



# Feminist Perspectives In Manipuri Movements: Women's Agency And Collective Action In "The Mothers Of Manipur: Twelve Women Who Made History" By Teresa Rehman And "Women's Movement In Manipur" By Thokchom Binarani Devi

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**Abstract** - The project titled "Feminist Perspectives in Manipuri Movements: Women's Agency and Collective Action" aims to comprehensively explore and analyze the role of women within social, political, and cultural movements in Manipur, as depicted in Teresa Rehman's "The Mothers of Manipur" and Thokchom Binarani Devi's "Women's Movement in Manipur."

**keywords** - manipur, collective action, agency, women, Manipuri, politics, culture

## 1. Introduction

In the midst of India's diverse social and political landscape, the state of Manipur emerges as a region imbued with rich cultural heritage and a history marked by resilience and resistance. Central to the discussion of Manipur's socio-political struggles are the voices and actions of its women, whose agency and collective action have played pivotal roles in shaping the course of the region's history.

Manipuri women have played a huge role as agents of change and protest, be it women warriors of the Nupi Lan (directly translates to: Women's War) who fought in the 1904 and 1939 wars or the Meira Paibis (Women Torch Bearers) women and their night vigils to keep their sons safe from army atrocities. They also take the burden of picking up the pieces after every act of violence, every social unrest every conflict which takes lives and destroys homes.

This research explores the feminist viewpoints present in these movements and how Manipuri women have used their agency and group efforts to bring about change. The books "The Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women who Made History" by Teresa Rehman and "Women's Movement in Manipur" by Thokchom Binarani Devi will be our main sources.

The goal is to examine how Manipuri women have fought against social injustices and patriarchal systems through these texts. We'll look at the reasons behind these movements, the women's tactics, and the effects they've had on their local communities.

The conflict between societal issues and persistent gender-based violence against Manipuri women and traditional ideas of their high status will be examined in this study. Through an analysis of these varied viewpoints, the goal is to acquire a more profound comprehension of the intricate aspects of feminism in Manipur.

Furthermore, as a crucial instrument for feminist activism, the concept of collective action will be examined in this research. We will examine the ways in which Manipuri women have united to overcome personal obstacles in order to accomplish a shared objective. This study will shed light on the importance of solidarity and how it helps to topple systems of oppression.

## **Background Information on Manipuri Women's Movements**

### **Historical Context (Pre-Colonial to Independence):**

The history of Manipuri Women's Movements is deeply intertwined with the region's colonial past and its struggle for independence. Despite the challenges the colonial rule imposed upon the region, Manipuri Women actively participated in resistance movements against colonial rule, contributing to the fight for independence.

The iconic women's wars, or Nupi-Lan movements, in 1904 and 1939 serve as reminders of the resistance to colonialism. These uprisings, which were spearheaded by women, opposed British policies that had resulted in forced labor, trade restrictions on rice, and economic hardship [Arambam, P. Devi. "Colonial Rule and Women's Movement in Manipur." Proceedings of the North East India History Association (1993)].

### **Post-Independence Era:**

Following India's independence in 1947, Manipur became a part of the Indian Union in 1949. This era ushered in new challenges and socio-political transitions. Manipuri Women continued their activism, advocating for social justice, gender equality, and the preservation of indigenous culture and identity. Human rights violations became one of the main concerns. Security forces were given extensive authority by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which sparked accusations of misuse. Women's organizations like Meira Paibi became influential opponents of AFSPA, staging demonstrations, calling for its abolition, and compiling reports of violent incidents. The famous 16-year hunger strike led by Irom Sharmila, which demanded the abolition of AFSPA, became a worldwide symbol of resistance. Preserving indigenous culture and identity became another crucial aspect of women's activism. Globalization and homogenization posed a threat to Manipuri traditions and language. Women played a vital role in safeguarding indigenous knowledge systems, handicrafts, and traditional forms of art and performance. They advocated for the inclusion of Manipuri history and culture in educational curricula.

### **Emergence of organized Women's Movements:**

The emergence of organized women's movements in Manipur gained momentum in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by a desire to address gender-based inequalities and injustices. Grassroots initiatives, community-based organizations, and women-led campaigns became instrumental in amplifying women's voices and mobilizing collective action.

Meira Paibi ("women torchbearers") which was founded in 1977, deals with societal problems like drug and alcohol addiction and human rights abuses. Their signature strategy is to patrol communities at night while carrying flame-wielding torches as a sign of presence.

