

The Women of Manipur: Performing the Naked Protest

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The point of this paper is to understand and examine the naked protests in Manipur, and to do so it is absolutely essential to have an understanding of the historical, social and cultural dynamics of the Manipuri state.

The state of Manipur is a small state in the North Eastern corner of India. The state used to be a Kingdom, but after the bloody Anglo-Manipuri battle of 1891 it was annexed by the British government as a princely state, one of the last independent states to be annexed. In fact the British had fought the incoming Burmese army together with the then Manipuri King during the 1828 Indo-Burmese war. The state also saw fierce fighting between the allied and axis forces during the Second World War and it was then the British realized the geo-political importance of this small state. In 1947 after independence, an elected legislative assembly was established under the leadership of the Maharaja in accordance with the Manipur Constitution Act.

However in 1949, Maharaja Buddhachandra was summoned to Shillong by the Indian government and there (most say under extreme pressure and duress) acceded to the Indian Union and the kingdom was merged with the republic of India. In the beginning it did not have the status of a state but in 1956 it was made into a Union Territory and in 1972 it became a state. The history behind the merging of the kingdom into the Indian Union and later on the creation of the state involves a long drawn out battle between the various factions in Manipuri Society and the Indian state.

The problem with these new state and nation demarcations were that they created artificial borders between people who had been engaged in cultural and economic transactions for ages. As Sanjoy Hazarika puts it-"Decisions for the little people of such regions- the historian Amalendu Guha describes as Sub-Nationalities- are made by bureaucratic and political mandarins in national and state capitals, far removed from the realities of the customs and beliefs that govern the thoughts and lives of indigenous peoples."

The above laid the basis for a long and unrelenting state of violence that continues till this date and is made even more complicated by the responses of the Indian government. Most of the Northeastern states claimed that the Indian government treated them in a step-motherly fashion and this had led to systematic under development in these states. Manipur was kept out of the Government of India's first few five year plans. The state has become politically and economically dependent on mainstream India while with its traditional trade routes with South East Asia being closed.

Moreover there is an intense sense of detachment from 'India' as culturally and physically they are worlds apart. The population of Manipur is a mix of the Meitis (Hindus, Christians and Muslims) who live in the Imphal Valley and the different tribes who occupy the hills with the Nagas and the Kukis being in the majority. As the South Asian Human Rights Centre rightfully observes - "Much of this historical bloodshed could have been avoided if the new India had lived up to the democratic principles enshrined in its Constitution and respected the rights of the nationalities it had taken within its borders. But in the over-zealous efforts to integrate these people into the "national mainstream", based on the dominant brahminical Aryan culture, much destruction has been done to the indigenous populations"

The first signs of trouble in Manipur were foreshadowed by the Naga Movement. There were separatist movements that had already started in the early sixties but they did not gain proper momentum until the mid seventies. The separatist groups demand either autonomy or independence from India which are based on the reasoning that Manipur had been a documented independent kingdom even before the first century A.D. As of now there are around thirty four insurgent groups active in Manipur including mainly- the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), and PLA (People's Liberation Army) of Manipur. Moreover there is an active Naga insurgency which calls for some areas of Manipur to be handed over for the creation of a greater Nagaland. Thus the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN I/M) is also a part of the outfits in Manipur.

Unlike the Mizos and the Nagas, the Manipuri insurgency started out with a difference. For a long time the Manipuris had been involved in Communist politics. Bisweswar the leader of the insurgency in Manipur infused Marxism to the movements of the Northeast. *He declared himself the chairman of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a reaction to soaring unemployment rates and under development in the state.* Another group which only demanded the ouster of all outsiders from the state was the PREPAK group (People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak). "Bisweswar's campaign drew the usual response from Delhi: curfews and troops, assaults on villagers and others suspected of harbouring the guerrillas. By this time the India military machine was familiar with ways to deal with armed insurrections in the Northeast." Thus this retaliatory action by the Indian government, whether proportionate or not, further complicated matters in the region with extensive human rights violations which led to further insurgencies.

The one important way that the government of India dealt with the insurgencies was to apply the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act on the affected areas of the conflict (AFSPA). The Armed Forces Special Powers ordinance was passed on the 22nd May 1958 and it gave infinite powers to the army with almost little or no accountability involved. The AFSPA can be applied on any area that has been labeled as disturbed. Until 1972, it was only the state's prerogative to label an area disturbed but after the amendment in 1972 the power to do so was usurped by the Centre. Moreover the way in which a disturbed area is defined by law is very vague and is completely dependent on the particular government official.

