

Manipuri Women' s Role in the Social Movement of Manipur

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A movement is said to be an instrument of change. Women' s movement emerged to bring a change in their status when they sensed that they have been exploited socially and politically by the existing society. Women' s movement is also an important aspect of social movement. Social movement can be defined as an organised effort by a group of people either to bring or to resist change in society. Socio-political movement is also a variety of collective attempt to bring about a change to certain social institutions or to create an entirely new social order. There have been many socio-political movements relating to women elsewhere in the world as well as in different parts of India. Formerly women kept themselves away from societal work due to the busy schedule at home and other household duties. Moreover women were regarded as unequipped for management or control of public affairs and as such they were discouraged from participating in socio-political affairs of the society. Therefore, the outbreak of women' s movement was a turning point in the emergence of a new trend of political and social conscious.

The Emergence of Women' s Movement in India

Women' s movement in India began as a part of social reform movements during the 19th century. With the advent of western education and liberalism, the westernised Indians became aware about the deplorable condition of women and felt necessity to reform the society to eradicate social evils which deteriorated the status of women in particular. In India, the tradition of women' s struggles and movements against patriarchal institutions of gender injustice has been weak when compared to the women' s movements in the Western and European societies. In fact, women' s fight against the oppression of patriarchy has been rather slow in emerging. Most of the women' s writings of the 18th century reveal disenchantment with the prevalence of patriarchy and gender injustices rather than any kind of active resistance or revolt against them. Women did try to go against the male-dominated world.

The women' s movement in India can be seen as forming three ' waves' . The first wave can be seen during the National Movement, when there was mass mobilisation of women for

participation in the nationalist movement. Thereafter, for over a decade, there was a lull in political activities by women. The late 1960s onwards saw resurgence in women's political activity and can be called the second wave. In the late 1970s, the third wave of the women's movement emerged, which focused on women's empowerment.

The First Women's Agitation of 1904 or the First Nupi-Lal and other Anti-Colonial struggles in Manipur

The first organised form of women's movement broke out in Manipur in 1904. This movement is popularly known as 'the First Women's Agitation' or 'First Nupi-Lal' (Nupi means women, Lal means agitation or war). Women's agitation or better known as Nupi-Lal has been one of the unique cases of political movement in the history of Manipur. Not only was it unique in the state but also in the history of mankind. The reason being that it was solely women who took up the charge of agitation, that too against the most powerful imperialists (Britisher) of that time.

The story behind the movement was that on 6 July 1904, the Khwairamband Bazar with its 28 sheds that housed about 300 seats of the women vendors was raged to the ground by fire. Again on the 15th of the same month the bungalows of Captain Nattal and Dulop were also destroyed by fire in the middle of night and again on the 4th of August another bungalow was also gutted down after midnight. These incidents alarmed the British authorities in Manipur which finally decided that it was an organised crime of some people of Manipur, particularly of urban area. They wanted to punish those who had done these crimes. With this intention, Maxwell, the Superintendent of the state of Manipur issued an order on 30th September, 1904 that the people of Manipur, particularly of Imphal area, had to rebuild the British official's bungalow and for that they had to bring teak wood from Kabaw Valley.

When an illegal forced labour was imposed on the innocent male population of Imphal, the women folk did not sit quietly rather they came out of their hearth and fought for justice. Thousands of women of the Khwairamband bazaar came out spontaneously and began to launch a big demonstration and entered the residency to see the Political Agent and Superintendent of the state. The Bazaar was closed down due to this agitation. The demonstration of the women continued for several days. The agitation began to affect the day to day life of the state and the government decided to call army from outside. The agitation severely unnerved the whole administrative machinery of the government and normal life of the town was also completely paralysed. As a result, the British authorities at last decided to

withdraw the order for the reconstruction of building which was imposed upon the male population of the state. The movement of 1904 was a great land mark in the history of Manipur.

Meities in Imphal valley, and Naga and Kuki-Chin ethnic communities residing in the hill areas of Manipur, rebelled against colonial policies. In 1917-19, Kukis rebelled against forced labour against recruitment. The Bazaar Boycott Agitation, 1920-21, was followed by the Water Tax Agitation, 1925-32, and the Zaliangrong Movement. In the mid 1920s, a movement in Tamenglong district mobilised people towards Naga unity, against unjust laws, compulsory portage and exorbitant house tax. Gaidinlieu, a thirteen year old girl of Ningkhao village, joined the movement in 1928, and took over leadership after the British executed the leader, Jadonang, in 1931. British forces captured her in October 1932 and sentenced her to life imprisonment. She spent most of her life in prison, in the Mizo hills and Meghalaya. After 1947, she spent her last years in exile in Nagaland.

