

Manipur Protests: Powerfully bare or barely powerful?

The nude protests by the women of Manipur symbolises not their power, but their anguish

For many people in Manipur, the sight of a protest march or a desolate road in times of curfew is quite normal. It happens regularly. But when the women of Manipur disrobed to protest against the alleged rape and murder of Manorama by the Assam Rifles, it was much more than a regular protest.

For the women of Manipur – the mothers, sisters, wives, daughters - this was the last straw. A desperate, yet valiant effort to get their voices heard. By exposing their pain and coming out in the open to fight their distress, they had carried on with their legacy of activism.

Historically, Manipur has witnessed many women's movements which have contributed singularly to women's collective role in society today. These include the Women's' Movement of 1904 against the levy on rice, Pothang or the Movement to discontinue the system of compulsory forced labour in 1913, the Zeliangrong Naga Uprising of 1927-32, the great Nupilan of 1939 and the Meira Paibi movement against alcoholism in 1975.

These movements coupled with the prominent position of women in the Ima markets and their aesthetic dance forms, have made the civil society in the state recognize the significance of their womenfolk. Thus, the 1980s witnessed a new role of the Meira Paibis or Torch bearers, who were, and still are, involved in alerting the community about army patrols. Known for their influence within the community and outside, these women now began to negotiate with the armed forces when men of their community were taken into detention and became the buffer between the state forces and the ordinary people. Concerned groups, including the Indian army began to consult and involve them in local cases. They started settling disputes which were social and domestic in nature. They became the pride of Manipur, something the state could boast about to the rest of the country and the world.

And yet here were 14 women stripping and standing in front of the Kangla gate with banners. On the face of it, the protest was an immediate reaction to the killing of 30 year-old Th. Manorama Devi - a suspected cadre of the proscribed PLA (People's Liberation Army)- by the Assam Rifles personnel. However, if we

look deeper into the matter, we realise that the women used their bodies to protest against and call for a final solution to an oft repeated sexual violence.

Not that protests or bandhs are new to Manipur. We know of various campaigns that have been launched time and again to protest against extra-judicial killings, disappearances and to address the issue of violence against women. However, so far no real solution has emerged. There is simply no access to justice, even for the "empowered" Meira Paibis.



Members of the All Manipur Women's Reformation and Development Samaj have been the force behind the Meira Paibi movement in the state. They spearheaded the Kangla Gate protests.

The reasons are evident when one examines the degree of support that civil society and its men give to these women's groups. Since Manipuri society, its politics and social codes of conduct are determined through patriarchal norms, women's voices for concrete solutions have received marginal attention.

On the face of it, Manipuri society gives full

recognition to women's collective action, the 'strong' role of Meira Paibis and the like. However, conversations with individuals and groups in different parts of the state have revealed that the men of authority, both state and non-state, do not include women in decision-making. There has been no move by the powers that be to take women as partners in their strategic planning. However, they do include women in their processions, locality based bandhs, submission of memorandums and certainly when young men have to be salvaged from army or police custody. In fact, on these occasions it is only the women folk who are egged on to action and their visibility stems from the fact that this is the only arena where they are given an opportunity to express their views.

It's on this spectacular visual strength of women that most of us have convinced ourselves that the 'power of women' in Manipur is truly the most significant of all the movements in India. The incident of July 15 to many, further reiterates this symbolism of women's power. Unfortunately, it is just the opposite - the desperation of a group of women who have staked all that they have to get some of what they want. Spirit and courage - yes, but power, definitely not.