

Understanding Women's Activism of Manipur: The *Meira Paibis* Movement

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Introduction

In India, women activism in general is registered in the historical struggle for independence, worker's rights and other forms of oppressive struggles but in North East India the women, in particular, have had a rich history of collective participation in organized movements for the common cause of the day. In Manipur, women are more actively involved in economic and social activities as equal participant as their men counterpart. Despite the high traditional image of womanhood in cultural and spiritual realm, women participation in political field still remains bleak, as evident in the outcome of the conventional electoral politics of the state¹. Historically in Manipur, there has been strong women's participation for instance in the *Nupilan Movements* (women's agitation) of 1904, and 1939 and later the anti-liquor and anti-drug movements or *Nishabandh* in late 1970s, all of these have been primarily social rather than political in nature, without a modern sense of political identity. In recent times there has been strong agitation against the excesses of the Armed Forces Special Power Act of 1958 operating in Manipur² as a measure for safeguarding the internal securities. The activities of women in groups or as members of voluntary organizations like *Meira Paibis* (literally translates to women torch bearers) or non-governmental organizations, pressure groups have a forceful impact on the political process of the state. The outcome of these women activism in Manipur may be slow or delayed but the relentless efforts of the women and their voluntarily participation in socio-political events in the state are very difficult to ignore and are vital for understanding the ongoing political situation in Manipur.

Women have played an important role in the social life of Manipur. It is widely believed that women in Manipur are not only accorded a high status, respected and honoured, but also participate actively in public life, and contribute greatly to the economy of the state, taking a leading role in cultural and religious practices and festival. All the above facts are true,

yet the status of Manipur women is riddled by internal contradictions apparent from the escalating rise in human rights violations, sexual violence against women both at home and outside. In Manipur, the history of women's activism, though not organized formally, but acting as pressure groups, can be traced as early as the time of the British rule. It might be due to the historical practice of *lallup system* of the erstwhile Manipur kingdom (where every adult-bodied male in a family was made to work in royal palace for a stipulated time) and also be part of military campaigns against the neighbouring rulers. All these circumstances made the women of Manipur from time immemorial to be aware of the social, economic and political happenings, which directly affected their families.

On July 15, 2004, Imphal (Manipur) an amazing historical event unfolded in front of Kangla Fort, the capital of the erstwhile Manipur Kingdom, and at the time the headquarters of the Assam Rifles, a unit of the Indian Army. Soldiers and officers watch aghast as twelve women, all in their sixties and seventies, position themselves in front of the gates and then, one by one, strip themselves naked. The *imas*, the mothers of Manipur in state of delirium protested against the custodial rape and murder, by some personals of Assam rifles, of one Thangjam Manorama, 32-year-old women suspected of being a militant of a banned outfit. These mothers hold aloft banners and shouted, 'Indian Army Rape Us', 'Take our Flesh'. In this unusual paper, it is aimed to historically construct the story of these mothers, their momentous decision to partake in an unconventional protest, and how this event made the importance of understanding the Meira paibis movement. In doing so they used their own body as a powerful tool to challenge years of sustained discrimination from the state, human rights violations and sexual violence by members of Indian Army who through AFSPA legislation were kept to protect the citizens against any anti-social entities, in this unholy situation what could they do as they were being burnt from both the ends. It may be mentioned that Manipur has been experiencing social unrest since the 1970s with the rise of the insurgency activities and counter-insurgency operations in which women and children became victims of kidnap, rape, torture and trauma of lives being threatened.

¹ Kshetri Bimola, 'Government and Politics in Manipur'. Ashangba Communication Imphal. 2010. p-72.

² Phanjaobam Tarapot, 'Bleeding Manipur'. Har-Anand Publications Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi. 2004. p-7.

