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Voyages of Women in Manipur

Towards a peaceful society

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Front cover: Women fishing in Loktak Lake, Manipur
Back cover: Educating girls for a better future

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There are a good number of erstwhile sovereign nations inhabiting the southern side of the Himalayan range, displaying great cultural, linguistic, historical and ethnic diversity. Gradually the Indian empire engulfed most of them into its fold, and Manipur is a classic example. It was once a sovereign kingdom, having written royal chronicles since the year 33 AD. It is the home of Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups like the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki. In 1949 the king of Manipur and the Government of India signed an infamous agreement, the Merger Agreement of Manipur (Singh 1988). In the aftermath of this historic moment, the introduction of Indian norms and institutions created social disruptions and challenged conventional values and customs, giving rise to increasing confusion and hostilities in Manipuri society. Numerous repressive measures were also unleashed. With this, social life was degraded and people were left with a sense of victimization and helplessness in the face of Indian regimental rule. Some started thinking about how to free themselves collectively from such traumatic experiences. Many thought that a restoration of their lost sovereign status was the only solution, so they laid out plans for reinstating their erstwhile self-rule and conceived of mobilizing mass movements for sowing the seeds of emancipation.

To subdue all 'sons of the soil' politics and prevent such movements to spread beyond Manipur, the Government of India launched a military campaign supported legally by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA). In the name of maintaining law and order, Indian security forces have since perpetrated disappearances, extrajudicial executions, custodial deaths, illegal detention, various forms of torture, harassment, unwarranted arrest, searches and interrogation, and other human rights violations, all under the cover and protection of AFSPA (Human Rights Watch 2008; Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights. 2012). Women of Manipur have also experienced multiple forms of gender-based atrocities including molestation and sexual assault, sexual abuse, and rape by Indian armed forces. Such actions deepened the sense of victimization and helplessness of the women of Manipur, and brought both physical and psychological insecurity.

Since the early 1970s, Manipuri youths who received a modern education started discussing the contemporary situation in Manipur, comparing the status of life enjoyed under the erstwhile monarchical reign with the new Indian system of governance. They realized that in Manipur, people had been struggling against systemic oppressions ever since the time of the British colonizers (Tarapot 2004; Parrat 2005). Despite that history books taught them about

India's freedom struggle for independence from Britain, many students viewed the Indian military as another occupational force. In their own experience the rulers of newly independent India had turned the Indian armed forces towards their own frontiers soon after Independence, in an effort to subdue 'sons of the soil' movements. Indian colonizers, deploying security forces to unify the erstwhile British Empire and dilute emancipation movements, had thus replaced the British colonizers in the newly independent India.

Inspired mainly by socialist thinking, Manipuri intellectuals started writing on the traditional social system of Manipur and what Manipuri society was like under self-rule. Many argued that the status of women in Manipur was relatively high, as compared with the Indian Sati Savitri model in which a woman's virtue is measured by her devotion to her husband. Historically, they argued, women of Manipur were able to pursue a constructive influence on social processes. Women challenged the colonial state in political struggles and agitations known as the first Nupi Lal ('Women's Agitation' or 'Women's Uprising) of 1904 and the second Nupi Lal of 1939 (Singh 2011). According to Manipuri historians, women activists were thus recognized as a powerful political force. Contrary to the highly critical views of patriarchal society of many Indian feminists, Manipuri intellectuals wanted to engage women in an innovative idea of social change. Their idea was not to scrap away the traditional social system and all its values, but rather to overcome contemporary gender biases and disparities to create an inclusive society. Some argued that it was Hinduization which was the real problem, and that in ancient Manipuri history there were no chapters of sexism. They highlighted how women of Manipur were treated as equal, interdependent, and undeniable parts of the traditional society. In their histories, women of Manipur participated relentlessly in every social sphere, and therefore they occupied high social positions.