Second Women' s Agitation of 1939 or The Second Nupi-Lal

In 1939, Anisuba Nupi-Lal which translated as the Second Women' s War and the chain of events commenced had all the characteristic of a Civil war. The excessive export of rice which culminated in a near famine situation kind let the fire to a population of discontented elements of feudal and colonial expression. In fact, much beyond the immediate cause of the movement there was deep rooted historical causes which erupted at the opportune movement of the history. There is a tense atmosphere outside Telegraph office on 12th December, 1939, in order to disperse the thickening crowd, mounted troops charge at the women. The armed troops carried bayonet and it is reported that 21 women were severe injured and several with bayonet wounds. The women yielded ground temporarily but soon pressed back into ground. Next day, with a reply from Maharaja who was then at Nabadwip, the export of rice was promptly banned. The outbreak of women agitation was a turning point in the emergence of new trend of political and national consciousness in the state.

Nisha Bandh and Meira Paibi Movement (Women Torch- Bearers)

In the 1970s women organized themselves as a force against government policy of liberally licensing liquor vends. They formed ' Nisha Bandh' or anti-alcoholism groups, in different parts of Manipur. Walking in groups at night, they carried torches, caught drunken persons, and imposed fines. They raided liquor vends and set fire to alcohol supplies.

The outbreak of ' Meira Paibi Movement' launched by the women of the state from the beginning of the 1980, was also another unique feature in the history of the women' s

social role in Manipur. Besides this the outbreak of such type of movement is the unique phenomenon and the same feature was not seen in any part of the world. This is the speciality of the women of Manipur. The causes of the outbreak of this type of movement was directly related with existing social and political situation faced by the people under the several form of draconian laws promulgated by the central government in Manipur. Under the blanket umbrella of their laws the security personnel had committed a series atrocities against the innocent common people of the state in the name of the insurgency movements. As a result of this the moral and courage of the people of Manipur was completely destroyed by the activity of the army. To see the condition the womenfolk came out just to protect the human right of the people of Manipur. So, in order to save the life of their sons, brothers and husbands, women came out with a torch at night and put proper security in their respective areas.

On 11-12 July, 2004, Assam Rifles personnel brutally raped and murdered Ms Thangjam Manorama Devi, a young woman of Bamon Kampu. On 15th July, Meira Paibis staged a dramatic protest against this rape. Twelve elderly activists disrobed in public, outside Kangla Fort, the compound within which Assam Rifles regiments were stationed. The activists carried a long white banner bearing the slogan – INDIAN ARMY, RAPE US, and shouted, ‘ Rape Us, Kill Us, Take Our Flesh’ . Elderly women per se, and elderly women activists especially, are generally held in high regard in Manipur. Elderly women are universally addressed as ‘ Ima’ , literally mother. Elderly Meira Paibi activists are popularly perceived as the ones who care, nurture and actively protect the people and the land of Manipur.

Irom Sharmila: An Individual Activist

When we placed Irom Sharmila in the context of women’ s activism in Manipur, we recognize her as one point in a continuum. This point is unique: her struggle is unique. At the same time, it is part of a tradition of struggle, of determined dissent. Her individual self is linked integrally to a collective. Her struggle is a lone one, yet it emerges from a context of shared convictions; she enjoys the support of many.

Irom Sharmila began her fast after Assam Rifles personnel shot dead ten ordinary persons standing at a village bus-stop, on 2nd November 2000. This was not the first such atrocity: protected by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Indian security forces have repeatedly committed human rights violations and brutal atrocities---over the decades, they have committed murders and rapes, destroyed dwellings, subjected people to arbitrary arrests, and humiliated people.

After she sat on fast at Malom village (site of the 2nd November killings), countless citizens, women's groups and human rights workers expressed solidarity with her cause; many of them had been struggling against AFSPA over the years. The official reaction has been to arrest and jail her for a spurious crime; 'attempt to suicide'. Through most of the past thirteen years, she has been in judicial custody. The state keeps her alive through force-feeding, but has so far failed to negotiate on the issues she is raising.

Conclusion

Women were regarded as the agents of change and the index of any society. Their status was depended on their educational and employment level. In ancient India, women were considered as lower group and the male dominated Indian society were kept them inside the four walls of the house. In the early literature of India, even the birth of a girl baby would lower the position of the mother. Also in our Manipuri society, women were not treated equally with man. Domestic works were the main activity for them. Unlike other parts of the world, majority of Manipuri women were the main bread-winners of the family. Not only in the family, but also in the society they played a very remarkable role for the development of the society.

The development of a society would be reflected to the status of their women. Therefore, women were needed to empower for bringing development in our society. The termed empowered has been a means for changing a person into an advanced and a more freedom way. Education is the main key for empowering women. It brought them a higher knowledge and thus helped in improving their position. Educating a female would improve not only her status but also improved her whole family.

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