The naked protest by the *imas*, brought national attention to hitherto faceless women and the Meira Paibis movement, the paper is an endeavour to understand the legacy of these protesting mothers in gender perspectives and understand their femininity, which they used as their power to fight against injustice. They come out in public space not as individual selves, but as the mothers of the society who are responsible for restoring peace and stability, the way how mothers love and care their children. This paper would be an attempt to highlight the thick description of the socio-cultural settings enabling the women of Manipur for public performances and also the connotations they accommodate in such protests. But, women's identity as a victim circumscribes their roles in the peace building process, though a few of these positives roles are told and shared, countless remain untold. Oral history is a powerful tool to retrieve voices that have been doubly marginalized in History and Historiography, using this methodology the narratives of the women of Manipur would be undertaken to give insights into a feminist frame for learning to listen, interprets testimony and reaching out to their memory³. The study retrieves women's position in Manipur history; the focus is on the contradictions inherent in the popular belief that women in Manipur enjoy a high status; respect and honour at home and extolled on public platform, women are increasingly becoming recipients of a spiralling violence due to the prevailing armed conflict situations. My pursuit of understanding the women activism of Manipur through Meira paibis movement using oral history is a way of illuminating a narrative yet undocumented to highlight the need to ensure empowerment, promoting gender equality in peace-making, and how women have become the signifier for social justice and conflict-resolution. At the heart of my research is an understanding of Gender notions and analysis of public movement in Manipur and inquire the collective consciousness of women despite negligible political roles. Although there is rapid growth of women's activism in the state, women as equal participants in the development process have been 'missing' and their 'invisibility' is striking.

OBJECTIVES:-

The main objectives of the paper are as follows –

1. To understand the legacy of the women activism in Manipur and used their oral narratives as tool to give insights into aspects of motherhood, feminism and conflict-resolution.
2. To study the action and reaction of Meira paibis in wake of AFSPA imposition in Manipur and subsequent military excesses and human rights violation.
3. Understand the broader history of Meitei women as agent of change; and analyze the value of women organization and other pressure groups in confronting the happenings in Manipur.

³ Sherna Berger Gluck, and Daphne Patai, 'Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History'. Routledge. New York, 1991. Pp- 27-31, 54-59.

The paper draws on conceptualisation of feminist theories and practices to understand the women of Manipur in history. I approach this theme by grounding it with socio-political and cultural undercurrents to understand the historical reality of women in Meitei society, as their role has not been given due place and recognition in the construction of history. Within the enclosures of socially accepted patriarchy⁴, Meitei women stepped out into the public domain and tried to carve out a place for her. Secondary data includes the literature available on the Meira Paibis movements and for a broader perspective on the issue of women; feminist historians' works on gender identity and historical works have been incorporated. Using Oral tools like Learning to listen, Interview analysis, a feminist frame for confronting the demons of public history, an interpretive oral narrative⁵ research is adopted to reach out to memory and advocacy of oral history: women activism in Manipur by understanding the *Meira paibis* experiences. The research is also largely supplemented by interviews with Office-bearers of the All Manipur Women's Social Reformation and Development Samaj (Nupi Samaj) the parent organization of all the Meira Paibis in Manipur to understand the historical significance of Meira Paibis and other women's organizations from their perspective.

For nearly six decades, an internal war-like situation has been brewing in Manipur with more than 40 insurgent groups demanding self-determination against the Indian state. The Government's response has been massive militarisation of the area and imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, (AFSPA) 1958, under which arbitrary killings, torture, massacres, forced disappearances, rape and molestations by the security forces have taken place over the years. Manipur is one the state which is under the rule of the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), under which, no member of the Armed Forces may be prosecuted without sanction from the Union Home Ministry or Union Defence Ministry⁶. Of course, however much the angst of the people and the state violations may have gone unnoticed, unreported or sidelined before 2004, with their demonstration the women made the world sit up and take notice of the situation of the state. Subsequently, In July 2016, in an interim judgment based on a petition filed by the Extrajudicial Execution Victim Families' Association Manipur (EEFVAM), the Supreme Court hauled up the Indian Army heavily for a great amount of excesses and extra-judicial killings committed by the force. The petition demanded that investigations be conducted into 1,528 cases of extra-judicial and unwarranted killings committed by the Army. The same court had, in 2014, awarded Rs 10 lakh compensation to the family of

⁴ Judith Butler, 'Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity'. Routledge: London. 1990. p. 17

⁵ Sherna Berger Gluck, and Daphne Patai, 'Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History'. Routledge. New York, 1991. p.7

⁶ Wg. Cdr. U.C. Jha, 'Armed Forces Special Powers Act: A Draconian Law?' .Vij Books India Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi.2015. Pp. 3-13.

Manorama⁷. The Honourable Supreme Court OF India have also condemned the use of extra-force by the Indian Army and stated that they will not be permitted henceforth to use extra-force unless and until they do so for their defence. Whilst such a position of the court is welcome, it is far from being cathartic⁸. The realisation that their protests and activities have done almost nothing to alter the status quo in the region may have resulted in a lot of despondency but the mothers are not ready to quit.