Girls in Manipur now receive modern education to the tune of 73.17 per cent, while that of all India is only 65.46 per cent. Education provides opportunities besides the traditional domains of work, especially in health care and other government sectors, increasing the earnings of women and making them more economically empowered. Women have also made their voices heard in civil society. Since the mid-1970s, women torch bearers known as Meira Paibis started working in many localities of Manipur as activists against alcoholism and drugs (see Devi, this volume). With an aim to save their society from inhumanity, women united with strong commitment. In some areas the married women of every neighbourhood are obliged to be members of the village or ward branch of Meira Paibis. At night they patrol streets and village roads with bamboo torches (*meira*) in their hands, often to save youths from the jaws of military search operations. When there is an unwarranted action such as a combing operation under cover of martial law, they circulate information and respond actively, even snatching away civilians from the hands of the armed forces. They also organize street protests. This form of women's movement has spread out through the length and breadth of Manipur. Their work is mass based without affiliating to any political party. Their aim is to promote a humane life irrespective of caste and creed. They collect their funds from communities and membership fees.

The struggles of women against atrocities have become the landmark symbol of the recent women's agitation for constructive social change. The efforts of these women are highly valued, further enhancing the status of women in the community, and reinforcing the role of women as keepers and passers on of tradition to the coming generations. Histories of women's relentless sacrifice were inherited as a constant inspirational source to women to counter authoritarian rule designed under the aegis of Indian colonial legislation. In memory of this history, the current endeavour of female activists is known in Manipur as the third Nupi Lal, linking the present women's activism to the struggles of equally courageous women in the past.

This paper investigates the historical role and status of women in the political life of Manipur, and describes how this history is made relevant to the present role of women as peace activists and agents of change. Taking only a facile view, ancient Manipur can be seen as a patriarchal society. However, as will be discussed, women played an important role in the socio-economic sphere by having their own trading centre in Imphal city, the Nupi Keithel ('Women's

Market'). This market also served as a rendezvous point for incorporating the ideas of women into the decision-making processes of Manipur society. During the monarchy, when the king was the supreme authority, the women of Nupi Keithel could revoke an execution decree from the king. There was also a separate judiciary forum dealing with women's issues known as the Pacha Judiciary Court. These institutions reflected the status of women in Manipuri society.

While investigating the history of women's activism and political role in Manipur, I interviewed a range of different civil society leaders, executives, government servants, journalists, members of the judiciary, and women activists, especially widows of victims of armed violence. The questions I asked them were as follows: How did the life of women in Manipur change after the merger with the Indian Union (especially with regard to norms, laws and social practices)? What are the key challenges of Manipuri women in participating in governance and politics today? Is it easier for women to influence society through civil society organizations, human rights activism and legal tools rather than electorate politics in Manipuri society? In what ways do the women of Manipur participate in peacebuilding processes? The first part of this paper reviews the historical status of women in Manipuri society. The second part relates this history to women's activism in present-day Manipur by presenting the findings of my interviews. The final part presents the analysis and conclusions.

I. The status of women in ancient Manipur

Most historians of Manipur agree that in ancient times, women occupied high social positions and were not excluded from participating in the social domain. Even in creation theories, women played a significant role. This is illustrated by the Thabal Chongba Dance, in which women played the role of crucial protagonists in between the brawl of two brothers fighting to become the future monarch. In Meitei myth the creator and original ruler of the earth is known as Atingkok. He had two sons, the elder one known as Sanamahi and the younger known as Pakhangba. The younger son was weak. During his lifetime Atingkok was supposed to decide who was going to inherit his position as the next ruler. He gave this task to his sons. After this, both of them started manoeuvring to satisfy their father. Pakhangba, the younger one, received blessings from their mother Ima Leimaren. He accomplished the task and was appointed as the future ruler before the claim of his elder brother. Their mother sent Lai Nuras, female angels, who encircled and protected Pakhangba from the attack of his elder brother. Thus the Thabal Chongba dance came up. It shows how dignified and important the women of Manipur were in the ancient social system.

