases of rape and murder. The women in Manipur are facing the injustice and crime like any other women in the world, however silently and bearing the pain unless it succumbs her both mentally and physically.

About the organizations and the journals

Nupigi Punshi is published by 'Young Women Help Organization' and *Women and Crime* is published by 'Organization for Indian Women against Crime'. These journals are the outcomes of the cases of crime and violence dealt by the organizations. The editor of both the journals had published the cases with the consent of the victim, culprit or their family. However, there are cases where they do not reveal the identity of the victim or the family. They had published these journals with an objective of enlightening the women in Manipur about the crime and violence against women.

Young Women Help Organization (YWHO)

'Young Women Help Organization' (YWHO) is a civil society help group founded on 6th June 2011 and the journal was published on the same day at G.M. Hall in Imphal. It is a state level organization. Around 1000 women were gathered on the foundation day and was broadcast by Imphal Satellite Television (ISTV), a cable network based in Imphal, in maximum location of Manipur. When the organization began, there were 30 members including 20 work persons. They are not related to any government or non-government organization socially or economically. It is a group of women who are enthused in helping the women in Manipur irrespective of the class or community. The women had started the organization to help and provide justice to the woman whose cases may have piled with other cases at the government court of Manipur or may have died without revealing to anyone. In some cases, the organization also help monetarily to the victim or the family. Further, they have planned a short home for the homeless or abandoned women.

The revenue of the organization is generated by selling the journal copies (Rs. 30/- per copy) and by organizing non-profit events such as beauty pageants. Moreover, the victim or their family donates to the organization after their case has been resolved.

Organization for Indian Women against Crime

'Organization for Indian Women against Crime' was founded on March 2013 at Delhi University complex, along with Manipur Students' Association Delhi (MSAD). It is a national level civil society organization founded to help the abandoned and downtrodden women and prohibit crime and violence against women. The organization claimed that they had worked with 'Young Women Help Group', at state level and separated after 2 years for national level organization.[9] The

head office of the organization is located at Chhawla, New Delhi and its branch office is at Keisampat, opposite Sangai Express, Imphal West. Recently, the branch office had relocated at Canchipur near Standard Robarth Hr. Sc. School, Imphal East. The funding of the organization comes from donation from the local MLAs or Ministers and by organizing non-profitable shows such as Miss Contest. Currently, the organization has 500 members from 60 Kendras.

The crime and violence incidents collected are through the channels of network that they have in every Kendra, newspaper or approached by the victim or victim's family. All the details of the incident are collected and reported by the organization itself without any mediator between. The organization either go to the place where the incident occurred and collect the information or the victim approaches them by coming to the office or via calls. Apart from the journal, *Women and Crimes*, they also employ social media such as Facebook and Youtube channels (both in Editor's name – Robita Leima) to spread their awareness. In the social sites, they share posts related to the crime and violence along with pictures and videos that they had recorded while interacting with the victim or their family. This page is managed by Robita Leima and is followed by 4,999 followers. The Youtube channel covers the sight of the violence and crime and the interaction with the victim or their family.

The organization had also produced a film *Sekmai Turel* as an awareness program. The film was directed by Dhnaraj Khomdran and it was cast by Jolly as Takhelei, the victim; Bony as Achouba, victim's first husband; and Pritam as Chinglen, victim's second husband. The film was screened in all the film theatres in Manipur, both rural and urban. Later, the filmed was screened at 100 localities as awareness program by the club members of the locality as a charity show.

In a society like Manipur, where corruption and lawlessness prevail such civil society is a must. They are curative in nature and not bias to gender, class or community. They also seek legal support and help for serious crimes like rape and murder. These organization also avoids exploitation of women as they enlighten the women with their awareness programs and provides a platform where they can reveal their pain and sorrow without any fear. Further, it enhances the judgement process, as unlike the government court it is not piled up waiting for registration, lawyer fees or lawyer.

Conclusion

In a society, we normally see three forms of arbitrations, firstly, filing FIR; secondly, village council settlement and lastly, civil society intervention. In Manipur, where various social problems such as corruption, militant nationalism, insurgency and ethnic cleansing are deep-rooted, crime and violence against women are hardly concentrated upon. Cases related to family conflicts are often hushed or the women are convinced to submit to the authority of her husband. And

violent crimes such as murder and rape cases are often procrastinated from justice as the wheel of the government does not turn without bribe. By highlighting such cases of crime and violence against women, which otherwise would have gone un-noticed; and also, acting as an arbitration mediator to provide justice to women, organizations such as 'Young Women Help Organization' and 'Organization for Indian Women against Crime' play a crucial role to hinder victimization of women and to some extent men in Manipur.

The organizations are sound with both legal rules and regulations as well as cultural norms. This makes them the most preferable form of arbitration in Manipur. Moreover, as they are looking for the root cause of any conflict by interrogating both the accused and the victim, they are curative in nature. Their resolutions of the cases solved by the organization generally have three outcomes. Firstly, the culprit of violent crimes such as rape or murder are handed over to the police; secondly, cases of divorce or exploitation are settled with alimony; and lastly, cases of family conflict are advised and sometime threatened not to repeat again.

In spreading their awareness their journals play an important role. In rural areas, where social media or electricity hardly reaches, these journals do the job of spreading awareness. They are read by everyone irrespective of their age and gender. Thangjam Shanti Devi also said that in the rural area the people buy one journal and it is read by three to four houses. Most of the victims that fall under the cluster of Family conflict had reached out to the organization through the contact details provided in the journal. The organization had started the journals with an object to enlighten the people in Manipur about the various crimes and violence against women. They believe that by reading the people will reflect and hence contribute in curing the social evils against women. Indeed, their initiation had opened many eyes and had freed themselves from being succumbed by the violence against women.

No doubt, we have various mediums where women are represented, namely, films, books, other print media. However, the mode of recording carried out in these journals are very different from any other medium. The articles of the journal are direct narration of the case rather than any view or analytical presentation of the editor. Here, the articles are the printed picture of the crime scene without any biasness of the writer.

Being real cases, which had been resolved by the organizations the articles provides social awareness to the people. The victim did not succumb to the crime and violence silently, rather they came forward without any hesitation and sought justice. On the other hand, any potential perpetrators may think twice or at least think from the victim's perspective before committing any crime.

However, the rate of crime and violence against women is increasing and the organizations are trying hard to cleanse the

root cause of the crime. They believe alcohol, drug addiction and technology misuse are the root cause of crime and violence in Manipur. In relation to these roots, the organizations have carried out many awareness programs and looking forward for further program. Thus, quoting Robita Leima's word "reading and reflecting", it is believed that the employment of journal is indeed a revolutionary act. A movement in contrast to the projection of the image of women in Manipur as brave and courageous or docile and submissive, rather, the women in these articles are just individuals looking forward for survival and safety in a society where there is continuous socio-political turmoil and anxiety. With these journals, the organizations have given a voice to the downtrodden and exploited women and provide a platform to speak for themselves as individuals and not as collective like we do in our historical records.

Unfortunately, it was difficult to get hold of all the volumes of the journal as such journals are usually not kept in home for pleasure reading. Neither it is preserved in any library of Manipur. However, with the journals donated by these organization and the personal interaction with the members during the study, best efforts were made to bring forward the revolutionary movement initiated by the members of the organizations through the journals, with just their enthusiasm and knowledge for a better Manipur with no crime and violence against women.

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