



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Reconstructing Women's Nude Protest in Manipur through Oral History: Public Memory, women's Identity.

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Abstract: In the context of historical analysis of women in Manipur, the public memory and voices of the extraordinary women who took part in the nude protest of 2004, are first and foremost the ways in which these mothers has reconstructed their past to negotiate an ever-fluidic process of identity construction. Following the narrative analysis allows for a historical interpretation of these interview-based oral sources to relive the veracity of the accounts they provide as a participant of the event of 2004. As Memory and history confront each other across the tape recorder, video tapes as a documenting device the paper cast a new light into their gendered role in society. From their collaboration emerge a richer, and a more nuanced understanding of the past of womanhood and how motherhood plays a crucial role in the emergence of Meira paibis movement in Manipur and various other forms of activism. The work is based on oral history and traditions to document these women voices using interviews, listening, and understanding womanhood in the marginalized state of Manipur; to reconstruct links among personal experience, collective memory, and broad historical processes to address the role of re-telling in popular consciousness. The reconstruction of their history using the mothers as centre of the study provide a new insights into the narrative and symbolic frameworks they use to explain why things turned out as they did. In conclusion, I look at efforts to rethink the ways in which memory encodes historical processes into experience and the consequent possibilities for oral history, in situating the women of Manipur to augment historical understanding of motherhood and activism.

Keywords: *public memory, oral history, reconstruction, activism, motherhood politics*

Introduction:

Women play a very important role in the social life of Manipur and are widely believed that women in Manipur not only enjoy a high status, are accorded esteem and respect, participate actively in public life, contribute greatly to the economy, 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 violence against women both at home and outside. Thus it is important to understand the growth and development of a democratic society based on equality, liberty and freedom and welfare programmes largely depends on the participation of women in the democratic process of the state. The emergence of women's organisations as pressure groups is of recent phenomenon. But 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 monarchy i.e., during the British period. It might be due to historical reasons of having lallup system¹ (every adult male member from every family working in palace ten days out of forty) and accompanying the king in his frequent warfare against the neighbouring ruler etc. made the womenfolk of Manipur aware of the social, economic and political matters, which had affected their families. So, the womenfolk as a collective force could even correct the wrong doings as well as the mistake committed in the administrative and political aspects.

¹ Gangmumei Kamei, 'A History of Modern Manipur 1826-2000'. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. 2016. p-24.

Historically in Manipur, there has been strong women's participation for instance in the Nupilan Movements of 1904, and 1939 and later the anti-liquor and anti-drug movements of Nishabandh in late 1970s, all of these have been primarily social rather than political in nature, without a modern sense of political identity. After the accession of Manipur to the Union of India, the women community once again energized their role in the struggle for restoration of democracy and fought against the undemocratic Advisory Council (1952-53), the Territorial Council, and finally for the statehood of Manipur. The tradition of Meitei women's powerful civil society organizations rising against social evils is quite evident even today. Post-independence era, they have been agitating against the Armed Forces Special Power Act of 1958 operating in Manipur². The activities of women in groups or as members of voluntary organizations or non-governmental organizations, pressure groups have a forceful impact on the political process of the state. The outcome of the movement may be slow or delayed but the relentless efforts of the women's organizations are very difficult to ignore and are vital for understanding the ongoing political situation in Manipur.

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 the army, of one Thangjam Manorama, 32-year-old women suspected of being a militant of a banned outfit. The Kangla 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 they carried it out with precision and care. In doing so they used their own body as powerful tool to challenge years of sustained violation, humiliation and sexual violence by the Indian Army. 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.

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 womenfolk 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.

OBJECTIVES:-

The main objectives of the paper are as follows –

- To reconstruct the public events of the nude protest and used their oral narratives as tool to give insights into aspects of motherhood politics and women's identity.
- Understand the broader history of women activism in Manipur; and analyze the value of oral history in documenting their memories.

Despite the tremendous role that the Meira paibis have played in socio-political and economic struggles, they are seldom given the opportunity to express their views in Manipur politics. It is in this regard that an event that took place in July 2004 at the gate of Kangla, the then, erstwhile Meitei kingdom administrative centre is very significant. On 15 July 2004, a public protest was staged in Manipur to oppose the rape and custodial killing of a young Meitei woman, Thangjam Manorama, by soldiers of a counter-insurgency paramilitary battalion, the Assam Rifles,³ who suspected she was a militant. The nude protest in front of the Head Quarters of the Assam Rifles at Kangla fort, holding a banner that read "Indian Army Rape Us"; this protest was widely reported in local, national and international print and visual media. The photograph of the nude protestors of the Meira Paibis with the banner in front of them was splashed on the front pages of most newspapers of the national dailies. People in mainland India were shocked to see this expression of defiance on the part of women to such an extreme action resulting in media limelight. "Suddenly Manipur was in the centre of the world media. People, who do not even know where Manipur is, now began to analyse the core issue that led to this extreme." For weeks, months and years