It is still in the heart of the oral traditions of Manipur how women were emboldened and respected. For instance, when describing the names of monarchs they would always begin with the lineage of the mothers' side. When the king went on a mission and returned with success, the title was generally offered to the queen because of her dedication in his absence (Singh and Singh 2005). Having such images of the royalty of Manipur transferred to successive generations reveals that women were highly respected. Written history confirms the same. Though ancient Manipur was ruled by primitive authoritarianism, gradually it was structured by the introduction of laws. A centralized written constitution was introduced in 1100 AD. The Meitei monarch Loyamba also promulgated a list of jobs for his subjects, known as Loyamba Shinyen (Shinyen means distribution of jobs) (Singh 1975). This empowered the subjects in the administrative set up in different ways. During those days institutions were attested to the palace for performing various roles. A guild of women was constituted to regulate the king and queen when they flouted social norms. This institution was known as Leikhomsang. Leikhomsang was located in the eastern portion of the palace. It was run by a group of people, and the head of the institution was known as Leikhomsang Hanjabi, which was a role reserved for the mother-in-law of the king. Other posts were reserved for female family members such as aunts of the chief queen. Proceedings were to

be reported on the next day to the head of the court, known as Cheirap. If there was a mistake in the proceedings, those involved would have to be exiled (Singh 1975).

There were three judiciary systems in ancient Manipuri society. They were i) Cheirap (High Court/ Supreme Court), ii) Kuchu (Civil Court) and iii) Paa-Chaa Wayenshang (Family Court). The male-dominated courts (High Court and Civil Court) could not try issues related to women because of gender sensitivity. In the ancient form of the family court, it focused mainly on the issues of women. The word Paa-Chaa is a compound word made up of the words Paa meaning father and Chaa meaning offspring/son/daughter. Both fathers and children have been borne by a mother, and most cases brought before this court were connected either with the welfare of a woman's offspring or other family affairs. The name itself recognizes and honours the role and responsibility of women in the family. The maximum punishments of this court were shaving of the head, exposure in public places during consecutive days, and being expelled from society. The Paa-Chaa Wayenshang was run by a guild of women appointed by the presiding officer (known as Paa-Chaa Hanba) which was an office originally reserved for the chief queen. After Hinduization, this role was held by a male. However, the way of submission before the presiding officer was never changed.

The British colonial administrator Hudson (1908) opined that women of Manipur held a high position in society. In history, the kingdom of Manipur fought many wars with neighbouring polities. Women never stepped back when it was their turn to defend their society. This is documented by the courageous historical account of Leima Linthoingambi, the queen of his highness Ningthoukhomba who ruled Manipur from 1432 to 1567. When Ningthoukhomba left for the invasion of Akla for territorial expansion, the Tangkhuls came to know that the king had left his capitol, and started revolting. Leima Linthoingambi dressed up in the royal dress of the king. In this disguise she managed to defeat the revolting Tangkhuls before the return of the king, saving the kingdom (Singh and Singh 2005).

For the most part, men were engaged with state obligatory services while the day-to-day work of managing the family fell on the shoulders of women. So they became responsible for the daily socio-economic affairs of every household. From such compelling conditions, married women attended at neighbourhood confluences for trading essential commodities of families' needs. His Highness Mongyamba acknowledged their talents and capacities to play crucial roles in socio-economic affairs beyond the household. To empower and expand their responsibilities in the social domain, a trading centre was established around 1580 near the western gate of the royal palace, the Kangla. The market became known as Nupi Keithel (Nupi: women, Keithel: market). In Nupi Keithel the produce of the country was traded and exchanged, and it used to control all goods that were imported, exported or passed through Manipur. There were certain mandatory rules to be obeyed inside market premises, such as that all vendors should be married women, no one could use a veil, no one could use an umbrella, no one could be arrested, and the place was to be inherited to the senior daughter-in-law of the family (Singh 2011). Every space was limited for vending certain items for specific surnames or for women from a certain locality. This social code of conduct of the Nupi Keithal still conforms to living collectively with diverse professions. In Manipur, surnames and clans are vastly different. Surnames show which profession the family traditionally held and clan names show the genetic root or lineage of the offspring. During the monarchy, the king was the supreme authority whose decision no one could alter. However, even an execution decree could be revoked by the women of Nupi Keithel by a silent protest of dressing in the traditional mourning dress (an off pink sarong with white scarves covering the head and body). There are numbers of women extension markets beyond the Nupi Keithal that deal especially with particular products such as Lamlong, dealing mainly in rice, and Wangkhei Keithal for traditional handloom and ironsmith products.

