

Women as survivors and Mediator in Conflict

The Case of Meira Paibi (Women Torch
Bearers) in Manipur

By

Ningombam Shreema

Tracing women's involvement in social movements

- Women in Manipur has a long tradition of participation in public spheres.
- In 17th century -pacha loishang, (women's court) had the power to convince king to pardon capital punishment if the womenfolk is sure that the person has been wrongfully accused.
- Women's agitation 1904 and 1939 against the British administration. Locally known as Nupi Lal.
- Women organising themselves in locality / community emerged in 1970s as Nisha Bandis (anti-alcohol movement) to fight alcoholisms a main domestic problem at that time.
- In 1980s huge crackdown of camps of the insurgents (armed opposition groups) ; in this context they become actively involved.
- This women's social movement in Manipur led by elder *mothers came to be known as Meira paibi, because of their unique way of vigilant activities in the nights using flame torches.* Their main activity was patrolling and vigilant to prevent army's arbitrary arrest.
- Now it is known as "ema meira paibi" meaning mother torch bearers with the inherent idea that these women have emerged to save their children, at the initial times, it consist only of mothers, gradually now even young woman married and unmarried women are also a part of this movement . Regardless of age or reproductive status who ever go out for the movement they are entitled as Ema meaning Mother so now they are known as "Ema Meira paibi.
- Ema keithel (market of mothers) is the site of their economic power.

Meira Paibi's Domain of mediation

- Familial issues, issues regarding women's sexuality. At many times its not possible to give an impartial mediation in such issues. Their participation in this sphere elicit quite a number of controversy. Mediation in family happened in local affair, but as meira paibi became institutionalised in terms of evolving as state wide organisation, the parties involved in social disputes instead of going to their local meira paibi group, began to go to the larger Meira paibi groups.
- Another domain where they have establish major role in mediation is in the sphere of armed conflict. They have absolute public legitimacy in this sphere.
- **As the Meira paibi originated to fight social evil, it has a umbilical link with the social issue in spite of their rigorous activities in the political sphere.** In the decision making sphere of the mechanisms of modern nation state structure they are not present.

Causes for the Rise of Meira Paibi as mediators in the political domain

- Indian state military injustice and denial of human rights, atrocity of families of persons involved in insurgency.
- Abduction, wrongful accusation, arbitrary arrest, missing persons, fake encounters
- Anti AFSPA movement: Nisha bandis organised themselves resistant movements to stop AFSPA from being implemented in Manipur
- military operations leading to firing , lathi-charge on civilians regardless of children and women, physical assault and sexual harassment, humiliation and loss of dignity under the Indian militarisation.
- Increased human rights violation and mother's role also increased.

Mechanism of mediation

- In family mediation, the Meira paibi listen to the story of both parties and makes judgment to decide on the issues of compensation, elopement/marriage : fundamentally based on protecting the ideal of womanhood and their sexuality.
- The meira paibi, before intervention try to investigate the case thoroughly to find out if the arrested person is innocent or not. This can might do in midnight/ morning; anytime. If by their own investigation they find that the person is innocent, they directly go to the police or army officer in charge to negotiate and demand release of the innocents if they think they are innocent they protest /demonstrate demanding the release.
- Technique of mobilisation: they gather after hearing the sounds of “ringing bell” produced by an available stone hitting any nearby electric post. (Kangshi khingba) the number of bells have different codes for different communities , for e.g., 1= incident 3=emergency/critical problem, 5= things are clear who has arrested/abducted the person.

Motherhood and its space

- The very prefix of “mother” in “mother torch bearer” signifies that they based their activity on intuition and instinct of motherhood to protect their “children”
- The anti-state resistance movement could gain public legitimacy because of their status of motherhood
- Our society has traditionally has a tremendous space and respect for motherhood. Mother’s role was very powerful in the management of household, economy and bringing social equilibrium .
- They complete all the household activity and then they come out gather in local club or meira shang, (a specific house made for meira paibi to get together as a shelter in the time of their gathering)

Ideological evolution of Meira Paibi

- Gradual progressive transformation based on experience and exposure
- Initially they considered that both the Indian armed forces and the nationalist armed opposition group were doing their duty. As long as their conflict did not harm the civilians they had no issues. Yet the oppressive nature of the armed forces worsened. Thus Manipuri mothers perception of them changed. They could no longer trust them anymore.
- For them self determination becomes the last choice of dignified life. Mothers are reasserting/ reviving their fight for self-determination as these mothers have a history of fighting against any oppressive regime.

Premises of their movement

- Based on traditional values, indigenous mechanism of mediation. E.g. (erat thouni, laifam tinfam khuramba) sacred prayers offered to local deities and scared places to bring peace and equilibrium to the society which was in an upheaval like never before.
- Constructive , peace, close to nature; based solidarity and support of the member
- Not based on any external mediation theory or body of knowledge.
- Based on wisdom and sensibility and prudence.

Challenges

- Trap in the grid of multiplicity of state actor, non state actors and civil society. There is a need to re-affirm their agency again
- Difficulty at time of familial disputes and disputed relating to the sexuality of women to come up to a decision which both parties agree with happily.
- These women are often looked at as women who have gone beyond the domestic confines and the frame of sex/gender system which is set up to control and confine women's body and sexuality. In spite of all these restraint women have broken the traditional bindings to come out and seek justice and work for it.

Concluding remarks

- It consisted of simple housewives, in the last few years new group of women became members of Meira paibi yet these new “educated” women consist merely 5% of them.
- Possibility of emergence of new genre of Meira Paibi who are educated and well trained.
- Will Meira Paibi remain the same with the members being introduce to the new education system, technology, communication and information?