

Women's Movement in Manipur: Some Observations

LUCY T.V. ZEHOL

The state of Manipur consists of two distinct geo-ethnic parts: the hill region of the state inhabited by the tribal groups and Imphal valley inhabited by the non-tribal Meiteis.

I

The Meitei women of Manipur have a long and established tradition of agitations for social reforms or against administrative oppressions. From ancient times the Manipuris have been using two methods against the authority to have their grievances redressed: (i) non-violent or peaceful movement; and (ii) violent movement. The first method has been practised by women and the second by men. "The Manipuri male folk have considered it below their dignity to do satyagraha to get their grievances redressed. So they have left it to the female. It is a common story that whenever injustice was done by the King and the officials, a group of women went to the palace and protested against the injustice. The mistake was ordinarily corrected."¹

Constantine has also written, "In the agitation which women spearheaded, it is wrong to think men were shunning action. The women were their force . . . Women were considered non-violent or moderately so. It used to be the Manipuri practice to first send a women's delegate to report an injustice to the ruler".²

Women's movement in Manipur was mainly of the "Norm-oriented" type, that is in connection with reformation. They, however, also involved 'value orientation', since social movement is multi-dimensional by nature.³ During the last three centuries, i.e. after a

deep influence of Hinduism on the social norms of the Meitei society, the position of women has lowered.

In the history of women's movement in Manipur, mention may be made that quite a few Maharanis took active part in the administration during monarchical period. The King as well as the people sometimes sought the opinion or support of the women to solve difficult problems or situation which affected the interest of the community. In the history of Manipur there were many evidences where the King took the opinion and suggestions of their Maharani in matters which were of public interest. Sometimes women in a group gathered and complained to the King for correction, if he acted unruly and had done any injustice.⁴

After the annexation of Manipur by the British, the history of Manipur is famous for the two *Nupilans* (female's warfare). The first *Nupilan* was in 1904. It so happened that on the 28th of Lambda 1903, the house of the British Political Agent at Imphal caught fire and was completely destroyed. It again caught fire in 1904. Maxwell, the Assistant Political Agent ordered that every village chowkidar in the Imphal valley fetch teak wood from Kabow valley. The Political Agent also ordered the villagers to collect bamboos, thatch, reeds and other materials necessary for the construction of the house. While the male members were collecting the materials, women in a group suddenly appeared and snatched away the bamboo, thatches, etc. from the hands of the male members and threw them into the Nambul river. Thus, they started action against the order of the British officers.⁵ According to another account of the incident, all the people of Imphal were ordered to extract teak wood from Kabow and construct the house of the Assistant Superintendent, which the people protested and assembled at the Khwainamband Bazaar.⁶ Seeing the agitation, persons more than five were not allowed to assemble. All the women resorted to strike and bazaar was completely stopped. They disobeyed the orders and entered into the residence of the Political Agent and Superintendent in thousand. The demonstration of women continued for several days. The army was called to restore peace. As a result many women were injured and peace was restored at last. This is known as the First *Nupilan*.

In 1939, there was the second *Nupilan*. It was an agitation for banning the export of rice. In 1939, excessive rain had seriously

damaged the standing crops which was further beaten and destroyed by the hailstorm. A large quantity of rice was being exported from Manipur to other places earlier. This resulted in severe shortage of rice during 1939-40. There was a general apprehension about the possibility of rice scarcity. The rice export was exclusively controlled by the Marwari traders. They exported rice to other parts of British India. More than fifteen thousand women demonstrated before the Darbar Hall and shouted slogans for banning the export of rice. Many women leaders like Shabi Devi, Tharo Devi, Mukhi Devi, Kumar and Apambi Devi got serious bayonet injuries. And Tengou, Khongnang, Shabi and Akbu Devi were imprisoned for 9 months in the Imphal Jail in connection with the agitation.⁷

The Marwari traders who were permanently settled in Manipur held the top place in the economic structure of Manipur. They had the monopoly of purchasing rice and paddy from the cultivators and local traders. They offered rates sometimes much higher than the local rates. The cultivators and the local sellers obviously preferred to sell their rice and paddy to the Marwari traders for higher prices. As a result, the local people suffered. In spite of the efforts made by the public for stopping of rice exports, the Marwaris continued to export rice secretly at night. Since there was shortage of rice in almost all the households, one could hardly get rice even for the household consumption. The women traders at the local Khwairamband Bazaar, who earned their livelihood by trading rice and paddy were deprived of their means of livelihood. All the available stocks of rice were being bought by the outside traders. The public thus were at a loss.