Across Manipur, from the valley to the hills, there are stories of the brave acts of its women, and many women felt that this time more was demanded of them. The women had left their hair loose, a mark of mourning, few wore slippers, and others were on barefoot. All were on a fast and had prayed in the morning before they embarked on this *Nupi Lan*, this women's war. Their nakedness, old, haggard, was indescribably sacred. By using their bodies from a site of sustained vulnerability to an entirely different kind of strengthened vulnerability, they challenged years of sexual violence by the Armed forces. They used their own body as a powerful tool of protest and resistance against years of sustained violation and humiliation. "*They had their weapons; we only had our body... Together the mothers gave a war cry,*" recalls Ima Soibam Momon in an interview.

In Mahashweta Devi's short story '*Draupadi*', an adivasi woman from Bengal refuses to put on her clothes after she is taken into custody and raped by soldiers of the Indian Army⁹. At the end of the story the naked Draupadi confronts the army officer who sanctioned her rape and who now stands before her as 'an unarmed target', in a state of total paralysis usually associated with the victim. In January 2000 Heisnam Kanhailal (a Manipuri theatre doyen) adapted the story as a play, with his wife Heisnam Sabitri playing the lead protagonist, who appears nude on stage, having discarded all her clothes one by one -- screaming her protest out to the men who are her rapists. For this defenceless rebel, at this point, her body becomes her voice. Her nakedness is her power, her only weapon against the political/personal oppressors who have continuously, throughout her life, sought to subjugate and silence her. Draupadi's nakedness is her war cry, her autonomous answer to sexual violence. Cornered and desperate, she fights male aggression with the very thing that is the object of that aggression. The shock of this protest affects not only the characters on stage -- Draupadi's violators -- but also the audience. ***Her nudity becomes our nakedness, her power our humiliation.*** What Kanhailal and his wife

Sabitri were able to achieve was profound, simply because of the difficulties involved in such an enterprise -- in the 'making new' of a woman's body in performance¹⁰.

Four years later, the play turned out to be prophetic, a premonition of a real event in the history of Manipur when twelve Imas, mothers, stood naked in public to protest the killing and possible rape of a young girl, Thangjam Manorama. Quite like Mahashweta Devi's Draupadi they gave up modesty for justice and displaced some of the shame of nakedness and violation onto the soldiers of the Assam Rifles who were accused of raping and killing Manorama. At the Nupi Samaj, a prominent Meira Paibi group—the term for the historic 'women torchbearers' of Manipur who had in the past led campaigns against alcoholism and the armed forces—there was rage. The term *Meira* is also used to mean initiative, progress, or to signify a method for enlightening darkness. The Meira Paibis, typically married women between the ages of thirty and sixty-five, with or without any official post in the organization that they were loosely affiliated with, are like a disciplined cadre. Together, they also took on the obligations of their society, held night vigils with flaming torches or stood guard against the army taking away their boys by banging electric poles or beating a gong or banging bamboo poles on the ground.

The important role played by women in Manipur, is historically illustrated by the events of *Nupi Lan*, in 1904 thousands of women fought the first 'war' when they came out in large numbers and demonstrated in Imphal demanding the withdrawal of an order of forced labour¹¹. The government had issued an order for Manipuri men to go cut timber and rebuild colonial offices and bungalows, which had been burnt down. This was to be done without any payments. The British tried to quell the protests but had to finally withdraw. A little over three decades later, in 1939, the second *Nupi Lan* was in response to an artificial famine created by the British policy of exporting paddy coupled with hoarding and excessive rain that year which had led to severe shortages. Women petitioned the British Political Agent for a ban on rice export. In December of that year women confronted the President of the State Durbar, T.A. Sharpe, and forced him to send a telegram to the Maharaja who was out of Manipur¹². Many women leaders sat inside the telegraph office as the message was sent, while thousands sat outside on vigil. By the evening 4,000 agitators had collected. The police attacked the women, some of whom sustained serious injuries. On the 13th of December the Maharaja sent a telegram ordering an immediate ban on the export of rice and an end to turmoil.

⁷ Lokendra Arambam, 'Armed conflict, State Repression and Women in Manipur: Politics of the Body In Violence.' in Arunadha Dutta. (Ed). *Women and Peace: Chapters from the Northeast India*. Akansha Publishing House. New Delhi. 2008. Pp. 91-97.