The AFSPA gives most army men license to commit such actions that should be unheard of in a democracy. "The army can shoot to kill, under the powers of section 4(a), for the commission or suspicion of the commission of the following offenses: acting in contravention of any law or order for the time being in force in the disturbed area prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons, carrying weapons, or carrying anything which is capable of being used as a fire-arm or ammunition." To justify the invocation of this provision, the officer need only be "of the opinion that it is necessary to do so for the maintenance of public order" and only give "such due warning as he may consider necessary". Moreover they can arrest, enter and search without a warrant and can keep prisoners without a trial as well as declare curfew. And to make matters worse there cannot be any judicial proceedings initiated against them.

Imposition of the AFSPA has led to massive violations and abuses of human rights. There has been widespread outcry - both national and international against this act including censure from the OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights). "Many victims of abuses committed during the operations are civilians, often relatives or neighbours of young men suspected of militant sympathies. Villagers have been threatened, harassed, raped, assaulted and killed by soldiers attempting to frighten them into identifying suspected militants. Arbitrary arrest and lengthy detention of young men picked up in these periodic sweeps, or at random from their homes and from public places is common."

The Act violates many international laws like International customary law and International Humanitarian law. The AFSPA also violates many laws in the Indian constitution itself- Article 21(Right to Life), Article 22(Protection against arrest and detention), Indian Criminal Procedure Code etc. In fact the AFSPA is problematic taking into context the idea of an emergency state too as it bypasses normal constitutional procedures.

This state of affairs has led to even more economic under development and also to the physical and mental torture of an entire population. While this has led to an increase in insurgencies and thus to stricter enforcement of the AFSPA thereby leading to a vicious cycle, there has been a very interesting phenomena too. The government and the army do not tolerate dissent very well and try to curtail it as best as it can. This level of government control has led to the emergence of some unique kinds of protests and a very imposing and subversive articulation of dissent.

Thus it is in this context that we must examine the naked protest that took place in

Manipur in 2004. On the morning of 15th July 2004, around a hundred women marched up to the Assam Rifles' 17th Battalion headquarters screaming slogans and shouting- "Indian Army Rape us" and "Indian Army take our flesh". Among the hundred or so women 12 were completely naked. Most of the women were middle aged and around sixty years old and all of them were MeiraPaibis. This was a protest against the rape and killing of thirty two year old Th. Manorama by the army. There had been many more rapes and killings of this kind and all were carried out by the Indian Army under the protection of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. This was a kind of protest that had never been seen before in Indian history. However before one goes into a further analysis of this protest, it is necessary that the role of women and specially the MeiraPaibis in Manipuri society is delved into.

Women in Manipur have always enjoyed a much respected position. This translates into the kind of roles they play in the social, cultural and the economic milieu of the state. The Manipuri women have always been very active in both the domestic and public sphere of life in the state. Even when it concerns any sort of action against authority or unlawful disruptive behaviour they have always been at the forefront. This sense of involvement and participation can be traced back to the NupiLan or the women's war of 1904 and 1939 where the women of Manipur protested against price rise and the Maharaja's administrative and economic policies. Economically also the Meitei women have been very active. This can be traced back to the days of the LallupKaba in the 1800s. This was a kind of voluntary unpaid conscription into services towards the Raja of males from ages 17 to 60 for a certain number of days. During these times the burden of financial responsibility would fall on the women of the house. They would thus have to get involved in trade etc to make sure the family could get by. Slowly a section of the market came to fall into the hands of the women which persists till today and is the Women's Market or the Ima Keithel in Imphal. It is a market completely and absolutely run by women. There are also stories in Manipur of the Manipuri Queen MaishnaKumudini fighting alongside her husband Maharaja Gambhir Singh in the Indo-Burmese war.

Moving on to the MeiraPaibis, they were historically preceded by the Nisha Bandis. During the 1970s Manipur was a hub of criminal and drug and alcohol related activities. To counter this menace, local ordinary women started forming groups and patrolling the neighbourhoods. The efforts of these women led to the proclamation of Manipur as a dry state.