The women traders then mobilised the public for agitation against the activities of the Marwari rice traders. It is reported that about a thousand women began gathering around the Darbar Office of the Maharaja on 11 December 1939. The women demanded immediate stoppage of the export of rice. They also stopped some bullock-cart drivers who were to sell rice to the Marwari and handed the cartdrivers to the police. The members of the darbar had to escape the fury of the women agitators who entered the office and rounded-up the President. At that time the Maharaja of Manipur was out to Nabadweep in Bengal for pilgrimage. The women agitators compelled the President to go with them to the telegraph office and get a telegraphic order from the Maharaja. The women also prevented the Commandant of

the 40th Assam Rifles who had arrived there for controlling the mob. The situation became so serious that the soldiers were called to disperse the crowd. Although the crowd was cleared from the compound, the women did not leave the area but remained on the road outside near the compound. In the event 21 women were seriously injured.

On December 14, the President of the Darbar received a message from the Maharaja directing the Political Agent to stop the export of rice. An order was promptly issued. The women agitators then turned their attention to the rice mills. They forced a written promise from the owners that they would not run their mills. By the night, many big mills were dislocated as their electric connections had been cut off by the women agitators.

From 12 December 1939 the women had boycotted the Khwairamband Bazaar. The boycott continued and this became a matter of concern to the authorities since the economy of the state could suffer if women continued the boycott. This led the Government of Assam to demand a full and detailed report. According to the report, it was pointed out that the boycott of the Bazaar began on 12 December 1939 as a spontaneous protest against the outside merchants.

The women were adamant that as long as their grievances are not redressed they could not attend the Bazaar. The grievances were:

- (1) unfitness of the present members of the Darbar,
- (2) the unfitness of the police,
- (3) the illegal conviction of the four women,
- (4) the unexpected police assault on the women and
- (5) the illegal action of Dulap Sing (a member of the Darbar).

The women agitators were so well organised that the Khwairamband Bazaar was virtually deserted for about a year. It was after the repeated assurance by the Maharaja of Manipur that the situation in the market returned to normal.

In 1954 and 1959 women also took part in the demand for responsible government in Manipur. In 1960, women formed *Women's Assembly Demand Committee* to persuade the Central Government for granting responsible government in Manipur. The committee in one of its Memorandum to the Chief Commissioner mentioned that

we cannot remain passive and silent on the day-to-day happenings having a direct bearing on our happiness and sorrows as well as our future welfare. We are very much perturbed by the government's apathy and indifference towards the present satyagraha movement launched by the Assembly Demand Committee for the achievement of responsible government in Manipur.⁸

In 1980 the law and order situation of Manipur was very bad. The entire valley was under heavy combing operation by the army in order to flush out the 'extremists'. Ever since then, the women in different parts of the state have been organising themselves against the combing operation by the army personnel. On April 27, 1980, there was a heavy combing operation in Pastoi village situated in Imphal district. As a result, more than a hundred women had to be taken to the hospital. After the incident, more than 10,000 women from every corner of Manipur gathered in front of the Chief Minister's bungalow and shouted anti-combing slogans, followed by big demonstration in the city. This had some amount of desired effect. This is how the women have organised themselves to protest against the mental and physical torture by the armed forces which has become a prominent factor.

All Manipur Women's Reformation and Development Samaj and *Meitei Chanura Marup* are two of the effective female organisations in Manipur. The aim of these associations is the overall development of women in Manipur specially for the improvement of their socio-economic conditions. Sometimes strenuous efforts are being made to enforce prohibition, sale of liquor, prostitution, practice of polygamy and welfare programmes for women and children. Taking note of the effectiveness and success of the women's organisation, the Government of Manipur has accepted the request of these organisations for the recruitment of women volunteers in the police, excise and home guard departments.