⁸ The Imphal Free Press, daily, Dt. Aug 13, 2008; news item: 'HC Order Compensation for Rape Victim after 12 years'.

⁹ *Draupadi* can be found translated with a foreword by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Critical Inquiry*, 8.2 (1981): 381-402. The translation was reprinted in *Writing and Sexual Difference*. Ed: Elizabeth Abel. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.

¹⁰ In Rustom Bharucha, 'Afterword's', *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalisation* (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2001), p 201.

¹¹ Karam Manimohan Singh, 'Nupi Lan: Women's War of Manipur'. K. Premalata Devi, Imphal. 2000. p.47.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 165

Since the merger of Manipur, there have been numerous democratic movements in Manipur where the women played a significant part in bringing about betterment for the state as a whole. Historically speaking, the *Meira Paibis* were preceded by the *Nisha Bandies* who came into force in the 1970s. During that time, Manipur was flooded with drugs, narcotics, alcohol as a result of which young boys and men succumbed to addiction. This gave rise to numerous crimes, public disorder, wife-beating and other forms of gendered violence¹³. Traditionally having a role in controlling the social ills of the society, Meitei women took upon themselves the responsibility to control the rising disorder in the society. Ordinary women started forming groups voluntarily and started doing night vigils/ patrols in their respective *leikais* (locality) to prevent the drunken men from creating menace. If found drunk, the man would be beaten by a mob of women and publicly humiliated. Consequently, these women's groups started seizing locally brewed liquor from the distributors and doing mass scale destruction publicly. They were thus called the "*Nisha Bandies*", the group destroying drugs and hallucinogens. The efforts of the *Nisha Bandies* and their subsequent demands to the State Government to form a legislative order to ban the use and production of drugs and alcohol, later their efforts were honoured and the state government declared Manipur a dry State, making it illegal to brew and consume these drugs. A closer look at the kind of issues the *Meira Paibis* have actively fought shows that the women are the ones having adverse effect on the larger Meitei community.

The *Meira Paibis* have hardly taken up the gender issue per se. But they do intervene in marital and family disputes which many a time is not favourable to the woman. Beginning from the 1980s, when the *Nisha Bandies* transformed into *Meira Paibis*, one can see a huge shift in their mode of engagement in the public sphere. They are increasingly seen in the forefront of political mobilisation and have been visible in all public spaces expressing their stand effectively. One can thus see the evolution of the *Meira Paibis* as a movement for the cause of betterment. Through the collective body, the women have successfully created a space for women to come out in public and fight for their demand and resolution to be heard. The *Meira Paibis* are also slowly becoming more organised as a cohesive body against any form of injustice for the whole of Manipuri womanhood. This strand of women activism weaved the social and political history of Manipur with questions of identity, and to understand problems of gender history. These histories recognize the significance of the 19th century divide between the two spheres- the Public and the Private- as a critical determinant of gender relations. The *Meira paibis* movement broke the old historical dichotomies that the public life was increasingly being seen as an exclusively male preserve of sorts, while women were relegated to the private

space where moral virtues of gentleness, tenderness, and religious piety were extolled. Such notions of historical interpretations are inapplicable in case of understanding the women activism of Manipur as women cross this line of demarcation with their historical participation in socio-political and cultural antecedents of the state.

The response and the participation of women in these circumscribed public sphere is not so much due to the fact that women in Manipur are more powerful, skilled or educated or provided with sufficient opportunities. Rather, the continuing lack of modern normative and institutional practices, and hierarchies of tradition have led to the emergence of such an image and role of women. In such circumstances, women are forced to take the responsibility of offsetting the fallout of the political turmoil and economic hardships. The lingering complexities of modernity and tradition have posed strong incongruence between the reality and projected images of the women in our society. The twelve Manipuri women virtually disrobed the national justice system which had so long denied justice to the people of the state especially the women. Those naked women, with whatever courage at their command, evidently challenged not the real Security Forces of the nation then stationed in the Kangla Fort but the entire nationhood, perceivably, overlooking the on-going sexual violence and human rights violation of the Manipuri womanhood. Those twelve women stood erect and advanced not asking for mercy or forcing any 'rogue' demand on the Armed forces, but challenging the entire nation, for adopting discriminatory treatment among some citizens and for not taking such positive actions as would render 'affirmative' justice to this neglected corner of the nation¹⁴. The voices of the historic Kangla mothers were heard, loud and clear when the, then, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on 20th November, 2004 handed the Kangla Fort to the Government of Manipur, after it was formally handed over to the then, Chief Minister of Manipur Okram Ibobi Singh by Assam Rifles Director General Lt Gen Bhupinder Singh. With the event it fulfilled a long pending Manipuri demand for transfer of the historic Kangla Fort¹⁵ that was till that time, served as the Headquarters of Assam Rifles; Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the historic occasion voiced violence must be shunned as progress and development could be advanced only if peace and order prevailed.