The Nisha Bandhi Movement, which emerged in the late 1970s, was centered on the fight against drug and alcohol abuse. Women marched at night, berating people who were inebriated and even setting liquor stores on fire.

## Problem Statement

Despite the significant contributions of Manipuri women to social and political movements, there remains a gap in understanding the nuanced dynamics of their agency and collective action from a feminist perspective. While existing literature provides insights into women's roles and contributions within Manipuri society, there is a need for a comprehensive analysis that explores the intersections of gender, culture, and activism. This project aims to address this gap by critically examining the portrayal of women's agency and collective action in "The Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women who Made History" by Teresa Rehman and "Women's Movement in Manipur" by Thokchom Binarani Devi. By Analyzing these texts through a feminist lens using real life occurrences and figures, this study seeks to uncover the multifaceted dimensions of Manipuri women's movement, identify the challenges they face, and highlight their strategies for social change. Through this exploration, the project aims to contribute to a deeper understanding the complexities of gender dynamics in Manipur and shed light on the resilience and agency of Manipuri women in challenging societal norms and advocating for their rights.

## Overview of Feminist Perspectives in Social Movements

Feminist perspectives play a crucial role in understanding and analyzing social movements, offering nuanced insights into the ways in which gender dynamics intersect with broader structures of power, oppression, and resistance. Rooted in the belief that gender inequality is both a cause and consequence of social injustice, feminist scholars and activists have sought to challenge and transform existing power structures through their engagement with various social movements.

Feminist movements demolish the structure of patriarchy, that gives precedence to men and male dominance, by working together and showing solidarity, thereby elevating the voices and experiences of women. The concept of intersectionality recognizes the particular difficulties women encounter due to their sexual orientation, race, and class. Feminist movements continue to fight against violence, unequal pay, and the underrepresentation of women in positions of power despite undeniable progress in areas like voting rights and workplace protections.

## Historical Context of Manipuri Women's Movements

### Pre-Colonial Era (Before 1891):

In pre-colonial Manipur, women had significant roles within traditional society, participating in various social and cultural practices and economic activities. The matrilineal system of inheritance and the presence of leadership roles within the community (like the Khasi and Garo people of Meghalaya) emphasized the relatively equitable gender dynamics prevalent in Manipur Society.

Research indicates that in comparison to women in other regions of India, Manipuri women have historically enjoyed a comparatively high social status. They controlled trade, possessed property, and exercised considerable economic power [Yumnam, Rukmani. "Women in Manipuri Society." (1983)]. There are even records of female warriors engaging in combat, demonstrating the involvement of women in warfare [Bennett, Elizabeth P. "Women and warriors: gender in Manipuri history." Studies in South Asian History and Culture (1996)].

### **Impact of Colonialism (1891-1947):**

The arrival of the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century marked a significant turning point in Manipur's history. The British rule disrupted existing socio-political structures as well as the traditional Manipuri economy, especially with regard to women's control over trade while introducing new forms of governance and economic exploitation. The imposition of colonial policies and administrative systems also had profound implications for gender relations in Manipur, leading to shifts in power dynamics and the erosion of women's autonomy. Women were further economically marginalized by the British government's imposition of forced labor and high taxes [Singh, N. K. (1997). Manipur history: From ancient times to the present day.]

### **Resistance and Independence Movements (Early 20th Century):**

Throughout the colonial period, Manipuri women actively participated and organized resistance movements against British rule, alongside their male counterparts. Women took up various forms of protest, including boycotts, demonstrations, and acts of civil disobedience. Their involvement in the struggle for independence exemplified their agency and commitment to the cause of self-determination.

**The Nupi-Lan Movements (1904 & 1939):** These well-known uprisings, which were spearheaded by women, serve as evidence of their defiance of colonial authority. In 1904, the first Nupi-Lan (women's war) broke out in opposition to British-imposed forced labor laws and trade restrictions on rice. Similar to this, the British-backed king's economic hardship and political instability were opposed by the Nupi-Lan movement in 1939 ["Understanding Women's Activism of Manipur: The Meira Paibis Movement." Krishi Sanskriti].

### **Champions of Community Health and Social Justice**

The Lions Club of Leimarol Imphal isn't just a social organization; it's a driving force for positive change in the community. They tackle sensitive issues head-on while promoting vital healthcare initiatives.