The reason why the MeiraPaibis are called so is also very interesting-"In December 1980 Ibom Shah from HairangoithongMaibamLeikai was captured by the Army as a suspected insurgent. The Nisha Bandis at night used firewood on bamboo sticks as torches to march to the police station and get Ibom Shah released. This march of the Nisha Bandis with torches turned them into the MeiraPaibis or Women Torch-bearers. The group of women, who fought for the release of Ibom Shah, formed an organisation called the All Manipur Women's Reformation and Development Samaj in 1980 led by Ima Chobi. Nowadays the MeiraPaibis are extremely organized with various state and district level committees. They have taken part

in numerous protests as well as activities including convincing shopkeepers to not increase prices of essential goods. These same MeiraPaibis staged the protest in the July of 2004 calling themselves the Mothers of Manorama. This was an unprecedented protest in India's history and proved to be a major jolt to the state.

The protest of the MeiraPaibis mirrored in real life the very famous story, "Draupadi" by celebrated writer Maheshweta Devi. The story is set against the Naxalite movement in the 1960s. A tribal woman Draupadi and her husband Dulna are revolutionaries in this movement and indulge in *guerilla* warfare against the upper class landowners. Once they are caught by the government's armed forces, Draupadi is sexually tortured on the orders of Senanayak the government specialist on left wing guerrilla warfare. However once the torture has been committed, and she is lying naked, her perpetrators throw her clothes to her, but she refuses to put them on. In all her nakedness she advances towards Senanayak and he is terrified of her. It is at this moment when she refuses her clothes and refuses to be ashamed that she completely subverts the power relations between them. The Manipuri women protesting against the AFSPA also do something similar through their protest.

As Deepti Misri says- "In Draupadi" Maheshweta renders the state as a gendered institution that bestows on its male, upper-caste representative a prosthetic masculinity that stems from official power. The masculinity of the army officers Senanayak and Arjan Singh derives from precisely such an institutional arrangement." Thus the MeiraPaibis by their protest are challenging this institution. Through the non-embracing of this particular type of shamed femininity they want to see the administrative masculinity break down.

Here it is important to understand what exactly does this disrobing and nakedness do and how. Firstly if one is to question the success of this protest how does one define success? Do we define it through the amount of media attention or notice garnered? Or is it measured in the outcome it brings about or the kind of discourses it creates and facilitates.

When one talks about media coverage of this issue, it becomes problematic. Here the women are fighting gendered institutions and by the disproportionate amount of media attention (compared to Sharmila's Fast unto death) it receives one wonders if it is not really conforming to the media's idea of sensationalism and reinforcing patriarchal scripts of the commodifying gaze of the media. However once again here it is important to remember that intentions do matter and the women had no intentions of commodifying themselves. In fact these women were old women and the fact that they did not meet the general standards of attractiveness and were not of an appropriate age to incite lust was one that saved them from the commodifying gaze of the world. Most of these women were also old and older women are usually assumed to be non sexual beings who are no longer considered to be lust- worthy.

Moreover all of the women were carrying banners and slogans that took attention away from merely the bodies to a higher political and social concern. The irony of the messages saying "Indian Army Rape us" contested the easy availability that the naked bodies could have

portrayed themselves as. The body was the agent through which the message was to be diffused and the scandalous idea of nudity is used to draw attention and then subvert the scandalous.

When the protests took place the Indian government did what any patriarch would do - tried to cover up the women. In response to their demands though the AFSPA was not scrapped but a mere review committee was set up and as a token gesture the historic Kangla fort was reopened for the public. These actions did nothing to address the actual grievances of the Manipuri people but were a mere placebo to stop this kind of dissent articulation.

"The MeiraPaibis' unusual protest compelled Indian feminists to re-evaluate their own language of activism and the terms of their engagement with a patriarchal, military state and their complicity in the ideology of the nation. Refusing to invoke the liberal feminist models that have come to define some aspects of the women's movement, particularly its attenuated, NGO-influenced versions, the 'Mothers of Manorama' have spoken in a genuinely 'different voice' (Gilligan 1982). They have not only assaulted the nation, but have also challenged the accepted modes of doing so through international law or human rights frameworks."

We now move on to examine how exactly this protest undermines and subverts the rampant patriarchy of the state. The one thing that this protest does, for however brief a period of time is that it destabilizes the patriarchal authority that is in the state. By disrobing in front of the men, it is a disrobing of enforced social norms and thus rendering the enforcer of the norms powerless.