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

³ The Assam Rifles is the oldest paramilitary force of India. The unit can trace its lineage back to a paramilitary police force that was formed under the British in 1835 called Cachar Levy. Since then the Assam Rifles have undergone a number of name changes—the Assam Frontier Police (1883), the Assam Military Police (1891) and Eastern Bengal and Assam Military Police (1913), before finally becoming the Assam Rifles in 1917. See http://mha.nic.in/sites/upload_files/mha/files/EnglAnnualReport2016-17_17042017.pdf

after, the Assam Rifles would respond to questions related to Thangjam Manorama and her brutal death as if it was a form of horror or deceptively of sorts afflicting the questioner imagination more than anything.⁴

It is not surprising that the women used the terms of motherhood to articulate this protest- after all their motherhood gives them legitimacy to participate in the socio-political context of Manipur. What do we make of the refutation of the members of the Meira paibis that the protest was not orchestrated and their insistence that it was a spontaneous motherly reaction- that of a mother when her daughter is raped and killed? In the context of their role against army excesses, it has been common to label the Meira paibis as mothers of insurgent groups. Or is the emphasis on spontaneity because a planned decision to bare their bodies would be deemed inappropriate in terms of normative understandings of a mother's body? Whatever is the reason, this point about actions has been picked up in how this protest has been read and understood. Their actions have very often been interpreted as spontaneous act of anguish, anger and desperation, prompted by emotions, particularly those that fit into the narrative of a motherly anguish. My goal here is not to dispute the above emotions, but rather, what I want to inquire is the question of why the action of the Meira paibis have been seen predominantly from an emotional standpoint, and not as an act of politics, as an agent of history functions. My concern is about the way their actions have been interpreted by others, I will address this issue of their Challenges in bigger realm of State and the need to integrate women in history.

The mothers had left their hair loose, a mark of mourning. Some wore slippers. Others were 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. To find fellowship in loss is easy in a brutalized land. The odd relief here is that you don't need to make people understand grief. They know what you have suffered because chances are they have suffered the same. Laisram Gyaneshwari had seen Manorama's body.⁵ As news of the brutality and the possibility of custodial rape and other bodily violations to her body caused the ultimate demise. Soon it became public from her native Bamonkampu, near Iriblung⁶ in Imphal East district to the streets of Imphal city spread like wildfire, civil society organizations along with Meira paibis of major localities in the vicinity of Imphal and from far flung areas started gathering near Nupi lan Complex, and relived the Nupi lan protest in the circumstances, these group in unison demanded to see the body and ascertain whether it was a case of custodial death. Many women who went to the hospital morgue were horrified at the mutilation and cruelty done on her body; soon the State Government imposed a state wide curfew to control these protesting mothers, but despite all the clampdown the mothers never gave up and the incident is for the rest of the world to see, the abject surrendering of innocent people to gun totting paramilitary and to the insurgence and how people only suffer in any armed conflict and in this context we need to see how the event of 2004 Nude protest reaffirms the socio-cultural role of Meira paibis into a new political innings for change.

'I didn't know Manorama personally nor I'm related to her, but that such a terrible lawless thing could have happen in Manipur despite all the protected status by the Governments of the state and the union, how gruesome a crime scene it was that to a unmarried girl, how bodily sanctity of a women was humiliated, and violated in public shocked us. There was so much cruelty...so gruesome that my heart bled and cannot phantom our imagination that she could be any one's daughter, even could be mine. It was like vultures had preyed on her and it angered the mother in us for our own children,' Ima Ch. Jamini⁷ would narrate me sobbingly in an exhaustive retelling of the events that brought these elderly mothers into the limelight and drive home the need for understanding humanity and ethos of being a civil human being to one another especially to its weaker sections the women, children and the youth who suffered the most in any armed conflict. The event had awoken the resolved of these protesting mothers of Manipur and how their strength to organized Meira paibis of the entire Imphal valley and the hills women organization to unite, as it was vital in bringing about a new change in Manipur.