Recognizing the importance of addressing social issues, the Lions Club of Leimarol Imphal organizes symposiums that bring the topic of Violence Against Women to light. These symposiums serve as crucial platforms for raising awareness, educating the public, and fostering open discussions about this critical issue. Other sensitive issues which would not be discussed elsewhere are highlighted through these symposiums. By bringing together experts, community leaders, and the public, the club empowers women and encourages a culture of respect within the community.

The Lions Club of Leimarol Imphal also couples' awareness with action. They have established a permanent annual project focused on Breast and Cervical Cancer (Detection and Cure). These projects provide crucial preventive healthcare services to women in the community involving screenings, facilitating access to diagnostic tests, even supporting treatment options and financial aid. By making these services accessible, the club empowers women to take charge of their health and provides a vital safety net.

The Lions Club of Leimarol Imphal extends its commitment to healthcare by organizing regular Eye Camps. These camps offer free diagnosis and treatment for eye-related problems. This initiative caters to a widespread need, ensuring that financial constraints don't prevent individuals from receiving essential eye care. By providing free consultations and distributing corrective eyewear, the club helps improve the lives of countless community members. They also provide free of charge treatment and surgery options suffering from cataracts and other eye impairments.



Since The Lions Club of Leimarol Imphal, there are now several all-women Lions Club establishments in the state. Like the popular Lions Club of Imphal Chanura, who take on the Diabetes Detection Camp each year. These all-women organizations and groups work together to not only address social issues but also to advocate for women's collective action and integrity in the state. This absence of a male presence among their groups strengthens their sense of individual agency and provide much needed assurance of a system that can achieve equal if not greater results than male dominated organisation.

### **Cultural and societal barriers faced by women involved in Manipuri movements.**

Women in Manipur face several cultural and societal barriers, despite being arguably “accepting” of feminine values than other states, and this hinders the participation and progress in their agency and movements.

Manipuri society, like many others, has deeply rooted traditional gendered roles that women are expected to adhere to. To prioritize family and household duties over participation in public affairs or movements, and their own individual aspirations. There are clear signs of patriarchal attitudes that dominate society, limiting women's autonomy and decision-making power. This can manifest in various forms of discrimination and marginalization, making it challenging for women to take leadership roles in movements.

A clear example of this patriarchal control in public affairs is of an exemplary feminine figure in Manipuri politics - Thounaojam Brinda. Th. Brinda, a former Deputy Superintendent of Police, was hailed as a ‘super cop’ due to her efforts in erasing the drug trade taking place in the region. From 2003 to 2017, she practiced law. She is a known expert and enthusiast in permaculture and has been a consultant on the subject since 2017, leading various initiatives to introduce permaculture practices across different parts of the state. Brinda has also been an active voice in addressing pressing issues such as Fake Encounter Killings, The Drug Trade, Mining, Environmental concerns, Loktak, and street vendors. The same issues she has been involving her efforts in since her college days.

She has been a remarkable figure and a beacon of inspiration to men, women, children who seek to change not only the state of Manipur but the Nation as well. Th. Brinda was well on her way to becoming one of the most influential women figures in the country. That was until a very highly unlikely situation curved Brinda's life and career into a path of disarray prompted by the corrupt manners of the state machinery. Brinda was recognized as the Best Performing Officer Against Smuggled and Counterfeit Trade by the FICCI Cascade (Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry) on its 6<sup>th</sup> edition in New Delhi. Following a successful raid spearheaded by Brinda herself on the office of former ADC chairman of Chandel – Lukhosei Zou, a member of BJP, where drugs worth crores were seized, the Chief Minister pressured her to drop the case on Zou. This was one of the biggest drug-related operation in Manipur history. All these accolades and achievements, a lifetime of struggle shut down and suppressed by a corrupt man in power.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Teresa Rehman “Mothers of Manipur: The Twelve Women Who Made History”: Brunt of Military Intervention**

Coming back to the narratives given in the texts, the 12 women mentioned in Teresa Rehman's book, “Mothers of Manipur: The Twelve Women Who Made History” refer to the 12 women who stripped themselves naked in the heart of Imphal City on July 15, 2004 in front of The Kangla Gate, the then Assam Rifles HQ, in protest against the killing of Thangjam Manorama. Flying Banners with slogans painted in red – “Indian Army Rape Us”, “Indian Army Take Our Flesh”. It was an event that shook the nation and transformed the state forever. Amongst a number of killings and rapes, military and police brutality in the

late '90s and early 2000s, the brutal murder of Thangjam Manorama, a 32-year-old woman was the final nail in the coffin. Manorama's body was riddled with bullets, her private parts, stomach and thighs suffering much of the gunshot wounds. Her body was found in a paddy field near her home hours after she was abducted under suspicious circumstances by Assam Rifles personnel. In a forensic exam, semen stains were found on her clothes in addition to the torture that Manorama suffered in her final hours.