In 1709, His Highness Pamheiba became the first monarch to convert to Hinduism. Many constraints and restrictions were introduced in the Manipuri society from Hinduism. This pushed away certain groups of people such as the erstwhile king's advisers and their followers from decision-making processes, due to frequent objections in his views for fitting into the new

society contoured by the newly arrived religion. The arrival of such steps brought disunity, social confusion, and deeply polarized the erstwhile cordial social relationships. It brought extreme predicaments in the relationship between communities, norms and values, and social bridges between communal groups (Colleta and Cullen 2000). According to historians, this offered a golden opportunity for the invasion of Manipur by antagonistic neighbouring kingdoms like Burma (Awa), who occupied Manipur from 1819-1825 AD. In political history this is known as the 'seven years devastation'. During this period, people were driven away from their homes due to torture by Burmese forces, and many started migrating to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Assam, Tripura, and other parts of West Bengal. This was the most terrible juncture in the history of Manipur. For regaining their lost territory, women of Manipur contributed in many ways to defeat the Burmese, such as carrying supplies, helping to transport weapons, arranging hideouts, and even associating with Burmese to get information.

Manipur came under British suzerainty in April 1891. On 13th August, 1891, General Thangal and the successor to the throne, Yubraj Tikendrajit, were executed in public at Pheidapung, in the heart of Imphal town, for resisting against British colonial expansion. Later on their followers were exiled to different parts of British India (Mangi 2011). On the day of execution, 8,000-10,000 women protested silently with traditional mourning dresses at the site, aiming to save the lives of the captives from the colonial gallows. This was the custom that was traditionally honoured during the pre-British monarchical reigns. However, British colonial agents led by Mr. Maxwell failed to respect the values of traditional customs. They began exercising powers not in harmony with the established social system. Antagonism between the British colonial apparatus and local populace developed on the line of colonizers and colonized. This brought social frictions, deepened by the Bengalis who were brought to Manipur by the British to support their administrative set-up. As described by clan leaders, they tried in vain to request the colonial masters to exercise their powers in harmony with the established norms.

In 1903, after more than a decade of British colonial atrocities, protest flared up one fateful night. A group of angry men burnt down the residence of Boro Saheb (Hindi: 'big master'). After three and half months, the Khwairamband Bazar was also devastated by fire. This was the main marketplace of Imphal at the time. Next morning a proclamation order was given that requested male members of every household to come with thatch and bamboo for rebuilding the burnt down houses. This British instruction was considered as falling within the domain of forced or bonded labour. The inhuman order of using men's labour without any payment had never happened in the old monarchical reigns, but now they saw that it had arrived at their doorsteps. The men were the breadwinners in every family, and if they were not paid for their work it would cause acute hardship in family income. To prevent their spouses from submitting to such punitive impositions, women started protesting by not attending the convenient market places of British subjects. This was a sign of non-cooperation with the British colonizers. One day almost 3,000 women gathered and protested by refusing to let free their spouses from work inside the British Bungalow. A big scuffle happened between the colonial forces and local women (Singh 2011). In this manner, the first *Nupi Lal* (Meitei: 'women's agitation; women's uprising')¹ flashed out in 1904.

Generally people of Manipur depend for their livelihood on agriculture. During British rule, frequent floods occurred due to bad irrigation systems and siltation at riverbanks. It marred annual agriculture yields. Due to the scarcity of rice, the purchasing price would go beyond the normal range and structural problems also arose in tandem. This gave maximum hardship, mainly to poor local communities. Indian merchants started buying up at nominal rates all agro-based yields of Manipur, not only rice but also other crops like chillies, beans, cotton etc. and

¹ The literal translation of the word *lal* is war. In the context of *Nupi Lal*, the word *lal* does not fall within the scope of the contemporary definition of war as bloodshed between different nations or states, or within different groups within a nation or state. This was a protest against the systematic atrocities of the ruling elites. For a better understanding, *lal* is here translated as Uprising or Agitation.