According to gender rules and roles, women are supposed to be dressed in front of men who are not their sexual partners by law. When a woman takes her clothes off in front of an unknown man she is expressing that she is not ashamed of herself in front of this man. Thereby she refuses to recognize the masculinity of the male and thus emasculates him. "The Naked body seemed to testify to the breakdown of the normative structures of gender that would ordinarily include a need for modesty on her part"

However here unlike the other case that Deepti Misri quotes in her article there is no logic of asking for masculinist protection. In the case of the semi clothed harassed woman who was carrying bangles to give to those who could not protect her, instead of challenging masculinity she seemed to want to show it its proper role. The Manipuri protests did not suggest victimhood, vulnerability or timidity that needed male protection. There was no asking for protection but merely protesting that which should not have rightfully happened. They were asking for their rights that had been given to them by their constitution and not on the basis of patriarchal gender roles. There can be emasculation by subversion without their having to resort to gender stereotypes.

"Rather than staging women's bodies as the grounds of essential feminine vulnerability, the Meitei women's protest staged women's bodies as sites of violence and their vulnerability to custodial rape as the historical, legitimated, and legislative product of a state in which gendered and caste based (as exemplified by Mahasweta's Draupadi) modes of power converged in the

Armed Forces Special Powers Act."

There is a problematic issue here which questions how do these women intend to subvert patriarchy if they only seem to connect with Th. Manorama as mothers. However here it is important to understand that although they call themselves the Mothers of Manorama it is more of a political solidarity than a feminine one. The women maybe calling themselves the mothers of Manorama because of their age but their connection is far greater. It is the connection of shared political and social hardships and not one confined to the domestic space. Moreover it is not problematic to have gender based roles but what is dangerous is if these roles are seen to be unchangeable rigid and the only roles women are capable of.

Custodial rape, one of the many things being protested against by the women is often used by agents of patriarchal authority to put into place violently the shameless female who transgresses all boundaries of bourgeois femininity. However in this case through the disrobing, these women differentiated between being violated and being a victim by giving themselves agency. Moreover here the usual causal relationship between rape and shame is completely missing. The women do not feel a need to put on clothes and thus act like there is no man present. This is why the men present seem not like men and their masculinities are taken away from them in this single act. This could be problematic in many ways as it could be seen as adhering to gender roles but it is actually a calling out of the patriarchal state on its own ideas thus taunting the state about its patriarchal ideals. Thus there is an inversion of the enforced nakedness of rape. Patriarchy condemns raped women to social ostracism. What was achieved through this protest was that these women removed the stigma from a raped woman and shifted it to the man who had committed the rape.

This protest also makes an extremely important comment about rape and about victim blaming specially when raped or molested women are asked what they are wearing. (women are often questioned about what they were wearing during that time and blamed for being provocative). This nakedness and the invitation to rape subvert all the questions and statements that lead to victim blaming.

Thus we can see that through this protest, which is often seen as one of last resort and is given validity that way, there is a transformation of feminine victimhood and shame to one of resistance. It says boldly that the women's bodies are their own and they have sovereignty over it. The body is not the man's to rape nor the husband's and father's to own. It is only the woman's. Masculinist definitions of women's bodies as attractive or available are rejected and bodily sovereignty of the woman is established as most important.

"Women's bodies, in this radical paradigm, are not others' to possess. They are not objects of male gaze, or what is more extreme, male violation. Rather, the body is a woman's means of expression- of intelligence, anger, dissent, resistance, fearlessness. The women consciously created a collective expression of rage, challenging concentrated, brutal patriarchal power. It was the first time in recorded history that women collectively used their bodies in this manner."

What was of enormous consequence in this protest was that the women were not different people but everyday normal ordinary people who one ran into on a daily basis. This gave the protest even more of a shock value.

Through this disrobing they take over and subvert ideas of Victorian Puritanism that has defined the current cultural and social backgrounds of gender roles and ideas which say it is not acceptable for women to be nude in front of men.

It is here very interesting to note that this particular protest has led to a series of copycat protests in different parts of the Northeast. In an interview I had conducted with the then Superintendent of Police (SP), Jorhat, Assam, Sanjukta Parashar, in December 2013, she had talked about a particular incident that was interesting to examine. The SP talked about an incident in Majuli, the world's largest river island that is found near Jorhat. There was a group of women who had been sitting and protesting against a particular person and what they had done was that they were wearing double mekhas. The Mekhela is a traditional Assamese garment that can be worn in different combinations and usually different tribes wear them in many different ways. These particular women were wearing one on top of another and when the police moved in to remove them from their places they took off the upper Mekhela and threw it at the policemen. However their lower mekhas were intact and their proverbial "dignity" remained intact. When asked by the SP as to why they were protesting most of the women could not reply as they were not aware of what they were protesting against. When asked about why they had taken off their Mekhas they said that they had been asked to do so by the men in the organisation who were also family members. Later on apparently one of the male members of the organisation confessed to the SP that they had seen the Manipuri protests and had been hoping for the same amount of media attention.