This case sparked an outrage in Manipur against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958 – which allows use of deadly force against civilians and militants in disturbed areas – was already pervasive. During this time, Human Rights activist Irom Sharmila was already 4 years into her hunger strike against AFSPA. She would go on to fast until 2016. Resentment against security forces began as early as 1974 after a BSF officer raped a local woman named Rose, who committed suicide, and faced no consequences for the crime. “Since 1974, the Imas' hearts were overflowing with sorrow. With every murder, rape, abduction, our hearts sank further”, Ima Gyaneshwori, one of the Kangla Fort protesters, told The Print in an interview in 22 July 2021, during the 17<sup>th</sup> Anniversary observance of the protest. “When Manorama happened, we couldn't take it anymore. It had already been 24 years of struggle. Something within us broke”, she added.

The protest is observed on its anniversary by activists in the state as ‘Anti-Repression Day’ and serves as a reminder to the world, the atrocities committed by the military in the state and the number of extrajudicial killings in Manipur since. Decades later, Manorama and 1,528+ other victims – who were either killed or went missing in similar circumstances – remain elusive, and the AFSPA was removed in 2022 and 2023, only to be imposed again months after.

It has been 20 years, and Manorama, the victims and their families still wait for justice.

### **Thokchom Binarani Devi “Women's Movement in Manipur”: Women's Agency and Collective Action**

In Thokchom Binarani Devi's book “Women's Movement in Manipur”, she talks about the idea of a feminist wave of movements, that came during the period of the post-modern society, as a whole. Where women are enjoying more autonomy and taking on individual challenges without interference or intervention as they would have faced earlier on.

After decades of insurgency and militarization, people have felt profound effects on their lives as a result, particularly women. Women in Manipur have been actively involved in peace-building efforts, advocating for an end to violence and militarization, and demanding justice for victims of human rights abuses. In her book, Binarani talks about the various forms of activism and advocacy undertaken by women in Manipur, in the form of protests, campaigns, and grassroots organizing. There has been a rise in women only institutions and establishments throughout the state as well.

A unique and powerful symbol of Women Empowerment is the Ima Keithel, the largest and oldest women-run-market in Asia. The name is coined from a Manipuri word “Ima” meaning “Mother” (also used to address elder women as a sign of respect) and “Keithel” meaning “Market”. Thus, denoting that the market is run by the mothers of the state. The origin of Ima Keithel dates back to before British Colonial rule when the region was divided amongst smaller small kingdoms. During those times, when the men were off to battle, the women were left to sustain the family's needs. This is one of the explanations of how the Manipuri mothers started out in their venture of trading.

Currently the Ima Keithel is a vibrant commercial hub with more than 5000 vendors from both the Valley and the hills catering to thousands of customers daily. But it isn't just merely a tourist attraction or a place of hustle and bustle. It is also an important center for deliberations on important socio-political issues of the state. It is a symbol of empowerment and has enabled women folk to raise their voices to be heard and band together to overcome challenges in unity. The market is a shrine of Integrity and Strength having survived an onslaught of disruptive forces over the centuries. When the British ascended in 1891, they almost immediately began to control trade and commerce in Manipur, thereby undermining the businesses of

Manipuri womenfolk. To prevent the implementation of exploitative policies of the British power during colonial rule, the women vendors stood united against the oppressors and halted them in their efforts to take control of the local economy. This was when they declared the “Nupi Lan” or women’s war against the British in 1904 and 1939 to save the local markets from foreign invasions.

The Ima Keithel also serves as a symbol of ethnical tolerance and religious plurality, where the vendors are consisted of Meitei Pangals (Muslims), Meiteis, and other tribes (Naga, Kabui, Tangkhul etc) following different religions of Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sanamahi (indigenous faith) among other minority religions all under the same roof. Alluding to the strong relationship/connection among the womenfolk in the entirety of the region.