accumulated in their warehouses with premeditated preparations of their local agents. When the dry season arrived, they sold merchandise at an exorbitant rate, twice or thrice of the original cost. In 1939 from last week of July to first week of August there was an excessive rainfall that ruined standing crops in the paddy fields, and a similar fate repeated itself in the next two months of harvesting season, which had a deeply adverse impact on the yields. Due to this situation, women demonstrated to stop export of rice and close down the rice mills. Moreover, women of the main and extended local markets stopped selling rice to Indians who were exporting rice to other Indian states. As a consequence, Indian merchants were unable to procure sufficient amounts of rice for trading to India. They requested British political agents to help them procure rice from village areas, which the agents did. Indian merchants also installed rice mills in Imphal city and refined the rice they had collected and exported it to Indian states without hesitation. On 12th December 1939, women numbering around 4,000 gathered at the Telegraph office, a British Reserved Area, to prevent exporting of rice. Gradually the number of agitators was increased to around 10,000. They detained British political agents. To protect the political agents, troops started pushing out women agitators by charging with bayonets and sticks. Many women were injured and hospitalized. The momentum of this historic uprising of women went on for a couple of days. In history, this event is known as the 12th December event or otherwise as the Second Nupi Lal.

2. Relating history to the present

Women in Manipur continue to run traditional and other forms of cooperative systems for sustaining societal cohesiveness, and solidarity among women's groups remains fairly strong. Women still exercise significant roles in decision-making within the family. However, partly due to Indian cultural influences the private sphere now belongs to females while the public belongs largely to males. Changes in lifestyle include the adoption of Indian dress and fashion, language and expressions, rites and rituals related to marriage and death, cinema and songs, all of which encourages people to imitate the norms of Indian society. Problems of women and girl trafficking, and dowry-related torture and killings have also appeared in Manipur.

Indian contemporary law is based on the Hindu Code enacted in 1955-56, including the Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, and Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act. These Hindu laws are applied to the Meitei community of Manipur while ethnic minority communities are allowed to use their own customary laws. Neither the Hindu Code nor customary practices of Manipur society confer equal status between male and female regarding the inheritance of properties. On the other hand, those areas of traditional Manipuri society where women enjoyed and exercised powers are not even mentioned in Indian law. As noted, in traditional society women were often breadwinners in the absence of men, and the women's markets in Manipur evolved from these socio-political realities, standing as a unique manifestation of the status of women of Manipur. Traditional norms and social structures of Manipur are patriarchal, but quite different from the Brahmanical (Hindu) and Islamic forms of patriarchy prevalent in other parts of India. Moreover, even after more than six decades of new Indian laws after Independence, the rights of women enshrined therein are not fully implemented.

Changes after the merger regarding the status of women in Manipur

After becoming a part of the Indian union, laws established in the context of the mainstream Indian or Hindu social system started to prohibit atrocities that were widespread in India but never existed in Manipur, such as female feticide, child marriage, and dowry. As perceived by Manipuri intellectuals, a majority of the architects of the new Indian legal system had grown up in a Hindu cultural environment where they were indoctrinated with ideologies such as Manu's theories of society, based on patriarchal and male-dominated traditions in which masculine values

are to subjugate, control and undermine the voice of women. According to Manu, the ancient Indian ideologue of economy and polity, women should not be given rights in economic and political spheres, based on the argument that women are moulded from the many sins they have committed in previous lives. Although there was deprivation of women from active participation in politics in the traditional Manipuri patriarchy, ideologies and customs of female subjugation such as female feticide, child marriage and the dowry system were unfamiliar. Therefore, abolishing them by law was meaningless. Moreover, many gender-based constraints and restrictions became prevalent due to the spread of conservative Hindu religious ideas. In practice, this contributed to pushing women away from public arenas and decision-making.

Adding to the difficulties, the women of Manipur were also subjected to the actions of Indian security forces in the name of counterinsurgency operations, which further restricted the free movements of women. Indian armed forces treated local women with disrespect, even regarding them as sexual objects, causing strong reactions. In the traditional patriarchal society of Manipur it was unacceptable to treat women in such ways.