In order to have a clear understanding of women's status it is imperative to emphasise their empowerment, gender-equality in public as well as private domain in the socio-political and economic parameters. However, it is also important to analyse the role and contribution of the *Meira Paibi* movement in today's context to understand the events of Kangla protest by the imas, as they have played a significant role in the historical

¹³ Phanjaobam, Pradip, "The Homeland and the State: The Meiteis and the Nagas in Manipur", *Economic & Political Weekly*, June 26, 2010, Vol. XIV, No. 26 and 27.

¹⁴ M.C. Arun Kumar, Aheibam Koireng Singh, (Ed.) 'Contemporary Socio-Political Movements in Northeast India' pp. 7-11.

¹⁵ The Times of India, Daily, dt. 20 November, 2004: News article: 'PM hands over Kangla Fort to Manipur' also available as <http://archivepmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/speech-details.php?nodeid=45>

outcome of our understanding of the women's movement in Manipur. They for long shouldered the responsibility of defending human rights, and safeguarding the peace in this conflict riddled state. The use of '*Meira*' as a weapon symbolizes the declaration of a just war, their used of 'fire' as a sacred symbol too illustrates the sanctity to the movement. But the ever increasing number of women's organization mostly funded have made huge strides into the voluntary set-up of the Meira Paibi, especially as funded groups NGOs focuses on capacity building, skill training, sustainable livelihood, which assume prime importance in a market conscious economy.

Conclusion:-

In the historic photograph that captured the iconic protest¹⁶, Ima Gyaneshwari is behind the banner, She and the eleven other Imas, Taruni, Ramani, Jamini, Nganbi, Ibemhal, Momon, Ibetomi, Jibanmala, Tombi, Sarojini and Mema, would stay in jail for three months, even as protests would continue outside unabated. Later, the Government of Manipur release them, dropping all charges framed against them. A Commission of inquiry was setup under retired judge C. Upendra Singh by the Manipur government, which submitted its report in November 2004; subsequently, in 2005 the **Jeevan Reddy Committee**¹⁷ was setup to review the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA) recommended that AFSPA should be repealed. In 2013 the **Justice Verma Committee**¹⁸, set up to suggest amendments to laws relating to crimes against women, recommended are view of the continuance of AFSPA in the context of providing legal protection to women in conflict areas. A month after the nude protest of mothers, the state government withdrew the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act, AFSPA, from seven assembly constituencies in Imphal area. While the Centre and the status-quo of Army remained opposed to the move, the massive protests had forced the state government to make this small concession. Taking this historic event in gender perspective, it is imperative to understand women attempt to redefine their roles and expand their relevance, their perceptions and actions generate reverberations through the entire society necessitating a re-ordering of not only gender roles but also of the social and political order affecting the state. The identity of Meitei womanhood draws on these similar historical lines, *Meira paibis* activism being its prime example. Articulation of the identity of *Meira Paibi* as an organization has to be understood as a function of historical, social, and material circumstances. Manipur women have thus contributed immensely in the socio-economic transformation

and upliftment of the society. The above glaring instances of collective women's power in Manipur - Nupilan, Meira Paibi movements will surely make a reader believe, that womenfolk in Manipur are accorded high status. But unfortunately the reality is somewhat the other way round. The society is still in the womb of the patriarchal system. These's women activism exemplifies another collective woman's participation in Manipur dynamic oral history, as one of the important movers of peace-building, and empowerment thus; driving home the notion that women too have the potential to become a very significant instrument and agents of change for progressive social and political transformation. The prevailing armed-conflict situation and other forms of socio-political unrest have a direct bearing to women, through activism the women demand the right not to be marginalised.

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