### **Unveiling the Nuances: A Comparative Approach**

We are able to comprehend the Manipuri women's movements on a more complex level by examining the representations of both Rehman and Devi. Rehman's work emphasizes the leadership of important figures and offers a priceless historical record. Devi, on the other hand, provides a more profound link to the women who participated lived experiences and the collective spirit. In the end, a comparative approach enables us to recognize both the individual leadership and the collective action that fueled these movements, allowing us to appreciate their richness and complexity.

### **Rehman: Measuring Progress Through Systemic Change**

Rehman concentrates on observable, tangible changes to political systems and society because she is examining the movements through a historical perspective. She draws attention to particular legislative and policy developments brought about by the movements. Did the women's movements, for example, result in the passing of laws addressing matters such as alcohol control, which was a significant concern during the Nupi-Lan? Did their actions also lead to changes in law enforcement procedures so that women's safety and human rights were better protected?

The greater representation of women in politics may be another factor to consider when evaluating Rehman. Did the movements result in more women joining political parties and occupying seats in the government? This greater representation might indicate a change in the balance of power and the acceptance of women's perspectives in determining public policy.

Lastly, Rehman evaluates how the movements have affected more general social attitudes. Has there been a greater acknowledgement of women's rights and gender equality in Manipuri society as a result of the collective action and public protests? One important change that the movements have brought about is a change in cultural norms and societal expectations.

### **Devi: Acknowledging Progress While Recognizing Ongoing Challenges**

Writing from a deeper place of personal connection to the movements, Devi mentions the accomplishments that Rehman emphasized. She, however, also draws attention to the continued difficulties that Manipuri women face. The continued existence of patriarchal structures in society is a major cause for concern. Do societal norms like inheritance laws and gender roles still prevent women from achieving their full potential and limiting their agency?

Devi also looks into the issue of inadequate political representation. Is there still a gender gap in positions of power and decision-making, even if women's participation in government has increased somewhat? It will take time and consistent effort to achieve the long-term goal of fighting for true equality in politics.

Devi also concentrates on issues related to economic inequality. Did the movements address the

disproportionate impact of economic disparities on women? Do women still have less access to resources and financial independence, or is there still a sizable gender pay gap? A significant obstacle to attaining gender equality may be these economic realities.

### **Shaping the Future: A Never Ending Battle**

Across the history of Manipur, women have consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience, courage, and leadership in the face of adversity. From the pre-colonial era, where women held significant roles within traditional society, to the colonial period, marked by resistance against British rule, Manipur women have been at the forefront of social and political movements. As we have seen in examples of Nupi Lan mentioned earlier, where women protested against colonial economic policies, and the activism of figures like Rani Gaidinliu, a prominent Naga political leader, who fought for India's independence, these serve as testament to the enduring spirit of Manipuri women.

"The Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women who Made History" by Teresa Rehman vividly portrays the stories of twelve remarkable women who have made indelible contributions to Manipuri Society. These women such as Soibam Momon, Thokchom Ramani, Ema Mema, Mutum (o) Ibemhal, Loitam Ebetombi, Thokchom Jamini, Ema Tombi, Laishram Gyaneshwori, Moirangthem Jibanlata, Ema Taruni, Moirangthem Soro, Khagembam Nganbi (the twelve women who strip themselves in front of Kangla Gate as protest against AFSPA atrocities), Irom Sharmila and Longjam Memchoubi Devi (one of the earliest founders of an organized Meira Paibi association), and Thounaojam Brinda, exemplify the unwavering commitment of Manipuri women to social justice, peace, and human rights. Through their activism, they have challenged patriarchal norms, advocated for rights of marginalized communities, and inspired generations of women to join the struggle for a better future.

"Women's Movement in Manipur" by Thokchom Binarani Devi breaks down the historical context and evolution of women's movements in Manipur and provides valuable insights. Her text underscores the diverse forms of activism and collective action undertaken by Manipuri women, from grassroots organizing to political advocacy. Devi's book highlights resilience and resourcefulness of Manipuri women in navigating complex socio-political landscapes. In the efforts to recognize the leadership, agency, and collective action of Manipuri women, we gain deeper understanding and appreciation of their contributions to social justice, gender equality, and peace-building efforts in Manipur and beyond.

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