II

We may now take a look at the women among the tribal communities inhabiting the hill region of the state. Tribes of the Naga and Kuki-chin group inhabit the hill region. In tribal societies, under the rule of the patrilineal system of social organisation, the father is the head of

the family, yet the mother has always been holding a prominent status. In the Naga society, and so in the Kuki-chin society, the women may not have any apparent legal rights yet they are very influential with the menfolk specially their husbands.

In politics and other social affairs, women have been able to influence men in many ways directly or indirectly through the village councillors or at least through their husbands. In the bygone days when headhunting was practised, women played a vital role in saving the lives of men. A woman of the village, during inter-village feuds and wars, would act as an ambassador, and a mediator. In such a case both the warring villages would recognize diplomatic immunity for dedicating women. The neutral lady-*Phukhareila* among the Tangkhul, could boldly enter a battle field and intervene between warring groups. She had the right of her own to intervene in the political social affairs of the society, if it interfered with the general public.

Since the 1950's the army have been carrying out their counter insurgency operations in Naga inhabited lands. They have beaten, tortured, raped and murdered the Nagas. Entire villages have been burnt down. Khonoma was burnt seven times. Operation Bluebird was the biggest operation in recent times. The villagers did not remain silent and dared to speak out. With the help of the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) they took the armed forces to court. This is the first time in the history of the Naga that the guilty officers of Armed forces had to stand and answer the charges of murder, rape, looting and arson. The struggle for legal justice began some years ago on October 5, 1987.

In July, 1987 the Assam Rifles post near Oinam village situated in the Senapati district of Manipur was raided in broad day light by the undergrounds. They walked away with large quantity of arms and ammunition. Nine jawans were killed and three seriously injured. The Assam Rifles launched operation Bluebird to recover the looted arms and ammunition. This operation was carried out in and around Oinam and its surrounding 30 villages. There has been shocking reports that the villagers were being subjected to all kinds of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment by the armed forces. Women were not spared. Women and girls were assaulted. Two women were even compelled to give birth in the open ground in full view of the jawans.⁹

The women's union of the Manipur Convention filed a petition on behalf of the women who had been raped, molested and also those who had been forced to work as construction labourers or porters by the Army.

The women in Manipur now are politically conscious and often resort to various forms of agitations, strikes etc. In every demonstration, female participation constitutes about 50% of the total population.

We can also observe at present that though women come out actively on many issues, they hardly succeed and attain their goal on some of the important social issues. One important factor responsible for their failure is the appeasing policy of the ruling party. Many political leaders, often employed and misguided them for their interests and advantages. This created many factions and led to groupism. The other factor is the prevailing law and order situation in Manipur which hampers the execution of their work.

III

The description provided so far has been made with the intention to highlight that the women in each of the two categories, the non-tribal Meitei and the tribals have (a) organised themselves during all periods of their history, and (b) taken active part in the social and political activities of the society. In other words, the woman instead of representing a symbol of 'protection' and 'secondary roles', they have been able to take active part in the society and have been able to put effective check to a great extent on a variety of social evils against themselves, men and children.

REFERENCES

1. L. Ibungohol Singh, *An Introduction to Manipur*, Imphal, 1960, pp. 34-47.
2. R. Constantine, *Manipur: Maid of the Mountains*, Lancers Publishers, New Delhi, 1981, p. 144.
3. P. Wilkinson, *Social Movement*, Macmillan Co., London, 1971, p. 25.
4. Singh, op. cit., p. 31.
5. *Macha Leima*, Quarterly Journal of Manipur Women, 1972, pp. 5-7.

6. Singh, op. cit., pp. 47-48.
7. Macha Leima, op. cit., pp. 6-7.
8. Singh. op. cit., p. 61.
9. P. Ngully, *Torture and Thereafter: A Gesture of Solidarity*, A.V. Printers, Dimapur, 1990, pp. 40-44.