The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA) and declaration of Manipur as a 'disturbed area' affected the entire society of Manipur. Its imposition shows a colonial attitude, and its roots can also be traced back to the British colonisers who introduced it in order to rule over Indian subjects during the colonial era. Under cover of AFSPA, the Indian security forces have carried out many campaigns such as Operation Thunderbolt, Operation Dagnet, Operation Sunny Vale, Operation Blue Bird (1987), Operation Loktak (1999), Operation Stinger (2005), Operation Tornado (2005), and Operation Summer Storm (2009). Militarization also brought with it atrocities such as the Heiranggoithong massacre (1984), the Tera Bazar massacre (1993), the R.M.C. (Regional Medical College) massacre (1995), the Tonsen Lamkhai massacre (1999), the Malom massacre (2000), the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama Devi (2004), and the Khwairamband Bazar incident (2009). From 2001 to 2009, 2667 people were killed in Manipur due to armed conflict (Bhaumik 2009). Out of these, 771 people were civilians. As in any conflict zone, militarization has serious consequences. Security forces have arrested and tortured many innocent youths indiscriminately, accusing them falsely by producing arms and forged papers. There have been many cases of sexual assault by armed forces but under the guise of AFSPA, none were punished and impunity is pervasive (Lokendrajit 2004). Women experience indescribable obstructions and disturbances, not only in terms of molestation and rape but also challenges to their livelihood (Manipur State Commission for Women 2009). The protection provided by AFSPA encourages the members of security forces to go beyond the limits of human dignity. On the positive side, AFSPA has made women in Manipur become more aware of their rights and consequently more politically assertive.

What are the key challenges for women's participation in governance and politics?

The majority of interviewees agreed that there is gender inequality in Manipur society in political decision-making process. Women's participation in politics is minimal, because electoral politics requires investing huge amounts of money. Only popular women from well-to-do families and those who have relatives in party politics dare to stand for election. There are only three women out of 60 members of the legislative assembly (MLAs), where many political decisions are taken. This constitutes only five percent of the total. Moreover, there is only a single woman cabinet minister in the twelve-member council of ministers. In the political history of Manipur since 1948 till date, the share of women representatives has remained very low. That is why there are also imbalances in political discussions and decisions with regard to women's political participation. In local governance in Manipur, women can take part in politics thanks to a 30 percent reservation of seats for women. There are no restrictions on women's participation in electoral politics, but there is a general attitude that women may not be as effective as men in full-time political activity. In Manipuri society, which is basically male-dominated, there is a tendency to

prefer male candidates with integrity and firmness in executing the role of a political leader. Well-qualified able women are rarely sought out for important offices.

In contrast to their traditional status, contemporary women of Manipur are far behind men in terms of participation in decision-making processes and electoral politics, and in the occupation of high-level government posts. The modern state apparatus has given women rights and education, yet they remain within a patriarchal social structure. The dignity of women as vibrant agents in the region's economy has been subjugated by male-dominated forms of business. Women who come out of their houses to earn for their families' needs are looked down upon. Drug trafficking and consumption, armed conflict and criminal violence are also major contemporary problems that leave negative effects and impacts on women. When men die early due to alcoholism, drugs and violence, they leave behind women to fend for themselves and their children. These women become victims due to the untimely demise of breadwinners of the family. Facing enormous difficulties in trying to sustain their families they are forced to do many unwanted jobs.

The idea that women are to be concerned with only keeping household in order to look after children is being challenged by the generations of today, and many young women are now stepping out to take part in academics, social activism, entrepreneurship and politics. Despite this, many government servants have a pre-conceived notion that giving key offices to women would not yield the same results as given them to their male counterparts. Very few women are involved in politics and even fewer are elected. In Manipur women politicians have never been able to become frontrunners in their own political parties. Manipur society is patriarchal, and in the traditional norms of society, women are not expected to become leaders but rather to support their male counterpart. The toughest challenge of women in Manipur is to try to edge their way into male-dominated social spheres. Structural constraints like male domination in public decision-making are a major hindrance. It is difficult for women to take part in decision-making processes when men constitute the majority of the assemblage. Another challenge is the criminalization and brutalization of Indian politics. The political culture of using money and muscle power at the time of elections is not woman-friendly. In such an unfriendly environment, women find it difficult to establish a political base.