The first three section of the chapter have tried to summarize the discourses which the Meitei woman has emerged in Manipur history. These discourses have in turn shaped the possibilities that set the terms for Meitei women to participate in larger socio-political spheres of Manipur. In this regard, I have identified two broad themes. First, given the tremendous material violence perpetrated by the armed conflicts on women's bodies, an important concern for the women's movement in the state has been to highlight various forms of violence, discrimination and become the actors in historiography of politics, and state. Although their efforts are commendable, I have pointed out how the language of women's rights is not an adequate response, neither analytically nor politically as they are based on dismantling the power relations implied by the

⁴ Anubha Bhosle. 'Indian Army, Rape Us' in Outlook. February 2016 Available at <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/indian-army-rape-us/296634>

⁵ On an Interview with Ima Laishram Gyaneshwari on the reason for the Nude protest.

⁶ Bamon Kampu village is located in Keirao Bitra Tehsil of Imphal East district in Manipur, India. It is situated 6km away from sub-district headquarter Keirao Bitra and 7km away from district headquarter Imphal East.

⁷ Oral interview with Ch. Jamini by the researcher, and how mothers of Manipur rebelled against the powerful status quo of the state and the military forces to confront their wrongs in wake of Manorama's death. In the interview she took immense pride in carrying out the nude protest despite her own family having reservations as she opinion her pride was as much in question after the incident.

man/woman or the public/private binary. This is by no means a criticism of these organisations and movements; rather, a reminder of a point that Scott so eloquently made of the inevitable paradoxes that emerged for a feminist politics based on the category “woman”- that is, woman as a category of differences.⁸ Secondly, I have identified motherhood politics as a way to address questions of peace. This approach to peace making takes on the traditional role of mothers and recasts it as a larger historical project of protecting sons and daughters from the violence of the state.

Although motherhood politics has had its successes, it has also constrained the ways in which women can participate in making history. Marriage and then motherhood becomes prerequisites, without which as if Meitei women do not have the necessary credentials or the political authority to assert their presence in the public sphere. This recreates normative definitions of women within heterosexual norms and institutions.⁹ Given that these heterosexual norms are themselves the reasons for women’s oppression, in particular, in the context of Manipur, the tremendous sexual threats that they face, this discourse too ends up recreating the very sites of women’s domination. This way of conceiving politics also inadvertently recreates the problematic discourse of Cultural nationalism,¹⁰ which appeals to the sanctity of marriage and motherhood to constitute cultural identities.

In a reassessment of the role of maternal politics in the Northeast, Samir Kumar Das argues that in the militarized context of the Northeast where democratic institutions are not allowed to function in a democratic set-up, political motherhood has opened the door for women to participate in the politics of Northeast.¹¹ He argues that in democratic struggles, gender and maternal politics in Manipur are caught in an intersectional relationship such that one cannot be separated from the other and that this is reflected in the nude protest. Historically situating the nude protest by the imas as an expression of political motherhood in opposite to biological motherhood, or motherhood based on individual mother-child relationship. He furthers, that the naked protest both deploys and deconstructs the metaphor of motherhood. It deconstructs the everyday language of shame and victimhood and at the same time deploys a political motherhood by claiming “we are all Manorama’s mothers”.¹² While this is a welcome move and takes us away from a liberal feminist politics¹³, it nevertheless limits the meaning of women. It is an assessment of imbrications of gender (primarily in terms of politics of motherhood) with politics but there is a way in which he conflates women with mothers such that if women wanted to participate in politics in the Northeast they have to be mothers or understood as potential mothers. Another critique reiterates this symbolism; here nudity implies the lack of honour and as such is a very classed and gendered understanding of the female nude body. In this reading, nudity cannot signify power. Instead, the protest signified the opposite of women’s power where the women stalked all they have.

These were mostly women with similar stories of early marriage, domesticity, the birth of children. 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 banging would produce

⁸ For the most part, the attempts of historians to theorize about gender have remained within traditional social scientific frameworks, using longstanding formulations that provide universal causal explanations. These theories have been limited at best because they tend to contain reductive or overly simple generalizations that undercut not only history's disciplinary sense of the complexity of social causation but also feminist commitments to analyses that will lead to change. See Joan Scott. *Gender and the Politics of History*. (Gender and Culture.) New York: Columbia University Press. 1988. Pp. 14-21, 44-52

⁹ At a time when sexual violence is fervently discussed in the country and the word 'misogyny' has finally crept into mainstream discourse, Menon's work serves as a great introduction to taking those uncomfortable questions further and bridging the gap between feminism as a purely-academic, closeted concern and a battle that is waged everyday on the streets, in our houses and in our lives. See Nivedita Menon 'Seeing like a feminist'. Zubaan Books. New Delhi. 2012 pp. 33-39, 77-82, 134-141

¹⁰ Cultural nationalism is a form of nationalism in which the nation is defined by a shared culture. It is an intermediate position between ethnic nationalism on one hand and civic nationalism on the other.