This is a very problematic concern. Firstly, by not really disrobing but performing an act mimicking the disrobing does nothing more than being a token protest. There is no subversion involved in this protest. Moreover by doing this only at the behest of the men and really identifying with what they are doing leaves this act feeling like a mere gimmick and has nothing of the seriousness and importance of the original protests. Also the most crucial thing- agency of the women is completely missing in this protest. While evaluating the protests in Manipur and talking about bodily sovereignty it is absolutely essential to talk about one woman who has been fighting a long brave fight against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. A woman called Irom Chanu Sharmila has been on a fast unto death against the AFSPA for the last fourteen years. It is a feat of absolute heroic proportions and yet not many are aware of her or her protest. Sharmila was working in Human Rights Alert in Imphal in October 2000 when she learnt of the deep impact and history of the AFSPA. The more she read and witnessed the more helpless and desperate she felt. Then on the 2nd of November of the same year news reached her of the Malom Massacre. Ten presumably innocent civilians had been killed by the Assam Rifles.

Sharmila who is situated in the same context as the MeiraPaibis and benefits from the same culture had many examples of women who had been extremely strong and brave. With this in mind she, then 28 years old, declared that she was going to fast until the AFSPA has been repealed. This was a very important event in the history of protest in Manipur. "She became a point around which dissent crystallized." She was also supported and helped by most civil society organisations who were working in this field including the MeiraPaibis and the Apunbalun. It is important to note here that when Sharmila started her fast senior members of the MeiraPaibis were there supporting her and calling her their daughter. The government of India however was quick to act, soon arresting her under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) accusing her of "attempt to suicide". Sharmila agreed to be nasally fed and for the last fourteen years that has been her sole source of nourishment. In addition to the above she also refused to oil or comb her hair and wear footwear etc. Sharmila's goal is not unilateral and she doesn't want to merely see an end to the AFSPA but also to help create a politically and economically accountable Manipur.

To understand why Sharmila has been such a big problem to the Indian government is because of the wide national and international support she has garnered and the attention she receives. Although it is important to understand that the attention she receives is still not enough and not mainstreamed.

"Implicitly, from Sharmila poses a civilizational challenge. She is critiquing dominant paradigms of modernity and development, and suggesting that we must fashion other, very different modes of human life and livelihood. Her vision includes the preservation of traditional indigenous wisdom, adapted creativity to diverse cultural and technological changes flowing in from the rest of the world"

It is important to study Sharmila's fast and its implications from a gendered perspective too. This is a woman who has complete control over her body and she is using it as a weapon against the Indian state. She is asserting her bodily sovereignty and proclaiming that her body is absolutely hers and its entire agency belongs to her. By this one act of refusing to eat she has broken all holds of the patriarchal state on her body. She says-"See, an ordinary person has nothing in today's social system. I have only my body. But at least this, which is mine, I will use fully."

Here it is important to contextualize how the female body is seen by a patriarchal society. It is always seen as a vessel for reproduction. Thus for a woman who hasn't eaten for fourteen years and is in an emaciated state, reproduction is not really possible. Thus by not being available for reproduction she has broken down all rules of gender roles. This is a frightening concept for the patriarchal state machinery to deal with.

Moreover Sharmila has been repeatedly booked under the "attempt to suicide" provision. However she has maintained since the very beginning that she is not committing suicide and that she has no interest in being a martyr. This is not a criminal activity but a political protest.

By repeatedly arresting her for attempting to commit suicide the Indian state is undermining her ideas and views and her political declaration.

Recent events have brought into question her relationship with British social activist Desmond Cutinhu. There have been conspiracy theories and articles written about how he is merely a government funded distraction for Sharmila. However it is again a very condescending and patronizing tone to take by assuming that a grown woman who is perhaps one of the bravest women of the country dealing with a serious political problem will not know to handle her own relationships.

Thus we can see how these examples of women from Manipur have through their bodies tried to create alternative and meaningful articulations of dissent against the Indian state. These kinds of protests and the dynamics and understanding and commitment behind them are a rare sight to witness..

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