Are women influencing society through CSOs, activism and legal tools?

Most of the respondents felt that women are more motivated to work in civil society organizations (CSOs) than to participate in electorate politics or engage in other types of party politics. Women of Manipur have gradually come out to the forefront of activism, fighting against all odds and taking part in all kinds of activities, whether social, political, cultural or economical. They use CSOs to voice their ideas and views, in some cases making activism a stepping-stone towards greater political participation, and in others directly protesting against social and political evils such as the behaviour of security forces under AFSPA. This was particularly evident with the nude protest by Manipuri women in front of Indian military forces in 2004, in response to the brutal killing of Miss Manorama by members of the security forces (see Dey, this volume). The protest was staged at the Western Gate of Kangla, where the accused were lodged. Kangla is the place where many monarchs of Manipur resided from 33 AD till the loss of sovereignty. At the time of the nude protest, Kangla was occupied as the headquarters of the Indian armed forces. On 15th July 2004, twelve elderly women from different parts of Manipur paraded for protest by stripping off their clothes. The women raised slogans, demanding that the men involved in the killing of Manorama be brought before them. They questioned how long they have to be agonized while their sons and daughters are being tortured, raped and exterminated by so-called security personnel in the name of India's national security. They challenged the security personnel to come out and outrage their modesty, if they wished. Many women fainted at the protest site and were rushed to hospital for treatment. Due to the gravity of the situation, district administrative authorities imposed an indefinite curfew with immediate effect.

Manipur has undergone layers of histories of repression by different forces. Historical experience has shown that it is easier for women to influence society through activism than through electoral politics, especially on issues pertaining to human rights. This may be because many people have the mindset that electoral politics is for men while women can deal with social issues. The general public has created and developed CSOs with an aim to change society. People trust the women for rendering their remarkable services by motivating public sentiments with idealistic thinking. Women have often worked towards prohibiting the abuse, manufacturing and trafficking of drugs and intoxicants. During critical situations, they protect and rescue innocent people from the hands of security forces by bearing torches and staying at local Meira Paibis centres in late hours. Due to their uninterrupted, courageous participation in social activism, the Indian government has maliciously targeted many women activists. This is especially so in the case of anti-AFSPA activist Irom Sharmila and her decade-long fasting.

Conflict widows have perceived the need for creating a platform to convey what they wish or need from the state for the larger interest of society. To meet their mission they recently established an organization called Extrajudicial Execution Victims Families Association, Manipur (EEVFAM), formed by a group of widows whose husbands were eliminated summarily by security forces without any judicial trial. The objective of EEVFAM is to put an end to killings without trial. The young widows never received any assistance for rehabilitation but were rather portrayed as terrorists having close bonds with insurgents. They still suffer from mental distress and trauma due to the actions of Indian security forces, and want to bring the perpetrators to justice. EEVFAM filed a lawsuit being Cril. No. 129 of 2012 before the Supreme Court of India with a list of extrajudicial executions in Manipur, requesting the establishment of a Special Investigation Team and subsequent prosecution of the perpetrators in accordance with the law. The matter is still pending before the Supreme Court for final disposal. In the interim the Supreme Court passed an order for investigating six cases randomly selected from the list by constituting an independent three-member commission. The commission submitted its report concluding that none of the investigated cases were really encounters between insurgents and security forces.

In what ways do women in Manipur participate in peacebuilding?

Women activists such as the Meira Paibis play an active role in resolving social issues, both at the local and state level. These women's groups may broadly be divided into two categories. Firstly, they act as pressure groups to prevent and protect local people from violent acts of state forces and non-state armed groups, and secondly, in the form of NGOs working as peace campaigners. Neither of these categories is able to take a leading role in peace processes. They participate only in traditional roles entitled to them among all ethnic communities of Manipur. They have no role in peacebuilding decision-making because it is still considered the men's role to make decisions.