¹¹ Samir Kumar Das. 'Ethnicity and democracy meet when Mothers protest' in *Women in Peace Politics* ed. Paula Banerjee P.37

¹² Anubha Bhosle. '*Mother, Where is my country? Looking for light in the darkness of Manipur*'. Speaking Tiger Publishing Private Limited. Delhi.2016. pp.108-115

¹³ Liberal feminism is an individualistic form of feminist theory, which focuses on women's ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Liberal feminists argue that society holds the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and physically capable than men; thus it tends to discriminate against women in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. Liberal feminists believe that "female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world". They strive for sexual equality via political and legal reform. See Rosemarie Tong '*Liberal feminism: Feminist thought a comprehensive introduction*'. London: Routledge. 1992. pp- 21, 25-30

varying rhythms of sounds and beats, each conveying a different message, a message to congregate for an emergency. The recent years had been particularly difficult, but there was much fight still left in them. Manipur's history expected no less. 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. It was time for the third Nupi Lan or women's war.¹⁴

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. Injustice was done all through the last half-a-century to all the ethnic groups, genders, classes and regions of the State. Human beings were treated just like chattels by the State Forces. Yet the nation would protect them under the said Act of 1958. Those naked women, with whatever courage at their command, evidently challenged not the real Security Forces of the nation then stationed in the Kangla but the entire nationhood, perceivably, overlooking the on-going rape of the Manipuri womanhood. Those twelve women stood erect and advanced not asking for mercy or forcing any 'rogue' demand on the 'rogue' Security 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 and the remotest corner of the nationhood. Their voice was heard, loud and clear. For, the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself came along soon thereafter i.e. on 20 November to oversee the 'handing over' of Kangla itself to the State by the Director-General, Assam Rifles in front of a record Manipuri womenfolk turnout.¹⁵

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 state government would finally 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 Kangla 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. When women attempt to redefine their roles and expand their arena of choices, their perceptions and actions generate reverberations through the entire society necessitating a re-ordering of not only gender roles and arrangements but also of the social and political order affecting the culture and the collectivity and its self-definition and identity. The identity of Meitei womanhood draws on the similar historical lines. Identity is also, about subjectivities; yet it is not something that persons don at their will, irrespective of objective situations and processes. 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. Patriarchy cannot be understood as discrete individual behavior of a patriarch or the male head of the family. Rather we find in our society a system of social relations that perpetuate the exploitation of women by men¹⁹. The exploitation of a person or an object is preconditioned by its control in

¹⁴ Anubha Bhosle. *Op cit.* P.119

¹⁵ Prime Minister's Dr. Manmohan Singh's speech at Government of India, PMO Archive <http://archivepmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/speech-details.php?nodeid=45>

¹⁶ Teresa Rehman, 'The Mothers of Manipur'. Zubaan Publisher's Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi. 2017. p. 15

¹⁷ Report of the Committee to Review the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, Ministry of Home Affairs .2005. Part- IV. Pp. 67-81; Also in The Hindu: daily: article; 'Repeal Armed Forces Act: official panel.'

¹⁸ Report of The committee on 'Amendments to Criminal Law'. January 23, 2013. Pp. 260-69; also in The Hindu: daily: News item; 'Don't allow Army men to take cover under AFSPA, says Justice Verma'.

¹⁹ Gerda Lerner, 'The Creation of Patriarchy'. Oxford University Press: New York. 1986. p. 43

some form or the other. Control of female sexuality and procreativity are the basis of men's control over women. Women of Manipur take a variety of roles in the society. Right from rearing the children and managing the household; women earn for the family, feed the other members, involve themselves in reforming the society, and take part in policy formulation and governance. The Kangla mother's exemplifies another collective woman's participation in Manipur dynamic oral history, as one of the important movers of peace-building, and empowerment thus; the womenfolk have the potential to become a very significant instrument for progressive social and political transformation.

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 Kangla Mothers would be insights into a feminist frame for learning to listen, interprets testimony and reaching out to their memory. The article 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 spiraling violence due to the prevailing armed conflict situations. My pursuit of making Meitei motherhood visible through 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. 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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4. Ima Soibam Momon - Co- Convenor, Sharmila Apunba lup and
President, All Manipur Tammi-Chingmi Apunba Lup.
5. Ima Lourembam Nganbi - Executive Member, Macha Leima
6. Ima Laishram Gyaneshwari - Ex-Secretary, AMWSRDS
7. Ima Mutum Ibemhal - Ex-President,
All Manipur Tammi (valley)- Chingmi (hill) Apunba Lup

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