However, in every social movement of Manipur, the Nupi Keithal has taken an undeniable part. In the political history of Manipur, women from Nupi Keithal never sat idle as mute spectators when there was societal trouble. They responded sharply and showed solidarity by shutting down market places. This showed that they prioritized social issues rather than earnings and income. This is their power and contribution to society. Nupi Keithal is the transaction zone of all business in Manipur and lies at the hub of all inter-district public transportation. When women from Nupi Keithal joined in any kind of protest, Imphal city became paralyzed, impacting banks, government offices, public transportation, businesses and shops, and ultimately also the exchequer of state. State agents eventually noticed the women vendors of Nupi Keithal. However, instead of engaging them in peacebuilding, the state made efforts to dilute the unity of women. This became a strategy of countering secessionist movements after the protests following Manorama's murder in 2004. Security forces started kicking off civic action programs for the women, helping one particular group expand its power to the detriment of others. In remote areas Indian security forces constructed roads, distributed sports items, donated televisions to local clubs, provided free medical camps and renovated primary health centres. They also sponsored

tours to Indian cities like Agra and New Delhi, South Indian states, and religious places, in the name of promoting Meira Paibis. Some of those who benefitted personally became sceptical of claiming collective rights. In return, some commanding officers of Indian security forces were made presidium members in some of the social programs organized by these women. Unfortunately, this has created distrust among different Meira Paibi groups.

3. Conclusion

In a conflict-torn society like Manipur, peacebuilding requires identifying the root causes of conflict as well as the main problems of the victims of conflict. The state needs to listen to civil society before taking any important decision. In fact, most of the problems of Manipur are due to the failure of integrating the sentiments of common people into policymaking. The reconstruction of society is a shared responsibility. Women's networks have a key role to play in fostering peace in the state.

After the filing of a lawsuit by EEVFAM before the Supreme Court of India, the number of extrajudicial executions has decreased. Such a vital contribution to a more peaceful society entitles them to be recognized as the most persuasive peacebuilders in contemporary Manipur. Even if the conflict widows' efforts did not bring an end to hostilities, they have helped create a supportive environment for dialogue and negotiation. Instead of giving them recognition as peacebuilding ambassadors, the government is sabotaging the work of the widows with false charges that their legal expenditures have been borne by insurgent outfits. If such hostile criticism continues, how can peace ever be imagined? A central part of the peacebuilding process is the cessation of bloodshed and violence. For establishing a peaceful society, the state requires a constructive platform including the victims and providing them with a secure space. The steps of a sustainable peace process include dialogue and working sincerely and transparently together with grassroots people and conflict victims, recognizing their needs and concerns and addressing their collective traumas, fears and humiliation.

Ignoring the heartfelt voices of women in political decision-making is a clear sign of gender discrimination. This deprives women of their rights. Fortunately, policymakers in Manipur have started to realize that women represent half the population and participate actively in socio-economy affairs. Women should not be ignored in social change and development processes, because ignoring them and their ideas is ignoring the ideas of half the state's population and human resources. There is also a growing recognition that without addressing gender issues, obtaining peace is impossible. Engaging women from the perspective of empowerment in social change processes does not mean taking away the rights of their male counterparts, it means collaborating and contributing ideas that were previously neglected. Inclusion in policymaking will help not only in protecting women's rights but also the responsibilities, values, and beliefs derived from age-old societal traditions. With their courageous spirit and experiences in social movements there should be no doubt that women can perform as ambassadors of peacebuilding in Manipur, as they have done for almost seven decades of violent and intractable conflict.

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Voyages of Women in Manipur

Towards a peaceful society

Inhabiting the southern side of the Himalayan range, there are a number of erstwhile sovereign nations with great cultural and linguistic diversity that have been brought into the fold of the Indian empire. Manipur is a classic example. In 1949, the king of Manipur signed an infamous agreement with the Government of India, known as the Merger Agreement. In the aftermath, the introduction of Indian norms and institutions has created social disruptions and challenged conventional values and customs, giving rise to increasing confusion and hostilities in Manipuri society.

In a conflict-torn society like Manipur, a central part of the peacebuilding process is the cessation of violence. To build a peaceful society, the state will

also need to provide a platform and secure space for dialogue, and create a sustainable peace process that addresses collective traumas, fears and humiliation.

